

**LIVING AND WORKING TOGETHER  
WITH SISTERS AND BROTHERS OF OTHER FAITHS**

An Ecumenical Consultation  
Singapore, July 5-10, 1987

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**I. THE JOINT CONSULTATION ON INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: A REPORT  
by Georg Evars**

Organized by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) and the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) a joint consultation on the theme "Living and Working Together with Sisters and Brothers of Other Faiths" was held in Singapore, July 5-10, 1987. This meeting

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Participants from the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), which represents most of the Protestant and Orthodox Churches in Asia, met in Singapore, July 5 - 10, 1987, for their first joint meeting. They came together for prayer and discussion on the topic of interreligious dialogue. On the Catholic side, the consultation was sponsored by the FABC Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, as part of its present series of Bishops' Institutes for Interreligious Dialogue (BIRA IV). The full proceedings of the consultation will be published jointly. This FABC Paper presents a report of part of the Catholic contribution.

with 55 participants from 14 countries in Asia constituted a historical "first" in trying to work out a common ecumenical understanding on the part of the majority of Catholic and Protestant Churches of the problems of interreligious dialogue and living together with neighbors of other faiths. The consultation included certain risks, since the theological questions posed by an interreligious dialogue are far from being solved in Catholic as well as Protestant theology. The consultation took account of this fact by splitting up into groups according to confessions, after having had a solemn opening session together in which the agenda for the meeting was set.

### **Trying to Build a Bridge**

The joint consultation had been prepared by representatives of the FABC and CCA who came together for that purpose several times. The idea to have a joint meeting of Christians in Asia originated from a consultation of experts in dialogue who came together for a conference organized by the Roman Secretariat for Non-Christians and the Commission for Dialogue with People of Living Faiths of the World Council of Churches. During this conference it became evident that all Christians in Asia are confronted with the problems of interreligious dialogue in much the same way and that the theological answers worked out so far showed a surprising similarity. At the opening of the Singapore consultation this fact was mentioned, but it was added that in spite of the many similarities and congruences, there still remain quite a few theological differences. The coming together for the joint consultation was likened to the attempt to construct a bridge from different banks, using different material and blueprints, in the hope of meeting somewhere in midstream.

The first three days following the common opening ceremony were taken up by the study groups, separately held according to confessions. The Catholic participants consisted of 25 bishops from various Asian countries, who were assisted by theological experts in the persons of D.S. Amalorpavadass and Felix Wilfred, both from India, and R. Hardawiryana from Indonesia. In preparation for the joint consultation the Theological Advisory Commission (TAC) of the FABC had held a meeting in April 1987, also in Singapore, and worked out a series of theses dealing with interreligious dialogue, which had been sent to all the bishops. Felix Wilfred gave an important contribution to the work of the study groups, when in his talk he pointed out the necessity to find a new starting point for interreligious dialogue in Asia. He emphasized that interreligious dialogue has to be integrated into the context of



Asia. The socio-economic and political problems of Asia have many reasons. But given the fact that the influence of the many religions in Asia remains paramount even today, there cannot be any solution to these problems which does not take into account the religions of Asia. Together with other theological reasons, the fact of the religious pluralism in Asia should be sufficient reason to enter into a cooperation with the various religions on the social, economic and political level.

The study groups took up the various aspects and problems of interreligious dialogue. The bishops from India, Pakistan and Thailand were the ones with most experiences of the practical implications of dialogue and living together with members of other religions. Other bishops, for instance from the Philippines, were interested in the problem of interreligious dialogue without, however, having direct experience. That was the reason why not only special problems of dialogue were treated but at the same time the very fundamental problems of the why and how of dialogue were dealt with as well. A good part of the discussion was taken up by trying to explain the relationship between mission (proclamation/ evangelization) and dialogue.

Stanley Samartha, who as director of the Dialogue Commission of the WCC in Geneva for many years has a lot of experience in this field, gave the key address for the Protestant study group. He recommended the development of a Trinitarian theology in order to avoid the blind alleys which are the necessary outcome if one follows a Christomonistic approach to dialogue. Among the Protestant theologians, too, the question of the relationship between mission and dialogue was discussed at length. Looking at the possible partners in dialogue from the other religions, it was stressed that a too simple connection of mission and dialogue would result in strengthening the suspicion, already rampant among members of other religions, that dialogue constitutes nothing but a more sophisticated form of mission. The Protestant participants at the consultation were, in the first place, collaborators at centers for dialogue or professors at theological colleges. Besides the staff of the CCA, General Secretary Park and his collaborators, there were some representatives of National Councils of Churches from India and the Philippines.

### **The Joint Consultation**

After three days of working in separate study groups — the steering committee of the consultation had met in the meantime on several occasions — the participants came together for plenary sessions. First,

the reports of the study groups, which had been awaited with much anticipation and some anxiety, were read. There was general relief when these reports proved to contain a lot of common points which showed that there was much agreement as regards the problems and the theological insights dealing with them. The different parts of the common bridge did not fit without some slight hitches but there was strong hope that the bridge would prove to be a success after all.

### **The Joint Statement**

So the work to draft a joint declaration was taken up in different groups, which referred their work back to the plenary. The main task of writing was entrusted to a mixed drafting committee. Since there was not much time, it was decided to make a brief statement on the necessity and nature of interreligious dialogue and conclude this statement with some pastoral recommendations. The statement should be addressed in the first place to the Christian Churches in Asia, but the possible partners for dialogue from the other religions should be considered too. The statement starts with recalling the context of Asia with its many economic, political and religious problems. There is an obvious necessity, given the importance of the religions in Asia, that all religions in Asia should cooperate in building a more human society.

The theme of the consultation, "Living and Working Together with Sisters and Brothers of Other Faiths," indicates already that dialogue in the statement is not understood to be the discussion among specialists but as "dialogue of life in all its variety." It was stressed that dialogue includes the full witness of one's own religious conviction. Taking this into account, dialogue always deals with proclamation, witness and evangelization, but cannot be identified with them. It was explicitly mentioned that God's salvific work transcends the boundaries of the Church, because it is related to the bringing about of the Kingdom of God, which transcends the Church too. Christians see themselves as pilgrims who are on their pilgrimage together with the members of other religions. The Church is called to render an effective witness and become a symbol of the Kingdom of God. The pastoral recommendations deal with practical implications resulting from the theological statement on religious dialogue. There is need to deal with interreligious dialogue in theological formation and in other areas of the Churches' life. Special mention is made of the problem of interreligious marriages. A further point is stressed when the phenomena of fundamentalism and fanaticism in various religions, which pose special problems for the development of a fruitful interreligious dialogue, are dealt with.



## **Mission and Dialogue**

The problem of the relationship between dialogue and mission played an important role for the study groups, as well as during the common work in plenary session. There was a general agreement that the direct intention of causing a member of a certain religion to change his religious belief is incompatible with a genuine interreligious dialogue. At the same time, it was agreed that it is an essential part of interreligious dialogue to give each other a full witness of one's own religious conviction. The question of how the mandate to proclaim the Good News to every one and the witness to one's own religious conviction in an interreligious dialogue can be related could not be solved during this consultation. There were different opinions, on the one hand, according to one's confessional belonging, but there were nuances, too, among members of the same Church. The final statement avoided committing itself and simply stated that mission and dialogue are related to one another but remain different. The Catholic participants argued more from the mission of the Church which they see as one, and which can be differentiated by making the distinction between mission and proclamation, which are then to be seen as integral, dialectical and complementary dimensions of this one mission of the Church.

## **Dialogue and Conversion**

Taking as a starting point the view of the partner of the other religions, the Protestant theologians called for a clear distinction between mission and dialogue in order to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings and anxieties among the members of other religions. At the same time it would be easier to explain to the more fundamentalist groups in their own Churches that the great commandment to preach the Gospel is not necessarily impaired when entering into dialogue. The problem of conversion in interreligious dialogue proved the major theological issue at the consultation. In the first place there was general agreement that all partners in dialogue are called to convert "individually," that is to say, that they should progress in religious and spiritual development within their own religious tradition. The theological problems started with the question whether it is conceivable that in interreligious dialogue conversions from one religion to another can happen. Even agreed that such conversions should not be aimed at, there remains the possibility that they occur. In the eyes of Christian theologians conversions from Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and other non-Christian religions do not constitute a great problem. There is no difficulty to speak in such cases about the work of the Holy Spirit. The real problem

starts when a Christian converts to another religion. Is it possible to interpret such a development as work of the Holy Spirit too?

### **An Ecumenical Event and a Theological Happening**

The consultation of Singapore constitutes, in the first place, an ecumenical event of high caliber and significance for the future collaboration of the Christian Churches in Asia, not only in the realm of interreligious dialogue. Since such a meeting had still a rather revolutionary character and given the many unsolved theological questions, it was only natural that a common dialogue with representatives of other religions during the Singapore conference was not attempted. As a gesture of goodwill the participants undertook several visits to places of worship in Singapore belonging to Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Jainism. These were more courtesy calls expressing the interest in further meetings than a real taking up of dialogue. Considering the aim of the consultation and the constituency of the participants, it is understandable that the main result of the consultation is not to be found in the field of a systematic development of a theology of interreligious dialogue but more in the area of a pastoral application of the results of theological research for the Churches and parishes in Asia. The collaboration between bishops and theological experts which took place during the Singapore consultation — and other similar "Bishops' Institutes" of the FABC — can be seen as a model for a division of tasks between bishops and theologians. It constitutes a learning process for both sides. The theologians are forced to present the results of their research to the bishops in such a way that they can see a possible application for pastoral activity. The bishops are enabled to increase their theological knowledge, to talk directly with the theologians and to work together with them in applying the theological insights to the pastoral activity in the Church.

There is a possibility that interreligious dialogue will become one of the major concerns of the Asian Churches if the pastoral recommendations are put into practice to the extent envisaged by the Singapore consultation. This would mean, at the same time, a big step in the direction of establishing truly Asian local Churches.

### **II. A WORD OF WELCOME: A CALL TO COVENANTAL LOVE**

by Archbishop Angelo Fernandes

Greetings to all of you whom God loves and has called to be his dedicated people. Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the



Lord Jesus Christ in whose name you have assembled. I welcome you most cordially and greet you most heartily. *Shalom!*

I rejoice that we have been able to arrange this ecumenical consultation, and I thank very sincerely indeed all who have been actively involved in its preparations.

A note of appreciation, and even commendation, is very much in order for the personal and corporate responsibility you have exercised in deciding to take part in this common endeavor. It is not unlikely that, for some at least, this has meant a passage from hurtful memories, going back a long time, to healed ones, and thereafter, thanks to the breath of the Spirit, to thankful memories and forgiving Christian love.

Speaking in general terms, the image of Christians in Asia could hardly sustain the note that marked the early followers of Christ: "See how those Christians love one another." But in the face of our consultation's theme — "Living and Working Together with Sisters and Brothers of Other Faiths in Asia," let it henceforth be: "See how those Christians practice understanding and forgiving love"; for he who abides in forgiveness abides in God.

It is such understanding, leading to forgiving love and joy, that has made this meeting possible. Covenantal love was at work — God's love accepted and put into practice. And this love commits us totally, not only to Jesus and to the Gospel, but to his entire community — God's people in the widest sense of the term. Friendship with Jesus is friendship with the world.<sup>1</sup> The whole of graced humanity can be seen, in some sense as the Church, for where the Spirit is, there too is the Church.<sup>2</sup>

Covenantal love embraces the disciples of Jesus, united among themselves and united with Buddhists, Confucianists, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Parsis, Shintoists, Sikhs, Taoists, Aboriginal religionists, other primitives and all tribal people, and all men and women of goodwill, even those who are atheist and agnostic. The Second Vatican Council clearly stated: "All men and women are called to be part of this catholic unity of the people of God ... And there belong to it, or are related to it in various ways, the Catholic faithful, as well as all who believe in Christ, and indeed the whole of humankind. For all are called to salvation by the grace of God."<sup>3</sup>

To continue the process of renewal, we would need to apply the

methodology of silence enshrined in Christ's self-emptying love on Calvary, remembering him in Eucharist and life as he asked us to, namely, as "body *given*" and "blood *shed*" for the redemption of humankind. This evokes the contemplative dimension of our inner journey with him, wherein we wonder, we listen, we wait, we let go and let God. The prayer of silence and the power of suffering love resonate well with the sentiments of persons of other living faiths.<sup>4</sup>

### **In Prayerful Contemplation**

At its meeting last month, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences commissioned its theological advisory commission to explore the meaning and suggest tentative guidelines towards a contemplative theology. Also advocated for future meetings — and we have built this into our programs for these days — is a period of personal, prayerful reflection or meditation after each major address or presentation. This is to allow for interiorizing the message and making it our own before we embark on further discussion and elaboration. Perhaps it will be an Asian mustard seed towards the task confronting Christianity today of renewing its mystical life, the experience of God in the Spirit.<sup>5</sup> A real beginning might be made with popular religiosity and "the mysticism of the senses"<sup>6</sup> of our simple, devout Christian faithful. Coupled with it could be the vision of a "cosmic unity in which man and nature are sustained by an all-pervading spirit."<sup>7</sup> Nature is God's first grace to mankind.

Sharing the experience of friendship and intimacy with God will ultimately be the best bridge to our sisters and brothers of other faiths in Asia, even if we start on humbler lines of working together on human issues from a religious standpoint.

### **United in Worship and Life and in Seeking the Reign of God**

In seeking to clarify for themselves a sort of common vision for the six Offices of FABC, the bishops, last month, came up with something like this: Our task is to assist the bishops and member conferences of FABC to build living Christian communities, who, experiencing God's love in worship and life, proclaim the Good News and, along with their sisters and brothers of other faiths, and particularly with the poor and the youth, witness to truth, freedom, justice and peace, and thereby make more visible God's reign on earth. Solidarity, concern and dialogue are the main components of the new approach.



The unity of love and prayer experienced by leaders of very nearly all the religious traditions of mankind at their historic gathering at Assisi in October, 1986, has already made some impact around the world. Reviewing the pastoral activity of our Christian Churches in Asia, the bishops who met last month thought fit to place strong emphasis on "being" before doing; on being present to the Lord together in prayer; and took to heart what some Muslim friends from a slum in Karachi once conveyed through the Little Sisters of Jesus: "Christians must love their Muslim brothers and sisters and make that obvious, not necessarily by always doing things for them, but by being there both in good times and bad."<sup>8</sup>

Doubtless there is a pressing need to transform and humanize the social and economic structures of today, to give all people the opportunity to live a truly human life, but we cannot pin all our hopes only on political and social changes. The Christian message is rather that first our heart must be changed.<sup>9</sup> "There is no new humanity if there are not first new persons."<sup>10</sup> Unless God's reign comes in the world of our daily life and work, it will not come at all. As the process of accepting love and loving goes on, it brings a change of consciousness whereby the heart of stone becomes a heart of flesh.

### **Instruments of Peace**

Fidelity to covenantal love takes on new and lustrous meaning in the historical setting of today.<sup>11</sup> It demands conversion to peace, the great moral imperative of our day. This is in effect a conversion to justice and in the first place an urgent, all-out effort to prevent nuclear war. It demands conversion to the poor, the afflicted, the exploited, the underprivileged, the hungry; but conversion stamped with the sign of the Cross — Christ's self-emptying love. It demands conversion to those who do not share our religious convictions and whom we must learn to accept in our hearts and in life as our sisters and brothers. It demands conversion to youth, pledging themselves for a new world; and conversion also to woman and to those feminine values, without which we cannot renew the family, the cradle of human life, offer meaning to a disturbed world or build a just and peaceful society. Conversion to our Asian and contemporary world demands that we get used to thinking of humankind in a new way, and so too its life in common, with a new manner too of conceiving the paths of history and the destiny of Asia and the world. We need to think anew of our common origin, our history, our common destiny. Today, as never before in our era, so marked by human progress, there is need for an appeal to the moral

conscience of humankind.<sup>12</sup> And in fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, let me express the hope that this assembly, and the pattern of Christian lives thereafter, will reflect the continuous practice of intercessory prayer to him who pleads for us at the right hand of the Father. And may we remember particularly the universal responsibility of all believers to realize God's reign, the new creation, the new communion of brotherhood in the Spirit in the whole of human society.

May the God of hope fill you with every joy.

With that I give you this Joint Consultation. May it be a meaningful and fruitful experience for each and all of us and a significant contribution too from some Christians and Christian communities of Asia to the common patrimony of Christianity and to the religious heritage of the human race.

Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!

**Footnotes:**

1. William Johnston, *The Wounded Stag*, Collins, Fount Paperbacks 1984, p. 88.
2. Charles De Celles, *The Unbound Spirit*, Alba House, New York 1985, p. 347.
3. Documents of Vatican II, "The Church," 13.
4. Vishwanath Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and Sarvodaya*, Educational Publishers, Agra 1965, p. 185.
5. Johnston, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
7. Bede Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, p. 15, quoted by De Celles, *op. cit.*, p. 352.
8. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
9. J. Neuner, *Walking with Him*, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, Gujarat 1987, p. 79.
10. Pope Paul VI, *Evangelisation Today*, 18.
11. Johnston, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
12. Pope Paul VI, U.N. General Assembly, 1965.
13. Documents of Vatican II, *The Church*, 16.

### III. ECUMENICAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN ASIA. CONCERNS AND INITIATIVES OF THE FEDERATION OF ASIAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCES by Albert Poulet-Mathis

The following pages intend merely to be a report on the main steps which the FABC has taken during the last thirteen years with the view to promoting in Asia a meaningful dialogue of all Christians with their



sisters and brothers of other faiths. We hope this report will not only help us understand the dynamics which have brought about the project of a first FABC-CCA Joint Consultation on the theme of "Living and Working Together With Our Sisters and Brothers of Other Faiths in Asia," but also facilitate the final preparations for this consultation.

### **The Asian Meeting of Bishops**

In the first meeting held in Manila in November of 1970 (the meeting which led to the foundation of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences), the bishops of Asia acknowledged that "in the inculturation of the life and message of the Gospel in Asia, there have been many hesitations and mistakes in the past," and they affirmed their conviction that "dialogue with our fellow Asians whose commitment is to other faiths is increasingly important."<sup>1</sup> They asked themselves how they might more fully engage in the common task wherein all men and women of goodwill must be joined, namely, the task of building in the Asian nations "societies which respond to the deepest aspirations of our peoples as well as to the demands of the Gospel."<sup>2</sup> Then they affirmed that the first task must be the renewal of themselves in the light of Christ and in the spirit of "servanthood" taught by him — a renewal rooted in the vivifying of "that profound religious sense which characterizes the spirit of the Asian world."<sup>3</sup> They finally pledged themselves to "an open, sincere and continuing dialogue" with their brothers and sisters of other great religions of Asia "so that we may learn from one another how to enrich ourselves spiritually and how to work more effectively together on our common task of total human development."<sup>4</sup>

### **Step By Step Through The Years**

The First Plenary Assembly of the FABC, held in Taipei in April of 1974, stressed the importance of a "continuous, humble and loving dialogue"<sup>5</sup> with the great religions of Asia and made it clear that this dialogue should be actively promoted:

Over many centuries, the great religions of Asia have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations.

How then can we not give them reverence and honor? And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to himself through them?

Only in dialogue with these religions can we discover in them the seeds of the word of God (*Ad Gentes* I, 9). This will allow us to touch the expression and the reality of our peoples' deepest selves, and enable us to find authentic ways of living and expressing our own Christian faith. It will reveal to us also many riches of our own faith which we perhaps would not have perceived. Thus it can become a sharing in friendship of our quest for God and for brotherhood among his sons.

Finally this dialogue will teach us what our faith in Christ leads us to receive from these religious traditions, and what must be purified in them, healed and made whole, in the light of God's word.

On our part we can offer what we believe the Church alone has the duty and joy to offer to them and to all men: oneness with the Father in Jesus his Son, the ways to grace Christ gives us in his Gospel and his sacraments, and in the fellowship of the community which seeks to live in him; an understanding too of the value of the human person and of the social dimensions of human salvation — a salvation which assumes and gives meaning to human freedom, earthly realities, and the course of this world's history.<sup>6</sup>

These five paragraphs of the Final Statement of the First FABC Plenary Assembly clearly reflect the Second Vatican Council's positive approach to the spiritual values of the world religions. Together with *Ecclesiam Suam* (August 1964) and *Nostra Aetate* (October 1965), they have provided a framework for an expanded and renewed understanding of the tasks of dialogue in the Asian context.

In 1977, the Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church, held in Hong Kong under the sponsorship of the FABC, pointed out that interreligious dialogue is one of the most important "situational challenges to the Christian Church in Asia." This challenge was formulated in the following way:

How to enrich its own Christian identity and life by opening itself to the great religious traditions of Asia in interreligious dialogue; and together with them, how to practice religion and promote



moral and religious values in a way that will contribute to the total human development of our peoples.<sup>7</sup>

These thoughts were further elaborated during the First Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate of the FABC (BIMA I), held in Baguio City in July, 1978. From the discussions emerged the persuasion that Christians in Asia, with their lived experience of contact with the great Oriental religious traditions, have a special contribution to make to the fullness of Christ in the Church. They are in a privileged position and living at a privileged point in time, which places on them a serious responsibility. In taking this responsibility, they must first realize that dialogue is not with abstract systems, but with persons, on terms of personal equality and in a common search for God:

Religious dialogue is not just a substitute for or a mere preliminary to the proclamation of Christ, but should be the ideal form of evangelization, where in humility and mutual support we seek together with our brothers and sisters that fullness of Christ which is God's plan for the whole of creation, in its entirety and its great and wonderful diversity.<sup>8</sup>

As they tried to penetrate the meaning of the uniqueness of Christ in their own inner experience, in their contact with others, in the very plan of God to bring all things to the fulfilment in Christ as head, the participants of BIMA I realized how long a way they had to go:

There is still much to be discovered ... There is also much in the Church that must change — in ways of thinking and in structures — to make room for Christ to expand to the full dimensions envisaged by St. Paul. We feel that the Christian experience in contact with the age-old religious experience of Asia has much to contribute to the growth and the transformation in outlook and appearance of the Universal Church.<sup>9</sup>

They also felt intensely how much had to be done to push forward interreligious dialogue in a very concrete manner.

Concentrating more particularly on the practical aspects of inculturation and dialogue, we recognized the efforts that are being made everywhere, but felt that there is a need for further study and experiment; that a vast variety of constantly changing situations has to be taken into account and boldly ventured into; that all over our enormous continent, local groups must be activated,

for on them depends the initiative in many spheres. In other words, there is much to be done so that all bishops and many leaders can be involved.<sup>10</sup>

The "Conclusions" of the First Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate (BIMA I) convinced the Office of Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs (OEIA) of the FABC that new steps should be taken as soon as possible to implement the mandate given it by the bishops' conferences of Asia to assist and strengthen interreligious activities in Asia.

Less than two weeks after BIMA I, a meeting of OEIA's executive committee was held in Hong Kong. During this meeting the first plans were made towards the organization of Bishops' Institutes for Inter-religious Affairs (BIRA). The proposal was to bring together representative bishops from the three regions of Asia — according to regional religious traditions and affinities — so that they might search out and recommend to their conferences practical areas of ecumenical and inter-religious activity which could enter into their pastoral planning.

With a view towards facilitating the preparations for the Institutes, the executive committee of OEIA also decided to draw up and distribute to all the bishops of Asia a questionnaire on the present state of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue in each diocese. The distribution of the questionnaire began in October of 1978.

One month later, the Asian bishops, gathered in Calcutta for the Second Plenary Assembly of the FABC, strongly encouraged a "sustained and reflective dialogue in prayer" with people of other faiths:

This dialogue will reveal to us what the Holy Spirit has taught others to express in a marvellous variety of ways. These are different perhaps from our own, but through them we too may hear his voice, calling us to lift our hearts to the Father ... This dialogue must be undertaken in all seriousness, accompanied constantly by discernment in the Spirit, fostered and safeguarded by those attitudes which lead to its deepening and its patient, loving growth. These are: openness and sensitivity, honesty and humility of spirit, a sincere disinterestedness and that fraternal love which holds in reverence the feelings of the other and seeks to enter into his heart.<sup>11</sup>

During the first months of 1979, 136 bishops of Asia replied to the



OEIA questionnaire. All of them pointed out a general lack of interest in interreligious dialogue, especially at the grassroots level of the Church's life in Asia. The two main reasons given for this lack of interest were: insufficient theological motivation and a lack of competent personnel engaged fulltime in this particular Church activity.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Bishops' Institutes**

The replies to the questionnaire were indeed helpful in the preparations for the three planned Bishops' Institutes. They made it clear that the focus of these meetings should be thoroughly pastoral, and that their main objective should be to provide concrete pastoral suggestions responding to the actual needs and flowing from a theological reflection based on the contemporary teaching of the Church, especially the teaching of Vatican II, and also on the orientations given by the bishops of Asia. Two main questions were to be addressed in these Institutes: What should be the pastoral positions of the Catholic Church in the particular situations of each country regarding the dialogue with people of other faiths? What concrete steps should we take for the near future in our pastoral activity to advance the dialogue?

It was decided that two Bishops' Institutes would be organized in 1979: one for the bishops working in countries of major Buddhist influence, and the other for the bishops working in countries of major Muslim influence. A third one would take place later for the bishops working in countries or regions of major Hindu influence.

In March 1979, the Third Assembly of the East Asian Region of the FABC reaffirmed the preceding statements of the FABC and stressed again the urgency of dialogue:

The urgency to promote this dialogue is felt as we, the people of Asia, search for realization of those human values and ways of life that through the centuries have been presented and handed down by these great traditional religions. We feel this even more as we see the corrosive influence of belief in the omnipotence of science, Marxism, nihilism, egoism, consumer mentality, and the consequent indifference to transcendental values and religion, and the decay of traditional moral values and practices. Therefore, we renew the call of the Church to our priests, religious and lay people to understand the purpose of interreligious dialogue, to promote it wherever the Spirit of God opens a door, and to become personally involved. The ecumenical and interreligious dialogue is

an integral part of the Church's mission, especially in East Asia.<sup>13</sup>

In June 1979, the Fifth Bishops' Institute for Social Action of the FABC (BISA V) made a point of facilitating a further dialogue through a service of faith and life in Asia:

We wish to facilitate a further dialogue with the Great Religions about the meaning of faith and service in daily life. All mankind is rooted in the Christ-event; this anthropology is operative even in those who do not know Christ. Our main point of contact is a search for a new humanity and a new human family.<sup>14</sup>

BIRA I (Bishops' Institute on Buddhist-Christian Dialogue) was held 11th-19th October 1979, in Sampran, Thailand. BIRA II (Muslim-Christian Dialogue) was held one month later, 13th-21st November, in Kuala Lumpur.

Bishops and priests from all over Asia attended these Institutes. An encouraging sign of the fraternal solidarity and common responsibility of all Christians in Asia was the participation of the General Secretary of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) in BIRA II.

### **Recognizing the Difficult Questions**

In both Institutes, the present reality of the Church's mission was truly faced up to through the very practical reports of the represented episcopal conferences and the comments of the participants from their personal experiences. Within the context of the theology of mission, the participants moved to ask the difficult questions which have been raised again and again after Vatican II: relationship of dialogue to mission, evangelization, proclamation, inculturation, conversion, etc. They acknowledged their inability to solve the problems; but they recognized more clearly the questions, and they were able to discern some practical ways of pushing forward in their countries the interreligious dimension of the Church's life.

BIRA I considered interreligious dialogue as "intrinsic to the very life of the Church, and the essential mode of all evangelization."<sup>15</sup>

As the Incarnate Word was spoken into human history, so also does the Church's witnessing word have a bearing on the hearer, and vice versa. It is in this incessant, mutual encounter of the speaker and the hearer that the full meaning of the Divine Word



becomes incarnate in history, maturing into fullness till the end of time.<sup>16</sup>

In the same meeting, the participants recognized in their lives "the promptings of the Spirit moving us in love to open ourselves to Buddhists in new ways, respecting them so that we may help one another to grow together to the fullness of our total reality."<sup>17</sup> They also recognized the activity of the Spirit in the personal lives of the Buddhists, as well as in their total religious life.<sup>18</sup> They made it clear that dialogue is not and should never be a tactic in proselytism.<sup>19</sup> It is, on the contrary, a process leading each partner to the deepening and enriching of his own faith.

We enter as equal partners into the dialogue in a mutuality of sharing and enrichment contributing to mutual growth. It excludes any sense of competition. Rather, it centers on each other's values ... and brings the partners more deeply into their own cultures.<sup>20</sup>

BIRA II recognized that "the Church, sacrament of God's message in the world, continues Christ's work of dialogue" and that "the Christian finds himself continually evangelizing and being evangelized by his partners in dialogue."<sup>21</sup> BIRA II also affirmed that "God's saving will is at work, in many ways, in all religions," that "the Spirit of Christ is active outside the bounds of the visible Church" and that "God's saving grace is offered to every person." "His grace may lead some to accept baptism and enter the Church, but it cannot be presumed that this must always be case."<sup>22</sup> Finally, BIRA II stressed that "the purpose of the Church's proclaiming the message of Christ is to call man to the values of the Kingdom of God, values also present in Islam."

In dialogue, therefore, a Christian hopes that both he and his Muslim brother will turn anew to God's Kingdom, their own faiths richer by their mutual interchange, their mission to the world more fruitful by their shared insights and commitments.<sup>23</sup>

In both Institutes, the participants especially stressed the importance of a genuine "dialogue of life," which they described as follows: "daily practice of brotherhood, helpfulness, openheartedness and hospitality,"<sup>24</sup> and joint commitment to "whatever leads to unity, love, truth, justice and peace."<sup>25</sup> The participants also stressed the urgent need of a well-planned "education for dialogue" at all levels of the Church's life.<sup>26</sup> In BIRA II, special attention was given to the "ecumenical dimension" of interreligious dialogue<sup>27</sup> and to the common concern that FABC and CCA share in their search for a greater Christian service in Asia. Perhaps

the most immediate result of the Institutes was that the participants returned home confirmed in their commitment to dialogue, and confident that their promising first effort "among them" would mature, step by step, to a genuine dialogue "with" their brothers and sisters of other faiths in full fellowship.

Three weeks after BIRA II, the participants in the International Congress on Mission (Manila, 2-7 December 1979) sent to their brothers and sisters of the "living faiths of Asia" a special message of brotherhood and peace; "joined with them in the common quests for truth and freedom, justice and love and our peoples," they prayed that "the coming decade may be one of greater mutual understanding, forgiveness, collaboration and oneness."<sup>28</sup>

### **From Theory to Pastoral Practice**

From the 18th to the 23rd of November of 1980, a first "Seminar for Interreligious Affairs" (SIRA I), organized by FABC-OEIA, brought together in Taipei 26 bishops and priests especially committed to the study of Asian religions and to the tasks of dialogue in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Japan, Korea and Taiwan. This meeting was designed to search out concrete means of assisting the bishops of Asia in their efforts to develop the programs recommended by the two BIRAs. The participants insisted that all the local Churches should be given every encouragement and every possible help to prepare competent and responsible animators of dialogue: clergy, religious and laity deeply rooted in their Christian communities. In the light of this, they formulated a few proposals which added a new dimension to the recommendations made by the two BIRAs and opened the door to many possible exchanges of information and services at all levels, on the part of all those committed to the development of dialogue in Asia.

In the first part of 1982 (May 24-27), another Seminar on Dialogue (SIRA II), organized by FABC-OEIA, brought together in Tamshuei, Taiwan, the rectors of the seminaries of Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong. This regional meeting stressed that dialogue is a lifestyle which includes: living in harmony with people of other faiths, forming an open attitude to other religions, sharing religious experiences and working together with people of other faiths. The participants also stressed that the spirit of dialogue should permeate the whole educational setup of seminaries and pastoral centers, and they agreed to take steps towards this ideal in their respective countries.



## **Dialogue — An Integral Part of the Church's Mission**

At the end of 1982 (November 15-20), BIRA III was held in Madras, India, to reflect on the urgency, problems and prospects of Hindu-Christian dialogue in Asia. The main idea stressed in this meeting was that it is in their common commitment to the fuller life of the human community that people of different faiths discover their complementarity and the urgency of dialogue at all levels. Much was said about the "wholeness" which characterizes the Hindu culture, the various alienations which tarnish that wholeness, and the many ways in which Christians may help heal these alienations and promote a "culture of wholeness" in countries of major Hindu influence.

BIRA III reaffirmed that "dialogue is an integral part of the Church's mission,"<sup>29</sup> "does not have for its objective the conversion of the other,"<sup>30</sup> "promotes mutual understanding and enrichment,"<sup>31</sup> and demands "an attitude of openness to the mystery of God's saving action in history, of respect for the others, of humility and fearlessness."<sup>32</sup> More strongly than the preceding Institutes, BIRA III stressed that "interreligious dialogue cannot be confined to the religious sphere but must embrace all dimensions of life: economic, socio-political, cultural and religious,"<sup>33</sup> and that "the people at all levels must be prepared for this dialogue,"<sup>34</sup> which is "a crucial challenge to the Churches in Asia in their growing commitment to the building of the Kingdom."<sup>35</sup>

One month before BIRA III, the Third FABC Plenary Assembly (Sampran, Thailand, 20-27 October 1982) had pointed out that our Christian communities, in relation to the communities of other faiths which surround them, have often failed to be "communities of dialogue,"<sup>36</sup> that "interreligious dialogue continues to challenge us," that "our response to this challenge must be more and more that of actualization, of action,"<sup>37</sup> and that "the dialogue of life through which we interact with one another and become mutually enlightened, encouraged and carried forward in our response to the challenging Spirit, is an indispensable element for the building up of our own community life on all levels."<sup>38</sup>

## **Mission and Dialogue — Compatible?**

Deeply aware of the urgency of new steps towards "a true and real dialogue of life" with their Muslim brothers and sisters in Asia, a good number of participants in the Third Plenary Assembly joyfully welcomed a joint initiative of two FABC Offices: the Office of Mission and the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. At the invitation of

these two Offices they met together before the end of the Plenary Assembly and fully approved the idea of a BIRA II Follow-Up Consultation to be organized by the two Offices and held in Varanasi, India, on the theme of: "Christian Presence among Muslims in Asia."

The Varanasi Consultation was held from November 26 to December 4, 1983, after one year of intensive preparatory work. The purpose of the meeting was to examine in depth the varying life situations of Muslims in the countries of Asia and to discern the different influences affecting Christian-Muslim relationships, in order to propose orientations and action.

The consultation reaffirmed that "the Spirit of God is also active outside the visible Church," that "salvation is a gift from God offered to all in Jesus Christ," and that "through contacts with people of other faiths we become more aware of the fullness of Christ's salvific work."<sup>39</sup> Varanasi also reaffirmed that "dialogue must never be made a strategy to elicit conversions,"<sup>40</sup> and that "inculturation, like dialogue, is not a tactic to convert people to one's faith."<sup>41</sup> The goal of dialogue is "an enrichment which enables both participants to purify and deepen their respective faith commitments and then become open to ever more abundant movements of God's grace."<sup>42</sup> The consultation did not overlook the serious difficulties of Christian-Muslim dialogue, but insisted that "our commitment to dialogue is one which must transcend historical difficulties and vicissitudes."<sup>43</sup>

The final statement touched on almost every aspect of personal and group encounter between Christians and Muslims and stressed that the first and necessary step in the building up of better Christian-Muslim relations is the formation of Christian communities which, besides the principles of their own faith, know well the basic teachings of Islam.<sup>44</sup> The participants strongly recommended ongoing reflection-action programs designed to foster Christian-Muslim mutual understanding and to initiate common projects towards the building of a just social order.<sup>45</sup> They pointed out that the promotion of Asian society and family life depends greatly on the improved status of women and that collaboration between Christian and Muslim women in improving their place in society should receive warm support from the whole Church. Consequently, they urged that Christian women be formed for their important role of reaching out to Muslim women and assisting them in the struggle for their rights.<sup>46</sup>

By the end of 1983, 35 bishops and 44 priests from thirteen Asian



countries had taken part in one or two of the "Institutes" or "Seminars" organized by OEIA. Many of them had been able to initiate in their countries or dioceses a follow-up work adapted to the local situations and needs. The results of their endeavors had been, in many countries, a noticeable progress in the local Churches' concern for dialogue and a broader involvement in this dialogue. In the meantime, OEIA had considerably strengthened its links of cooperation with each of the National Dialogue Commissions of the FABC member conferences. OEIA had also developed a wide network of correspondents committed to the study of Asian religions and to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue in Asia.

### **Dialogue and Catholic Leadership**

However, these signs of hope were somewhat overshadowed by the fact that only a rather small number of Church leaders in Asia had actually benefited from the OEIA-sponsored meetings, and that the vast majority of Christians in Asia were still deprived of the cultural and theological preparation necessary for a humble and authentic dialogue.

Early in the same year, 1983, the OEIA executive committee had seriously faced up to this alarming situation and searched for new ways of assisting effectively the process of conscientization towards a meaningful and growing dialogue between Christians and people of other faiths in Asia. Two main resolutions resulted from this joint reflection: (a) to give greater attention to the ecumenical dimension of OEIA's work, so as to help more effectively the local Churches in their efforts to promote the ecumenical dialogue which is the necessary condition for a fruitful dialogue between Christians and people of other faiths; (b) to offer as soon as possible to all the bishops of Asia an opportunity to get more acquainted with the Church's efforts to promote interreligious dialogue and, at the same time, to deepen their personal understanding of the theology of dialogue.

These resolutions were soon followed by a tentative plan for a series of ten Bishops' Institutes on the Theology of Dialogue, to be held before 1990 and to be organized in such a way that each of the bishops of Asia may have the opportunity to take part in one of these seminars and to benefit from the other seminars in this series as well. Carefully studied with the help of several theologians, this plan was presented by the OEIA secretary to the plenary assembly of the Secretariat for Non-Christians in Rome in February, 1984. It was officially approved by the FABC at the Federation's Central Committee meeting in Suwon, Korea, in May, 1984.

## **A Convergence of Ecumenical Concern**

We wish to mention in this paper a very meaningful and memorable event which took place during the plenary assembly of the Secretariat for Non-Christians, held in Rome from February 27 to March 2, 1984, to reflect on the relationship between "dialogue" and "mission." Both the secretary of OEIA and the director of the World Council of Churches' Sub-Unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies had been especially invited to take part in this meeting. They were meeting together for the first time. On February 28th, both of them were asked to present to the assembly a report on their work and plans. It was for them a great joy to discover not only the great similarity of their observations but also the striking convergence of the projects elaborated by OEIA and the WCC Sub-Unit. Corresponding to the OEIA Seven-Year Plan, there was, at the world level, a WCC "Five-Year Program on the Theological Significance of People of other Faiths and their Convictions." Both programs were designed to answer the same needs, one at the Asian level and the other at the world level. Through the discovery of their common vision, both OEIA and the WCC Sub-Unit were confirmed in their determination to open new horizons in the field of interreligious dialogue, so that the Church may become ever more a credible sign of the Kingdom and a source of genuine hope for the future of man.

### **The BIRA Four Series**

The first FABC Bishops' Institute on the Theology of Dialogue (BIRA IV/I) was held in Sampran, Thailand, October 23-30, 1984. It was designed to discern the main areas of concern to be reflected upon in the planned series of BIRA IV, as well as the priority tasks to be undertaken by all those involved in the realization of the Seven-Year Plan, so that all might realistically hope to add further impulse to the dynamics of interreligious dialogue in Asia and everywhere in the world. For this important discernment OEIA had invited the presidents and secretaries of all the FABC National Commissions for Interreligious Affairs and a few representatives of directly concerned Church offices, like the FABC Office for Human Development, the Christian Conference of Asia and, at the world level, the Vatican Secretariats for Non-Christians and Non-Believers, as well as the Pontifical Council for Culture.

The issues which emerged during the meeting covered a wide range in both the theological and pastoral fields: "the Church and the King-



dom," "the Holy Spirit at work in and beyond the visible boundaries of the Church," "Mission and Dialogue," "Conversion and Dialogue," "Peace, Justice, Human Development and the tasks of Dialogue in Asia," "Theology of Harmony in the Asian Context," "Ways of Prayer and Worship in Asia," "the Laity in the Ministry of Dialogue," "Education for Dialogue," etc. The participants agreed to see in each of these issues the object of study in depth to be done by the successive Bishops' Institutes on the Theology of Dialogue (1984-1990). They strongly pointed out that:

A true metanoia regarding the importance of dialogue in the mission of the Church is one of the first goals to be attained if inter-religious dialogue may ever become a reality. This affects both the pastors and ordinary faithful. Measures should be taken to favor this change of heart and mind at the earliest possible time: the Church should move *now*.<sup>47</sup>

A healthy spontaneity in the discussions was visible all through the meeting. This spontaneity greatly helped to create in the group a sense of community, a common vision of ecumenical and interreligious tasks in Asia, and a real solidarity which, since then, has been continuously operating as a powerful stimulus in the common work to be done both at the national level and at the Asian level.

"The Church at the Service of God's Reign on Earth." This was the theme of BIRA IV/2, held in Pattaya, Thailand, November 17-22, 1985. During the four months preceding this event, each of the twenty-two bishop-participants received from OEIA three series of questions on the Church's relationship to the Kingdom, the work of dialogue, and the tasks of evangelization. All answered these questionnaires in a way which clearly showed their deep interest in the study of the theme chosen for the meeting.

In sharing with one another their personal reflections, they came to believe more firmly and realize more clearly that:

The Reign of God is the very reason for the being of the Church. The Church exists in and for the Kingdom.<sup>48</sup>

The Kingdom, God's gift and initiative, is already begun and is continually being realized and made present through the Spirit ... It is far wider than the Church's boundaries. This already present reality is oriented towards the final manifestation and full per-

fection of the Reign of God.<sup>49</sup>

The Church is an instrument for the actualization of the Kingdom.<sup>50</sup>

BIRA IV/2 pointed out the great importance of doing justice to the three models of the Church operating in the minds of Christians today: the "Institution" model, the "Community" model and the "Servant" model:

Institution though she be, the Church is charged with building community among its own members as well as with mankind. It is in the spirit of humble servanthood that she must dedicate herself to these tasks.<sup>51</sup>

BIRA IV/2 also stressed that "as a sign and an instrument that reaches out, the Church is in dialogue with all peoples" and that this dialogue "is to be carried out at all levels."<sup>52</sup>

Given the Asian situation of poverty and pluralism, it is urgent that persons of all faiths make common cause in a dialogue of action together to respond to the cry for human dignity, brotherhood and freedom.<sup>53</sup>

Most of the practical recommendations made by BIRA IV/2 deal with the formation of the laity (the vast majority of the Church), as well as the formation of priests and religious for a meaningful dialogue with people of other religions and a meaningful "service" to all in God's Reign.<sup>54</sup>

Before returning home to follow up in their own diocese or country the work of BIRA IV/2, the participants expressed their hope that "men and women of faith and goodwill, strengthened by the experience of common humanity, will join in the building of God's Kingdom whose completion he alone can bring about."<sup>55</sup>

More strongly, perhaps, than any of the preceding OEIA-sponsored Institutes, BIRA IV/2 stressed that interreligious dialogue is an imperative of the Kingdom and not a luxury to be confined to theological elites, and that the ministry of proclaiming the universal Kingdom should be entrusted in a special way to lay people who are, in fact, better placed for the work than Church-oriented clerics and religious. This was echoed in the Plenary Assembly held in Tokyo in September 1986:



In every situation, the whole Church is called to a dialogue of life with fellow Christians and other Churches, the billions of other religions and the members of various social groups. Since the laity live in a more direct and day-to-day contact with people of other faiths, they are the ones most called to this living dialogue ... The lay apostolate of our Churches still remains basically parish-oriented, inward-looking and priest-directed. The need of our Asian context and the thrust of Vatican II to make the apostolate world-oriented and Kingdom-oriented must be increasingly emphasized ...<sup>56</sup>

Two months after this FABC Plenary Assembly, BIRA IV/3 (November 2-7, 1986) was held in Hong Kong, on the theme, "Discerning the Spirit at Work in and beyond the Church in Asia."

As in the preceding BIRA IV, all the participants had seriously prepared themselves by answering three series of questions sent to them by OEIA in advance of the meeting. These questionnaires, as well as the preceding BIRAs and their follow-up work at the national level, had helped all of them understand better the insights of Vatican II with regard to the dialogue of the Church.

The Church is called by the Spirit of Christ to enter into a dialogue with the followers of other Asian faiths and movements. This indeed is the imperative which the Second Vatican Council gave to the Church.<sup>57</sup> Even though in some countries the obstacles to fruitful relationships with the followers of other religions and ideologies seem insurmountable, we are still called by the Spirit of Christ to seek every possible opening for dialogue and reconciliation.<sup>58</sup>

The Asian realities and the teaching of Vatican II compel the Church to move out of herself and into fellowship with all people of goodwill as an effective way to work for the Reign which Christ proclaimed.<sup>59</sup>

BIRA IV/3 pointed out that the call to dialogue is a call to a deeper understanding of "the Spirit of God who was active amongst all peoples before the Incarnation and is active amongst the nations, religions and peoples of Asia today,"<sup>60</sup> and that our dialogue will be fruitful only if we are able to "empty ourselves of all prejudices ... to listen to what the Spirit and our partner in dialogue are saying."

We need a life of deepening prayer and contemplation ... so that our dialogue will be of the Spirit.<sup>61</sup>

BIRA IV/3 affirmed that "the fruits of the Spirit should be our constant guides in discerning the presence of the Spirit,"<sup>62</sup> and that "any discernment of the Holy Spirit stands in relation to the Church's memory and interpretation of the reality of Jesus Christ."<sup>63</sup>

BIRA IV/3 stressed not only the importance of a wide and deep general knowledge of Asian faiths and ideologies,<sup>64</sup> but also the importance of a theological reflection to answer the questions that are thrown up by interfaith encounters.

Knowledge without critical theological reflection will remain sterile for the promotion of authentic human and faith relationships with the followers of other faiths and ideologies.<sup>65</sup>

BIRA IV/3 paid special attention to the fact that people encounter the Spirit within their context, which is pluralistic in terms of religions, culture and world views and, in this light affirmed a stance of "receptive pluralism," enabling each individual to remain open to the many ways of responding to the promptings of the Spirit, to dialogue with all forms and expressions of the Spirit in various realities, and to collaborate more effectively with the Spirit wherever and whenever he is operative.<sup>66</sup>

Finally, BIRA IV/3 appealed to all the bishops of Asia to "join in discerning anew the Spirit at work in and beyond the Church":

It is true that we are all rightfully concerned with "the care of the churches" but our discussions here in BIRA IV/3 have convinced us that the Church all over Asia is being called by the Spirit to a fuller understanding of mission and to innovative forms of witness, service and dialogue.

This will open a new era when we, along with our brothers and sisters, will jointly make the Reign of God more visibly present, a Reign of freedom, justice, love and peace.<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

Three years have passed since the FABC-OEIA Seven-Year Plan was initiated. The work has been progressing slowly but steadily. Besides the parallel meetings jointly prepared by OEIA and CCA and



scheduled for July 5-10 this year, four Bishops' Consultations on Inter-religious Dialogue (BIRA IV/5-8) are planned to be held in 1987: two in the Philippines and two in India. We hope these consultations will continue to foster in Asia a serious reflection on the Theology of Dialogue, which the Church is presently exploring. We also look forward to new developments of close cooperation between FABC and CCA. We feel confident that this cooperation will pave the way to new initiatives designed to make our Christian communities in Asia more attentive to God's love and activity in the whole realm of human life and "sensitively attuned to the work of the Spirit in the resounding symphony of the Asian Communion."<sup>68</sup>

(We believe that the FABC texts presented in this paper have an across-Asia dimension and clearly indicate not only the developing lines of a Theology of Dialogue which the Asian bishops have drawn in the last thirteen years, but also some areas of consensus already achieved. With a view toward facilitating the study and understanding of these important texts, special attention has been given to the detailed reference notes which follow.)

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3. Ibid., No. 15 (F p.14 / P28 p.3)
4. Resolutions of the Asian Bishops' Meeting, No. 12 (F p.21 / P28 p.9)
5. Statement of the FABC 1st Assembly, No. 12 (F p.29 / P28 p.16)
6. Ibid., NN 14-18 (F p.30 / P28 pp 16-17)
7. Conclusions of the Colloquium, No. 12 (P3 p.4)
8. BIMA I. Letter of Participants, No. 10 (F p.157 / P19 p.15)
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13. Report of the 3rd Assembly of the East Asian Region of the FABC\*\*\*
14. BISA V. Final Statement (P24, p.24)
15. BIRA I. Final Statement, No. 9 (F p.184 / P25 p.19)
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29. BIRA III. Final Statement, NN 1,3 (F p.197, 198 / P36 p.42)
30. Ibid., No. 4 (F p.198 / P36 p.43)
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33. Ibid., No. 7 (F p.199 / P36 p.43)
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35. BIRA III. Conclusions (F p.204 / P36, p.46)
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37. Ibid., No. 17.4 (F p.101 / P32 p.31)
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## Annex I

### List of Meetings Mentioned in This Paper

1970 Nov. 23-29	Manila	Asian Bishops' Meeting
1974 April 22-27	Taipei	FABC First Plenary Assembly
1977 Feb. 27-March 5	Hong Kong	Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church
1978 July 19-27	Baguio	BIMA I
Nov. 19-26	Calcutta	FABC Second Plenary Assembly
1979 March 26-29	Tokyo	Third Assembly of the East Asian Region of the FABC
May 21-June 1	Baguio	BISA V
Oct. 11-19	Sampran	BIRA I
Nov. 13-21	Kuala Lumpur	BIRA II
Dec. 2-7	Manila	International Congress on Mission
1980 Nov. 18-23	Taipei	SIRA I
1982 May 24-27	Taipei	SIRA II
Oct. 19-29	Sampran	FABC Third Plenary Assembly
Nov. 15-22	Madras	BIRA III
1983 Nov. 26-Dec. 4	Varanasi	Consultation on Christian Presence Among Muslims in Asia
1984 Feb. 27-March 2	Rome	Plenary Assembly of the Secretariat for Non-Christians

Oct. 23-30	Sampran	BIRA IV/1
1985 Nov. 17-22	Pattaya	BIRA IV/2
1986 Sept. 16-25	Tokyo	FABC Fourth Plenary Assembly
Nov. 2-7	Hong Kong	BIRA IV/3
1987 July 5-10	Singapore	BIRA IV/4

## Annex II

### 1979-1986 FABC Bishops' Institutes on Interreligious Dialogue Participants

	Bishops	Other Delegates	Total
BIRA I (1979)	10	12	22
BIRA II (1979)	10	11	21
BIRA III (1982)	12	19	31
VARANASI (1983)	14	32	46
BIRA IV/1 (1984)	11	18	29
BIRA IV/2 (1985)	22	14	36
BIRA IV/3 (1986)	23	8	31
Total	<u>102</u>	<u>114</u>	<u>216</u>
From:			
India	24 (14)	29 (28)	53 (42)
Bangladesh	7 (4)	6 (5)	13 (9)
Pakistan	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)
Sri Lanka	8 (5)	6 (6)	14 (11)
Philippines	13 (8)	3 (3)	16 (11)
Indonesia	16 (14)	6 (3)	22 (17)
Malaysia	8 (4)	3 (2)	11 (6)
Singapore		4 (4)	4 (4)
Thailand	16 (6)	17 (14)	33 (20)
Japan	5 (2)	6 (4)	11 (6)
Korea	2 (2)	2 (2)	4 (4)
Taiwan	2 (2)	9 (3)	11 (5)
Hong Kong		7 (3)	7 (3)
Macao		1 (1)	1 (1)
Australia		1 (1)	1 (1)
Rome, Germany		12 (11)	12 (11)
	<u>102 (62)</u>	<u>114 (92)</u>	<u>216 (154)</u>



It must be noted that most of the chairmen of the National Dialogue Commissions, several other bishops and a few priests, religious or other delegates have attended at least two of the seven Institutes held between 1979 and 1986. Only 62 bishops and 92 priests, religious or other delegates (see numbers in parentheses) have been directly involved in one (or several) of the seven Institutes held up to now.

### **Annex III**

#### **Interreligious Dialogue in Asia Studies Published in FABC Papers**

- 1977 Harmonious Approach of Christianity to Other Faiths, by Pedro S. de Achutegui (No. 2)
- 1978 Christian Prayer and Interreligious Dialogue (No. 12b)
- 1979 The Growing Church: Amid Various Religious and Cultural Traditions and Contemporary Ideologies. The Ecumenical Task in Asia, by Robert Hardawirana (No. 14)
- Gospel and Culture, by D.S. Amalorpavadass (No. 15)
- Church, Mission and the Kingdom of God  
by Bishop Patrick D' Souza (No. 22)
- 1982 The Church as a Community of Faith in the Asian Context, by D.S. Amalorpavadass (No. 30)
- The Church as a Community of Faith in the Asian Context, by Archbishop D. Simon Lourdasamy (in No. 32)
- The Dialogue of Communities of Faith in Asia (No. 33e)
- The Summons to Dialogue, by Archbishop Angelo Fernandes (No. 34)
- Maturation of the Asian Church, by I. Hirudayam (in No. 36)
- Towards a Culture of Wholeness: the Tasks of the Local Churches in Countries or Regions of Major Hindu Influence, by Michael Amaladoss (in No. 36)
- Obstacles to Dialogue, by Swami Vikrant (in No. 36)
- 1985 Building the Church of Christ in a Pluricultural Situation, by Robert Hardawirana (No. 41)

1986 The "Abba Experience" of Jesus: the Model and Motive for Mission Today, by Jacob Kavunkal (in No. 43)

Sunset in the East? The Asian Realities Challenging the Church and Its Laity Today, by Felix Wilfred (No. 45)

### **III. DIALOGUE GASPING FOR BREATH?**

Towards New Frontiers in Interreligious Dialogue

by Felix Wilfred

We need to open new frontiers and find new trajectories on the horizon of interreligious dialogue. This would call for a fresh and deeper theological reflection than what we have been used to. While fully recognizing and affirming the validity of the reasons generally adduced for the practice of dialogue, such as, that the Kingdom of God is broader than the Church, that the Spirit is active also beyond the borders of the Church, that we need to create a new world and a just society, etc., it is nevertheless important to realize that today we can enter into a meaningful dialogue with other religious traditions only by facing certain complex theological questions.

A critical reflection on the practice of dialogue is bound to lead us to the conclusion that traditional theological frameworks can no more meaningfully integrate into themselves the new experiences, nor adequately respond to new questions and problems that continue to emerge.

In this paper I intend to focus on a few theological questions the study of which can shape the future of dialogue, as they have far-reaching practical implications. Space does not permit me to delve into them at length. I shall, therefore, limit myself to a short reflection on each one of them.

#### **I. A Shift in the Location of the Question**

Though geographically dialogue is taking place in various countries of Asia through meetings, live-ins, ashrams, etc., yet the spiritual, theological and mental climate of it is that of the Western discussions on the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions. It is said time and time again that the Church has in the course of her long history encountered various peoples, races and cultures. Dialogue would be, then, the extension into Asia of the same process which characterized



the Church's encounter with the Greek world, with various peoples of Europe and their religions.

The situation in which we live today in Asia is markedly different. It is fundamentally important to recognize and state this fact clearly. This will avoid simplistic parallelisms between the past and now.

The first step towards new frontiers in dialogue is to be aware of the new location of the question. The question has to shift from how can Christianity relate to other religions to what is the place of Christianity itself in a religiously pluralistic Asian world. This shift would imply two things. First of all, the relationship between religions cannot be considered in the abstract, at the conceptual level. Religions are not reified entities or systems, as they have unfortunately come to be considered in the modern Western tradition.<sup>1</sup> This question entails also the context of the wider world with its struggles, problems, hopes and expectations.

Secondly, the new location means that we cannot now seriously enter into dialogue with other living faiths if our question is Christianity-centered. In other words, as long as we are concerned with asking how the Church can relate to other religions, the focus of attention turns to the Church and to making it relevant, meaningful and at home. This brings in its train mostly structured forms of dialogue and an organized enterprise of inculturation. All this is the result of a question posed from without. It is a question that has as its background the experience of long centuries of isolation of Christianity from the other religions of humanity. If we move from the Western location of the question, the attention will naturally center around what Christianity can assume, adapt, etc., from other religions, which is supposed to be at once a sign of Christianity's openness and a recognition of the value of other religions.

It is this perspective and point of departure which has led to a lot of initiatives and studies to show that other religions also have what we have — revelation, inspiration, salvation, Kingdom of God and Christ himself in an unknown way.<sup>2</sup> It is again the same perspective or location of the question which has reduced the dialogue of Christianity with other religions to structured forms. Even the so-called dialogue of life would seem to be basically an extrapolation of this same pattern of dialogue to lower levels. The very location of the question rendered it difficult to take any significant steps forward or to move to new frontiers in the field of dialogue.

As long as the point of departure does not change, we will be concentrating on such questions as salvation in other religions, because we have spiritually and theologically transported ourselves to the perspective of European and North American Christianity and its history with all its discussions concerning *vera et falsa religio*.<sup>3</sup> For us, the point of departure for dialogue is the concrete socio-political and historical context of Asia. From within this situation the question is thrown up about the place of Christianity and its relationship to other religions which form part of this context. These religions have contributed in various ways to shape the context, and are continuously interacting with it. The colors and shades of Christianity, as well as of all religions, the ideals they profess and the claim they make can be seen and tested only when they pass through the prism of the Asian realities.

What is meant by the shift in the questions will be better understood if we reverse the situation. Instead of Christianity in Asia, let us think of Buddhism in Europe today. The Buddhists, a microscopic minority in Europe, might well ask how can Buddhism be at home in Europe where Christianity is the religion of the overwhelming majority of the people. This would be basically a self-centered question inasmuch as Buddhism aims ultimately to preserve the old identity it had in the East with some adaptations to the local European situation. On the contrary, if Buddhism asks what is its place in the technological civilization of contemporary Europe, in an advanced industrial and consumeristic society, it is on the path of reconstructing its self-identity anew, which can take place only by an encounter at depth with Christianity, the matrix of European culture.

## II. Socio-Political Context of Interreligious Dialogue

Of the relationship of religion to political life in Asia, three patterns can be observed:

(i) First, there is the political model inspired by theocratic tendencies which range from religious ideology functioning as state ideology — as for example in Pakistan — to letting the policies of the state be strongly determined by an official religion — as for example the Islamization of politics in Malaysia, the role of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Thailand.<sup>4</sup> The pressures to turn India into Hindustan, or the demand for Khalistan, etc., belong to this trend.

(ii) Within the frame of an avowedly secular state, the majority



religion is supported by government and its machinery in unofficial and subtle ways, while the minority religions, groups or sections are somewhat discriminated against, as for example in India.<sup>5</sup>

- (iii) A third model would be where religion is instrumentalized and manipulated to political gains, and this is quite widespread.

The three patterns are not very distinct, so that we have situations in which a mixture of all these trends exists.

The problems deriving from the mixture of religion and politics in Asia are compounded further by the fact that in many cases ethnic identity is also religious identity. For example, to be Thai is to be Buddhist, to be Malay is to be Muslim, Sinhalese means Buddhist, while to be Tamil is to be Hindu, and so on. The interplay of religious and political forces in many Asian societies has caused endemic communal and ethnic conflicts, exploitation and oppression, weighing heavily, especially on the poorest sections of society. All this is far from the goal of unity and integration of peoples, groups, tribes, etc., towards which politics and religion are called to work.

In this overall situation, there is, I think, no other way out than to accept as point of departure universal human values, secular and democratic ideals and institutions, human rights, etc., in spite of the limitations and conditionings deriving from their Western origin.<sup>6</sup> This alone in the complex situation of today could pave the way for ensuring justice, equality, freedom to the people from all machinations and manipulations. Having said this, I should immediately add that the mere affirmation of these values, rights, institutions and ideals will, so to say, cut no ice in Asian societies. In fact, the modern ideals of society, democracy and the values they embody have not been able to strike deep roots in the Asian soil, as the experience of the past few decades has amply proved. Old loyalties and "primordial sentiments,"<sup>7</sup> to use an expression of Clifford Geertz, have still a very strong hold not only on the minds of Asians, and their way of life, but also on public life. To be effective and operative in Asian societies these values, ideals and institutions need to be appropriated by the people and integrated into the subjective and emotional sphere of individuals and groups.

In this regard, it needs to be remarked here that the substance of what goes under the titles of universal human values, human dignity,

rights, etc., is not something new in the Asian continent. These expressions have their homologous equivalent, that is to say, ideals and values performing a similar function in the Asian cultures.<sup>8</sup> The point to note is that these ideals and values, so vital for the functioning of a society, need to be supported and nourished by religious resources. In other words, these values and ideals can find a place in Asian societies and become an inspiring force only when they are linked to traditional religions and find theological legitimacy. This is clearly illustrated by the Indian independence movement. Secular ideals of freedom, national independence, etc., though propounded from the middle of the nineteenth century, remained at best cherished goals of elite groups. These ideals could find a resonance in the hearts of the people and mobilize them to action only when they were perceived by them in religious terms — *dharma*, *Ram Rajya*, etc. — as propounded by Gandhi.

It is clear, then, that the functioning of a modern secular state with a just societal order paradoxically requires, in Asia, a religious foundation. This, in fact, should not be strange, for historically in Asia religion has played a decisive role in the shaping of political ideals and institutions. Religions have lent ethical perspectives and principles lest the political order should turn out to be a perversion of power.

On the other hand, it was at the stage of divorce of politics from ethics in the West, resulting among other things from the permeation of crude positivistic and scientific strains of thought, that the Western secular liberal and democratic ideals were transported to Asia and to other parts of the Third World.<sup>9</sup> The political and the social order have been increasingly vitiated by the inflow into them of the sewage waters of economism, the unholy cult of money, profit and consumerism.

These ideals, therefore, stand in need of being rooted in the religious tradition and of being impregnated by ethical values from its resources. The ethical and religious void in these ideals and institutions has caused serious danger to the public life, allowing corruption and bribery to thrive in politics and bureaucracy.

In this whole context, it should be clear why today dialogue should take place among the various religious traditions of a nation, state or community. In a pluralistic and multireligious society, the religions need to enter into dialogue for providing a common moral foundation to the political and social life. But dialogue cannot limit itself to furnishing a moral foundation to Asian societies: it should reach out to further



goals. Asian religions should, namely, dialogue and engage themselves jointly in a search for viable alternatives to the present global socio-political order which through transnationalization has imposed itself as the only way.

In the pursuit of dialogue on political and social questions, we should take into account the fact that there exist diverse and even polarized tendencies within one and the same religious tradition. Practically all Asian religions today manifest two strains — one open to universalism and reinterpretation, the other more withdrawn into tradition and underscoring the hedges and fences which mark off one's religion from the rest. Groups of this latter trend often determine the political course of a nation by exerting pressures on the government which for strategic reasons gravitates towards them and yields to their demands. A case in point is the situation in Indonesia.<sup>10</sup>

Christian dialogue with other religionists has by and large overlooked the political context, and even if some political questions have been on the dialogue agenda, they have been discussed mostly with those groups and segments that represent the more universalistic and open trend in a religion. Such a dialogue is relatively easy. What is more difficult, but very important for the future, is that our dialogue be directed to fundamentalistic groups. Though these groups are deeply biased against Christianity, efforts to dialogue with them could become very fruitful in as much as they can, with their sharp critical sense, bring home to Christians, certain truths about themselves and lead them to discover their place and role in the Asian context.

In conclusion, let me add a point which, I think, flows naturally from the reflections made so far. The meeting of religions on the political and social levels would call for a serious dialogue on the divergent images of Man<sup>11</sup> as propounded by the religions, the meaning of community human togetherness, etc. It is not a matter of little importance for the social and political life, whether Man is conceived as *homo sapiens*, or *homo peccator*, or *homo faber*, or as *animal economicum*. More concretely, in Asia the framework of Christian anthropology, with its understanding of creation, fall, redemption, needs to be in dialogue with, for example, the more optimistic Confucian vision of Man and the Buddhist interpretation of the human situation. Dialogue along these lines will deepen the meaning of common initiatives and projects of the religionists for the well-being of Man and society. And at this juncture it will be not religions alone but also other ideologies with their understanding of Man and human society that will be partners in

our dialogue.

### III. Dialogue and the Interrelationship between Anthropocentrism and Cosmic Vision

The conclusion of the previous section leads us on to another question of great importance for the future of dialogue. The meeting of various images of Man is ultimately a meeting of different *Weltanschauungen* — world visions. It has to take place not in the abstract, but in the concrete arena of history, in life at the political, social and cultural levels.

It is generally recognized that the Judaeo-Christian tradition represents a strong anthropocentric vision, while the rest of Asian religious traditions represent a cosmic vision.<sup>12</sup> This point need not be elaborated here. However, it must be underlined that the Christian anthropocentrism invoked for support by modern science and technology is only the crust that has grown around a more sane Biblical core affirming the pre-eminence of Man, his freedom, dignity and resemblance to God, as well as his duties and responsibilities towards the whole creation. The anthropocentrism, which is part of contemporary technocratic world and civilization is something which was set in motion more immediately by Humanism, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.

The tragedy is that the affirmation of Man, started with the humanistic tradition, has ended up, paradoxically, in the negation of Man and the progressive destruction of his natural environment. The Baconian and Cartesian understanding of the relationship of Man to nature as master and possessor has distorted the true Christian vision of Man.<sup>13</sup> What began as anthropocentric vision has turned into egocentrism, individualism, and led to the emergence of the dangerous "one-dimensional Man."<sup>14</sup> The affirmation of a complete autonomy of Man vis-à-vis nature, the over-selfconfidence of Man, and the passionate drive to realize anything simply because it is possible, with total disregard of its cost in human, social and environmental terms, all these have precipitated a crisis of survival and have brought humanity to the brink of nuclear disaster.

The cosmic vision consists in the realization of the truth that the essence of reality is communion, harmony, interdependence, and that Man himself is a part of this web of relationships which constitute reality as an organic whole. Ingrained in this cosmic or organic vision is also the truth that there is an intrinsic relationship between nature and



the well-being of humanity.

One will readily concede — and we do not need to belabor the point here — that the anthropocentric and cosmic visions are complementary. This is true on principle. But in practice, the history of the last few centuries and the present world scene unmistakably demonstrate how the anthropocentric vision with its technocratic rationality has imposed itself on every realm of life and on every people and nation of the globe. Transforming itself into egocentrism, it has functioned in a relationship of domination-dependence, and has led to gross violation of human dignity and social injustice. Like many other societies in the world, the Asian societies have been dragged into this situation.

By force of historical circumstances, such as colonialism, Asia has opened itself up to the positive strains of the anthropocentric vision.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, because of the consciousness of political, economic and military power and superiority, the West has paid no heed to the cosmic and organic vision represented by the religions and cultures of the East. The organic and holistic vision of the East is slowly being eclipsed in the consciousness of the modern Man.

The world and the Asian societies need to be redeemed from the crisis of survival into which the anthropocentrism has thrown them. A just and righteous world order can be no more a pious wish. It has become an imperative need. In these circumstances, it is not enough to speak about complementarity of the two visions — anthropocentric and cosmic; the situation warrants a clear priority of the cosmic vision over anthropocentrism in today's world.

The organic vision must be given expression in every realm of life — social, political, economic and cultural. It is here that we should recognize the place of Eastern religions. They are the bearers of an organic vision of reality, and have given birth to a culture of harmony.<sup>16</sup> A new world, a new political, social and economic order, must embody and incarnate this organic vision. Whatever be the answers given to the academic question of the salvific value of non-Christian religions, we see in the concrete that the Eastern religions have a role of redeeming the world and humanity from the present crisis. The Asian religions can and ought to play a liberative role by presenting an alternative vision. Christianity in this context should enter into dialogue with these religions and join them in their task. In this dialogue Christianity can draw upon the Wisdom tradition of the Bible. The Wisdom tradition in many respects is closer to Asian religions and their vision. Having the experi-

ential and the mysterious as its characteristic, Wisdom is able to relate and harmoniously blend the mystery of God, the mystery of Man and the reality of the cosmos, and point the way to the maintenance of righteousness and righteous order.<sup>17</sup>

#### **IV. Soteriology within the Wider Horizon of Creation**

The first thing which immediately strikes us in Asia is life in its various forms and expressions; life as lived out by a rich variety of peoples and ethnic groups; life pulsating in the endless species of animals, birds, trees and plants. As God's gift, this life is to be nurtured in all its variegated forms and expressions. The dialogue of Christianity with other faiths should, then, focus on this fundamental gift of life among the teeming millions of Asia and in nature. Christianity should understand her mission in Asia as that of service to life and its blossoming at all levels — human, animal and nature — all bound together to form one cosmic whole.

But at the same time we witness gruesome scenes where life is trampled upon. Life is threatened and endangered in various ways, starting from the lack of water, food and shelter to the threat of nuclear war, through the various inhumanities heaped upon individuals, peoples, groups, and the wanton destruction of nature and its resources.

These two basic experiences, namely life and its nurturing, on the one hand, and the dangers to life, on the other, are also fundamental religious experiences: the search for life in fullness, the experience of being redeemed from dangers or of being liberated. Religions have interpreted these experiences differently and have given them concrete expressions in doctrines, stories, sagas, celebrations, etc. These religious experiences which stem from the experience of life and its realities must be brought to bear upon contemporary Asia at the service of life, fostering it and freeing it from the dangers to which it is exposed.

The Christian engagement in Asia for preserving and saving life has to take place more and more in collaboration with sisters and brothers of other faiths. It is in promoting and saving God's gift of life in all its forms that Christianity will manifest how salvific it is. How salvific other Asian religions are has to be seen also in their service to life. Thus the encounter with other religions on the level of salvation takes on a very concrete dimension, touching deeply the reality of life.

This practice of involvement and dialogue brings in the question of



interpreting in Asia the traditional Christian understanding of creation (promotion of life) and their interrelationship. We need a proper perspective. A rethinking or revision of Christian models in this area has become an imperative need.

A dichotomy between creation and redemption or salvation, the latter identified with salvation history, has crept into our theological thinking. A static idea of creation, on the one hand, and, on the other, a narrowing down of God's saving activity to a group of people, a nation of the past, underlie this dichotomy. The result is the subordination of creation to soteriology. Something similar to the anthropocentrism of which I spoke earlier, there has been a soteriologism centered on the past with emphasis on the saving events of God rather than on the truth that God is one who saves. The expression of this tendency is to read the entire Bible under the leitmotif of salvation history.<sup>18</sup> This approach, which has gained currency, is, we must know, of recent origin, having been introduced in the middle of the last century by the Protestant theologian J.C.K. Hofmann (1910-1877).<sup>19</sup> The last-century understanding of history has been projected back on to the Hebrew world. The Bible with its complex and variegated nature defies any casting of its content into a single mold of a linear salvation history. The mold does not respect the didactical narratives, the Wisdom materials and the themes with which they are interwoven.

A proper understanding of the relationship of creation and redemption is a presupposition for a meaningful dialogue in Asia. We need to rethink the Christian conception of creation as developed in relation to Greek thought. For the Church, it has been difficult to free itself from the Greek world, and we find repeatedly in its history a nostalgic return to Greece, the womb of Western intellectual culture and civilization. According to this vision, creation is a past act of God, done once for all in the beginning. This conception has resulted in devaluing creation as nothing more than a stage for the unfolding of the history of salvation or redemption.

In the past few decades many Old Testament scholars, under the inspiration of Gerhard von Rad, have highlighted the salvation and redemption aspect in the history of Israelites and have tried to see in the historical events of salvation, especially the Exodus, the core element of Israel's faith.<sup>20</sup> Many of the traditions which Israel shared with its neighboring West Asian peoples concerning creation have been considered by these scholars as nothing more than a preface or a "foil" in which soteriology was wrapped up. The climate for the general accept-

ance of these ideas was created by the defensive attitude to which the Church was pushed because of the growing opposition to the biblical creation narratives from the time of the Enlightenment, later on intensified by the natural sciences. As a result, the creation narratives with their mythical tradition were relegated to the background as something theologically secondary, and touching the faith only marginally.

Today, renowned scholars, like Claus Westermann, H.H. Schmid, G.M. Landes, have convincingly shown that creation and the ordering of the world by God is the most fundamental element of faith and Israel's historical experience, and events of salvation are the concretization or realization of the creative power of God.<sup>21</sup> In fact, many of the salvific events are portrayed in the terms of the creation narratives, as a fight against chaos. Similarly at the root of O.T. Wisdom tradition lies, in fact, a theology of creation. For the order and righteousness (in Asian terms, the *dharma*) which is the heart of biblical Wisdom is only a reflection of the original harmonious order of creation.<sup>22</sup>

Such an understanding of creation as comprehending within its range of expanse the historical events of salvation as well as Wisdom is bound to alter our conceptions about the relationship to other religions, peoples and cultures, and make us engage ourselves with them in a common effort towards the realization of a harmonious order in human life (*satya*), society and politics (*dharma*), an order which would be the original order of creation or the cosmic order (*rita*) which sustains the world.

A deeper examination of the biblical witness will further show how creation is a process of God's dynamic action that continues from beginning to end, and that the end itself is depicted as a "new creation," symbolized as new Jerusalem or as a return to Paradise. It is within this dynamism of God's creation and in the context of a growing and evolving world that his saving events among peoples and nations are to be placed. In a way, they are all part of God's creation. Therefore, creation is most fundamental and universal, comprising within itself the birth, growth and prospering of everything — man, nature, the world, the entire humanity.

This perspective of creation will make us see in the Bible not only the saving acts of God but equally his activity of blessing for life and growth of life in all forms (Gen 1:22, 28). While God's saving actions are extraordinary and do not make a continuous story, the blessing activity of God is continuous and sustained, and extends to all the



nations of the earth.<sup>23</sup> "By you shall all the families of the earth bless themselves" (Gen 12:3). God is then not only someone who saves from extraordinary situations of danger but also one who blesses. And this blessing is spoken of about individuals, families, nations, and every kind of living creature (Gen 1:22).

Such a view of creation, and the understanding of God's saving deeds in its light, opens up new horizons and fresh perspectives for dialogue with other religions. This has not been possible in the past because of the context of a narrow understanding of soteriology and its dominance over the understanding of creation.

### **V. Asian Theological Epistemology and its Implications for Interreligious Dialogue**

Opening up new frontiers in dialogue calls for a shift in our current theological epistemology. The lack of it explains also why dialogue has, by and large, remained a pursuit of an elite group, and has confined itself to structured forms. Only a different epistemological approach is capable of turning dialogue into an everyday experience in Asian life.

The epistemology which underlies much of Western theology and is also at work subtly in our dialogue is a division or dichotomy of subject and object. The exaltation of the thinking subject, the knower, in contrast to the object has reinforced in the Western tradition discursive reasoning, logic analysis, and has created a tendency to judge truth and error too hastily. Error is, then, declared in so many ways as having no right to exist. It is the same epistemology which underlies the modern scientific rationality, control mechanisms, and homogenization of every sphere of life. This "technological epistemology" is characterized by rigidity, redomination of the object.

At the religious level the technological epistemology has led to the loss of the sense of mystery, the sacred, and to the reification of religions, namely, the reduction of religion to manageable and controllable formulae and conceptual molds. Socially it has caused the subjection of the personal and the human to the impersonal, organizational, functional, governed by technocratic laws. Politically it has fostered totalitarianism, militarism and authoritarianism.

Most theologies developed in the West in modern times are in tune with this kind of scientific rationality, and this is reflected in their method and approach and in the issues with which they are preoccupied.

This should cause no surprise since the modern Western theological tradition has concentrated its attention on making up, belatedly, for its past antagonism to science and the secular world. It has absorbed the architectonic world view and technological epistemology, and has been all out to adapt itself to modernity.

A theology with such an epistemology and world vision underlying it is quite inadequate and inappropriate in Asia, and therefore incapable of dialoguing with the Asian religions and their cultural world shaped by a different world view, and functioning with a totally different logic. The Latin American theologians were compelled by their experience to distance themselves from the Western tradition and even speak of an "epistemological break."<sup>24</sup> The possibility of the emergence of an authentic Asian theology and the foundation for a true dialogue in this continent will depend upon a shift in epistemology.

An epistemology closer to the Asian vision of reality and capable of leading us into a new era of dialogue needs to be elaborated. Without presuming to do that, let me point out some elements which, I think, will be characteristic of this epistemology. It can be seen operating in threefold relationships: (i) the whole and the part; (ii) the universal and the particular; (iii) between contrary, or even contradictory, elements.

The Asian approach to reality is total, that is, it tries to know, experience and realize reality in its entirety. Hence, in the understanding of any part of reality, the focus is on the ontological interrelationship of the part to the whole. The web of relationship by which the whole reality is interconnected and by which it subsists is vital to the understanding of every part. This contrasts with an architectonic approach in which the parts are considered independent and having only a functional and external relationship to a mechanistically-conceived whole. In the Asian ethos there is an understanding, a seeing, a certain immediacy with the whole reality in every knowing or understanding of any part of it.

This is an understanding by intuition into the whole reality, and it goes beyond the ideological reflection and discursive thought.<sup>25</sup> Hence, progress in knowledge is not characterized as learning and expertise, namely, the ability to analyze a particular segment or part of reality, but as wisdom, namely, the capacity to relate the part to the whole and the whole to the part by a deeper understanding of the inner order and harmony binding them together. Here truth is not something to be possessed, so to say, as a piece of furniture; it is something that appears and lets itself be seen progressively as we grow in wisdom.



Similarly, a right understanding of reality calls for a correct perception of the relationship between the universal and the particular. In the technological epistemology, and a theology attendant on it, the universal is accorded pride of place, and the particular is considered as something peripheral, marginal and secondary. This has serious practical consequences. In the name of the universal, the particular can be obliterated, done away with. This is the logic of all imperialism, political, economic and cultural. For example, one particular culture would be presented as the universal culture in the face of which all other cultures have to bow down and surrender, as it happened in colonial times and as it continues to happen today through neocolonialism.

The inherent tendency of the technological epistemology to conquer the particular by the universal manifests itself in the conquest of peoples, races, cultures in the name of a general "universal" culture, learning, technology, political system, ideology.

To give another example, such an epistemology can lead to the extolling of the universal Church in such a way as to consider the local Churches as nothing more than its extensions, overlooking thus their specific problems, struggles, cultures, experiences, etc.

The Asian ethos is very attentive and sensitive to the particular, the concrete. Every particular is let to live, respected, fostered for what it is. No attempt is made to reduce the particular to an abstraction, to ready-made categories of thought. This is the way of Asian pluralism, which is part of its cognitive ethos. It contrasts with the logic of imperialism and authoritarianism, which cannot tolerate the particular in its specificity, difference, color and tone. The Asian approach to truth is not by abstraction nor, through universals, but through the experience of plurality at all levels.

The recognition of pluralism brings us face to face with the question of contradictions, conflicts, which are part of our experience. The technological epistemology and the architectonic view are too quick to resolve these experiences by the affirmation of the principle of contradiction which excludes all that appear to contradict what is affirmed as the truth. The Asian pattern of thinking and way of life clearly demonstrate how the people here can coexist with and accept what manifestly are incompatible thoughts, situations, experiences, etc. This is not due to any lack of rigor in thinking and logic. The subtleties and sophistication of some schools of Indian philosophy, for example, are evidence enough. Behind the acceptance of contradictions and co-

existence with it lie two great realizations: (i) that the reality encompasses the mystery of Man, world and the Divine, and that it cannot be fathomed by any single individual or group, nor can it be encapsulated into any formula; (ii) that it is inbuilt into the reality that it should bear in itself the opposites. This latter point is clearly evidenced by the Taoist principle of *yin-yang*, that is, the constitution of reality by the opposites, male and female, positive and negative, active and passive.<sup>26</sup> Contraries in Asian view become complementary — *contraria sunt complementa*.

In conclusion: what does all this mean in terms of dialogue? The difficulties in dialogue are often due to the fact that the cognitive instruments and tools the partner employs are different. It is through them that one perceives the religious world of the other. We Asian Christians have been looking at other religions through the cognitive instruments developed in the West and supplied by it. Dialogue will take a new turn when we learn to look at Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, etc., through Asian eyes and with an Asian mind and an epistemology that is part of our life and heritage. Breaking open from the epistemological capacity in which we are is a primary condition for a fruitful dialogue in Asia today.

## VI. Dialogue and Symbolic Language

In the light of what has been said about epistemology, it is understandable why symbols, myths, stories, paradoxes, etc., are the most favorite Asian language to give expression to truth. And they are the language of the Asian religions, too. In fact, the Indian tradition abounds in myths and symbols, the Chinese in paradoxes, and the Japanese have recourse to aesthetic forms. The language of symbol, myth, etc., is capable of holding together the past and the present, the universal and the particular, elements of conflict and contradiction. It expresses profound intuitions about human life, society, the world and the Divine in a much more powerful way than what discursive reasoning and the language of logic are capable of. It suggests more than what is literal, for it is the key to unlock deeper levels and dimensions of reality.<sup>27</sup>

Symbolic and mythical language does not leave us cold “knowers” or dispassionate observers; it takes hold of us and leads us to the world it indicates, and makes us participants in the truth it communicates, transforming us in the process; it is a language which leads to commitment. If the language of technological epistemology is the language of the word, sign, text, which all pin down the reality, the symbol is the



language of the spirit; it is an endless opening to the endless mystery.

A deeper dialogue and a serious encounter between Christianity and other Asian religions can take place if the language of symbols is made use of. It will also open up new areas and perspectives for mutual understanding and collaboration among peoples of various religious traditions. The use of it would imply many things. First of all, we Christians should make efforts to understand, respect and appreciate the symbolic world of other faiths. This is necessary for entering into the cultural world of our societies. In Asia no separation between culture and religion is possible. Religion is the core element of culture and the matrix for many social mores. From its vision, cultural forms take their configuration and draw their meaning. Entering into the world of symbols, myths, etc., is to enter into the culture of a people.

In the past we dissociated ourselves from this principal language of non-Christian religions because it was seen in conjunction with polytheism. Symbols therefore often conjured up in the Christian mind images of false gods, moral degradation, falsity, error, etc. The world of symbols and myths is very much related to the religiosity of the people. Popular religiosity, ritual celebrations, etc., are impregnated by myths and stories, and it is through them that the people experience and express the divine, the human and the cosmos. They also express vividly their struggles, their aspirations, their hopes, joys and sorrows.<sup>28</sup> No wonder then that sanctuaries and celebrations are associated with myths. Shrines fascinate the masses and draw huge crowds. It is interesting how in the West one had to pass through various stages, as witnessed by the history of comparative religion, to rediscover today and recognize the place of symbols and myths in life — something which has always been so natural and spontaneous to the Asian peoples.

Our dialogue should enter into this world of the peoples with their stories, myths, folklore and songs. In this way it will avoid being a structured dialogue of elites, often speaking an esoteric language, and will strike deep roots among the people and speak their language. Dialogue will thus receive a new impetus from below.

Another implication of the Asian epistemology would be the need to rethink and critically examine the Christian idiom as employed in Asia. As it is, Christianity, in its life, doctrine, etc., is governed by and reflective of the world of logic, systems, formulae, etc. This is perhaps at the root of the widely-recognized alien character of Christianity in this continent. The Christian community must learn to re-express and

reformulate its experience in the language of symbols, paradoxes, aesthetic forms, etc. Such efforts may be resisted and looked at with apprehension, and this is quite natural. We have been accustomed to see the Christian message and moral ideals couched in a doctrinaire form and rigorous logical language. This form and language are controllable, while the symbolic language may be feared and resisted, as it may not give any kind of security or control. Christianity may need to submit its traditional language to a critical study within the Asian context.

During the last few centuries, under the influence of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation and of technological epistemology, the language of theology came to be a language of word and text, or of law, tradition, system. Juridical apparatus and institutions have been necessary to safeguard this language. Today, this language of word and letter, thriving on monolithic uniformity, cannot be allowed to dominate over the spirit represented by the symbolic language which is polysemic, diversified, pluralistic. The language of word, letter and system can easily become, and as a matter of fact has become, an end in itself.

The meeting of religions at the level of symbols can lead them to play jointly important roles. One is that the religions can work together to promote the cultures of peoples. History shows how religions have played the role of guardians of culture in critical times. We could think of the part played by Hinduism in India and Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand.

In a pluralistic and multireligious society this role cannot be assumed by any one single religion, but should become a joint venture. This is urgently required today when the ancient cultures of Asian societies are threatened and stand in danger of being swept off by the tide of the technocratic and consumeristic subculture. It is undeniable that one of the underlying reasons for religious revivalism and fundamentalism is the threat to cultural and religious identity of a people or a nation. Christians should join forces with other religionists in resisting all cultural imperialism. The most dangerous ideology in the world today is to imagine that there is but one way of knowing or interpreting reality, one model of human progress, one way of living and being human.

At the level of symbols, the religions have yet another important role. A society cannot be maintained by its external organization alone.



The internal cohesion of a people, society or a nation can be generated and sustained only by symbols which become the point of unity and a force of integration. They give solidity and stability to society by stimulating from within itself the necessary forces. In Asia, the encounter with technological modernity and the mingling of various ethnic races and groups (which is due to industrialization and urbanization) have caused a deep crisis and even a conflict of symbols, with great repercussions on society. Any amount of political and bureaucratic organization will not be able to restore a harmonious order within Asian societies unless a healing at the level of symbols takes place.

What I have just said would be incomplete if I do not add another important dimension of the question. The crisis of symbols is also because of the new experiences of Asian peoples at all levels — political, religious, social. They are such that they cannot be integrated and contained within the traditional symbolic system.

The complexity of the situation throws up a great challenge to the religions which, as has been pointed out, have been the guardians of cultures and have given stability and legitimacy to societies. And this challenge is twofold. On the one hand, it is of fundamental importance that every religion reinterpret its own symbols and rework constantly its interpretative framework so as to perceive and integrate new experiences and situations. This is possible because unlike signs and words, which tend to be rigid, symbols have an expansive potential, that is, they can grow in meaning and open us to wider horizons of reality. On the other hand, given the role of religion in culture and in the maintenance of the order of society through its symbolic language, the religions should individually and collectively create new and innovative symbols which will reflect new experiences and sustain the society in equality and justice.

## **Conclusion**

Contrary to all appearances, dialogue today is in fact gasping for breath. It is getting suffocated and constricted by the narrowness of the theological ambit in which it is moving. Fresh air is required for dialogue; vitalizing energies are to be injected into it. The horizons of dialogue need to be widened, starting from a change in the very location from where we approach the interrelationship of religions. Religions have to meet at the arena of Asian socio-political realities. The contextualization of dialogue is fundamental. Breaking new grounds in dialogue would call for a fresh anthropology, a recognition of the priority

of organic vision over anthropocentrism, the employing of Asian epistemology, and the approach to truth through symbolic language. These are our challenges. The future of dialogue will depend on whether and how we face them.

#### Footnotes:

1. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, SPCK, London Feb. 1978. In this thorough-going study the author shows the development the concept "religion" has undergone before it came to mean an objectified religious system.
2. The title of the well-known work of R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1964.
3. Cf. Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes towards World Religions*, SCM Press, London 1985; ID., "European Protestant and Catholic Approach to the World Religions," *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol. 12 (1975), pp. 13-28.
4. Cf. Chandra Muzaffar, "Islam in Malaysia: Resurgence and Response," *Religion and Asian Politics. An Islamic Perspective*, CCA, Hong Kong 1984, pp. 8-35; F. Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, TPI, Bangalore 1974; Donald E. Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1965; Heine Bechert, "Buddhism and Mass Politics in Burma and Ceylon," *Religion and Political Modernization*, New Haven-London 1974, pp. 147 ff.
5. Donald E. Smith (ed.), *South Asian Politics and Religion*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1966.
6. I am led to this position, among other things, by studying the history of the emergence of European humanism in modern times. It is interesting to note how European humanism was strengthened as a result of the unfortunate experience of religious conflicts and wars ensuing from the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. While the two 'religions' were at war, humanism represented a third force: it stood for human dignity and rights, independent of religious affiliation.
7. Clifford Geertz, "Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New State," *Old Societies and New States. The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa*, New Delhi 1963.
8. Cf. Sanet Chamarik, "The Place of Human Rights in Buddhist Tradition," *Impact*, Vol. 16 (1981), pp. 88-102; Sulak Sivaraksa, "Buddhism and Development," *Impact*, Vol. 15 (1980), pp. 230-240; R. Panikkar, "La notion des droits de l'homme est-elle un concept occidental?", *Interculture* no. 82 (1984), pp. 3-26.
9. Koson Srisang (ed.), *Perspectives on Political Ethics. An Ecumenical Enquiry*, WCC, Geneva 1983.
10. M. Dawam Rahardjo, "Pluriformity in the Development of Islam in Indonesia," *Religion and Politics. An Islamic Perspective*, CCA, Hong Kong 1984, pp. 36-48.
11. The word "Man" is in capital letter to indicate both male and female: therefore in this paper the word is used in an inclusive sense.
12. Cf. Walter Strolz and Hans Waldenfels (eds.), *Christliche Grundlage des Dialogs mit den Welt-religionen*, Herder, Freiburg 1983.
13. Cf. J. Moltmann, *The Future of Creation*, SCM Press, London 1979, p. 128.
14. H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Societies*, Beacon Press, Boston 1964.
15. This has taken place from the last century and has led to the recognition of the personal, social and historical dimensions of human life. Cf. M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, CLS, Madras 1970; ID., *Man and the Universe of Faith*, CLS, Madras 1975; P.D. Devanandan, *Preparation for*



- Dialogue*, 1964; ID., *Christian Concern in Hinduism*, CISRS, Bangalore 1961; S.J. Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ*, CLS, Madras 1974; David Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1979; Eric J. Sharpe, *Faith Meets Faith. Some Christian Attitudes to Hinduism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, SCM Press, London 1977.
16. Cf. Thomas H. Fang, *The Chinese View of Life. The Philosophy of Comprehensive Harmony*, The University Press, Hong Kong 1956; H. Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India — China — Tibet — Japan*, Honolulu 1964; Charles A. Moore (ed.), *Japanese Mind*, Honolulu 1967; ID., *Chinese Mind*, Honolulu 1967.
  17. Cf. J. Crenshaw (ed.), *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, New York 1976; ID., *Old Testament Wisdom. An Introduction*, SCM Press, London 1981; Donn F. Morgan, *Wisdom in the Old Testament Tradition*, John Knox Press, Atlanta 1981; G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, SCM Press, London 1972; cf. also Walter Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust: The Neglected Sides of Biblical Faith*, John Knox Press, Atlanta 1972.
  18. Cf. K.G. Steck, *Die Idee der Heilsgeschichte. Hoffmann-Schlatter-Cullmann*. Zurich 1959; Felix Wilfred, "A Matter of Theological Education: Some Critical Reflections on the Suitability of 'Salvation History' as Theological Model for India," *Vidyajyoti* 48 (1984), pp. 538-556.
  19. J.C. Hofmann, *Weissagung und Erfuellung im Alten und Neuen Testamente*. Nordlingen 1841-1844.
  20. G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vols I-II, SCM Press, London 1977.
  21. Claus Westermann, "Biblical Reflection on Creator-Creation," *Creation in the Old Testament*, ed. by B.W. Anderson, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1984, pp. 90-117; ID., Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1974; H.H. Schmid, "Creation, Righteousness, and Salvation. 'Creation Theology' as the Broad Horizon of Biblical Theology," *ibid.*, pp. 102-117; G.M. Landes, "Creation and Liberation," *op. cit.*, pp. 135-151; cf. also Mathew Fox, *Original Blessing*, Bear and Company, New Mexico 1986; ID. (ed.), *Breakthrough. Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality ... in New Translation*, Image Book, New York 1980.
  22. H.J. Hermission, "Observations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom," *Creation in the O.T.*, pp. 118-134.
  23. Cf. C. Westermann, *Der Segen in der Bible und im Handeln der Kirche*, Chr. Kaiser, Muenchen 1968; ID., *What Does The Old Testament Say About God*, SPCK, London 1979; Mathew Fox, *Original Blessing*.
  24. Cf. H. Assmann, *Practical Theology of Liberation*, Search Press, London 1975; G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, Orbis Book, New York 1973; J.L. Segundo, *Liberation of Theology*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin 1977; Rosino Gibellini (ed.), *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America*; SCM Press, London, 1980.
  25. Cf. Pratima Bowes, *Hindu Intellectual Tradition*, Allied Publishers, New Delhi 1978; ID., *Between Cultures*, Allied Publishers, New Delhi 1986.
  26. Jung Young Lee, "The Yin-Yang Way of Thinking. A Possible Method for Ecumenical Theology," *International Review of Missions*, 60 (1971), pp. 363-370.
  27. Cf. M. Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, Harrell Press, London 1952; P. Ricoeur, *La Metaphore Vive*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1975; E. Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, Dover, New York, Paris 1975; Joseph M. Kitagawa-Charles H. Long (eds.), *Myth and Symbols. Studies in Honour of Mircea Eliade*, Chicago 1969; F.W. Dillistone (ed.), *Myth and Symbol*, SPCK, London 1966; ID., *The Power of Symbols*, SCM Press, London 1986; John Middleton (ed.), *Myth and Cosmos: Readings in Mythology and Symbolism*, Natural History Press, New York 1961; J.E. Menard (ed.), *Le Symbole. Colloque International 1974*, Strasbourg 1975; M. Meslin, "Pour une

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28. Felix Wilfred, "Faith Without 'Faith'? Popular Religion. A Challenge to Elitist Theology and Liturgy," *Popular Devotions*, ed. Paul Puthanangady, NBCLC, Bangalore 1986, pp. 584-613.

## V. THE PLENARY ASSEMBLY REPORT OF THE FABC GROUP

by D.S. Amalorpavadass

In the march of the nations and pilgrimage of peoples through history, we have been partners and copilgrims. In this process we Christians feel solidarity with our sisters and brothers of other religions in Asia; we want to live and work with them in all situations in a dialogue of life and in community. This we consider as a normal way of being in this continent of significantly religious pluralism.

### I. Our Understanding of Dialogue

Dialogue is a two-way communication between persons or groups. Dialogue is a sharing of self — what one is and what one has — so that mutual enrichment takes place. Dialogue means openness to know, love and appreciate people of all beliefs and ideologies.

Interreligious dialogue emphasizes the dimension of religious experience. It is not just a dialogue of belief systems, but a dialogue of life, a journey of mutual enrichment, an ongoing journey towards God and the establishment of God's reign of justice, peace and harmony in society.

The dialogue of life is a manner of acting, an attitude and a spirit which guides one's conduct. It implies concern, respect, and empathy towards the other, mutual trust and acceptance. It must be non-judgmental; it must be sincere.

In interpersonal dialogue each partner experiences his own limitations, as well as the possibility of overcoming them. Mutual affirmation, reciprocal correction and fraternal exchange lead the partners in dialogue to an ever greater maturity which, in turn, generates inter-



personal communion. Religious experiences and outlooks can themselves be purified and enriched in this process of encounter.

It is urgent and imperative that Christians enter into dialogue with their brothers and sisters of other faiths in Asia among whom they live, so that they may witness to Christ.

## **II. The Church at the Service of the Kingdom and Interfaith Dialogue as a Process of Moving It**

In the light of the above understanding, dialogue is above all a means and a state of communication and communion. In this regard, one of the best definitions of the Church is *koinonia*, a communion of persons. The basic commonness, source of communion as shared by all, is the Spirit of Christ. The embodiment and facilitation of this fellowship is the community of Christ's disciples.

This community is called the sacrament of communion with all people, in a universal fellowship of unity among themselves and with God. Yearning for that day when this universal fellowship will be realized and taken up in this dynamism towards the goal, Christians, as members of the Church and the wider community of people of different faiths, need to move and are in fact moving, ever conscious of their common origin and single destiny within God's one universal plan of salvation. This they do as copilgrims, making history and transforming society into a more human, egalitarian, participating, fraternal and just one. Interreligious dialogue is the lifestyle, mode of behavior and normal activity of such a pilgrimage, whatever be the sphere of life. The Church is thus the sign and instrument, the beginning and foreshadowing, of this ultimate reality, the Kingdom, the final and universal Reign of God.

At the same time, this movement towards the Kingdom in unity is not Church-centered, though Church-animated and Church-participated, but with focus on God, oriented towards the Kingdom, and at the service of society. The name for such an animation from within is interreligious dialogue. It is the Good News of this Kingdom which Jesus went about preaching by his life, words and deeds, death and resurrection. It is at the service of this Kingdom that Jesus formed the Church as a spiritual movement. While so journeying, the Church should seriously and constantly take into account all forms of pluralisms, especially the religious pluralism of Asia. She should respect it and situate her presence and service within this plurality and consider

herself as a pilgrim among other pilgrims, in humility and self-effacement.

In such a humble pilgrim attitude, authentic conversion can take place in all the partners of the dialogue. Such a conversion is not necessarily from one religion to another, but basically a conversion of heart and change of life. As such, it is both a conversion to God and by God. It is the work of the Spirit, though it could happen through the medium of the witness of the dialoguing partners.

The same attitude of humility and openness will enable us to recognize the equality of people of other faiths and to respect their freedom and right to bear witness to their faith and way of life.

The Church's mission of service will have a variety of forms corresponding to the plural dimensions of reality. In this perspective, working for integral human development and a new society, evangelization or proclamation, together with interreligious dialogue, become various integral forms and constitutive dimensions of her one mission in this world. There is no conflict among them, nor is one form a threat and obstacle to the others, for each form is valid and should maintain its integrity, though a tension among them is healthy and normal. Tension is a reality of life, a source of creativity and inventiveness, a stimulus for progress and growth, an indispensable means to respond to the total reality with our whole being.

This dialogue, contextualized in the continent of Asia, is not something optional or secondary, to be done at leisure, if time, personnel and resources permit; but it is an imperative and even a priority if properly understood, namely, as responding promptly to the interpellating challenges of the arrival of God's Kingdom which ushers in a period of emergency and gives a sense of urgency.

### **III. Dialogue — Responsibility of All in the Local Church and Formation for It**

To be effective, dialogue has to be the responsibility of the local Church where the possibility of living and working with others exists in a concrete way. To fulfil this task, the Church with its various groups should enjoy sufficient freedom and autonomy. Then only, it can play a responsible role and give a creative response to the plural and the ever-changing situation.



Given the immensity of the task before us, it is obvious that dialogue can no longer be elitist and intellectual, limited to scholars and the intelligentsia, but has to be popular and ecclesial. All sections of the Church should be engaged in it. It cannot be just sporadic, once in a while, as a function, but regular, day-in and day-out, as a normal activity of the Christian community, in dynamic interaction with others. Thus, it will cover all spheres of life: it will be at the grassroots levels and it will become a people's movement and activity. It can be called a dialogue of life or a new lifestyle of Christians in this period of history.

This is especially easy and suitable for the laity who are engaged in the affairs of the world and live in family, social and professional milieus. Thus they can turn dialogue into an experience of daily life. In this regard, the enormous potential of youth and women for inter-religious dialogue should be released, and the opportunities for dialogue open to them are many.

To do all this, the various groups and sections in the local Church, together with their leaders, need an initial and ongoing formation which will include, among others, a change of vision and heart, of mentality and attitude, a sound knowledge and appreciation of other religions, and an exposure to dialogue situations. Such a formation should be ensured in all seminaries and other houses of formation.

#### **IV. Aware of Obstacles, and Taking Them in Our Stride, We Move Forward in Hope**

Among the obstacles to interreligious dialogue the following may be mentioned.

##### **On the Part of Christians:**

1. a Church-centered thinking on our mission in society, manifested in theological reflection and catechesis, which causes Christians to be too preoccupied with "making converts" and to be hesitating or even closed as regards dialogue, or not interested at all in dialogue;
2. a fundamentalistic attitude that does not allow for religious pluralism and creates difficulties in accepting people of other religions as they are;
3. the use of theological terms or language that is irritating for

Christians, and even more for people of other faiths;

4. a superiority complex towards adherents of other religions;
5. a lack of formation of pastors and lay leaders, and of preparation of our communities at the grassroots levels, who are in direct and day-to-day contact with peoples of other faiths.

#### **On the Part of People of other Faiths:**

1. their suspicion that dialogue initiated by Christians could be a disguised effort of Christianization;
2. a fundamentalistic attitude, at times turning into religious fanaticism;
3. the identification of Christianity with Western colonialism, and of religion with a particular national identity, which gives rise to attitudes of hostility.

For us Christians these obstacles are urging us to seek ways of overcoming them and improving the atmosphere for dialogue. We need to take them in our stride and move forward towards the future in hope.

#### **V. Benefits of Dialogue as Fruits of the Spirit**

The obstacles to dialogue present a challenge for us to overcome in order to reap the benefits of dialogue as fruits of the Spirit. A dialogical style of human relationship benefits our living together in an increasingly fragile yet interdependent world.

Faced with the reality of an increasingly technological society that reduces human beings to cogs in the production machine, the Spirit continuously regenerates the world in the depths of peoples' consciences and accompanies them towards the truth (GS 22). The Spirit is at work even beyond the boundaries of the Church (GS 22; AG 15) in the new openness among people at all levels to dialogue with one another in creating a more human, participative and peaceful world.

Dialogue with our sisters and brothers of other faiths challenges us to purify ourselves to become better attuned to their religious heritage which has "elements which are true and good (OT 16), "precious things both religious and human" (GS 92), "seeds of contemplation" (AG 18),



“elements of truth and grace” (AG 9), “seeds of the word” (AG 11, 15) and “rays of the truth which illumines all mankind” (NA 2). Their rich heritage is a genuine invitation to dialogue (AG 11), not only in those things that unite us but also in our differences.

God never ceases to reconcile persons to himself by the work of his Spirit. The Church relies on the promise made by Christ that the Spirit will guide her in history towards the fullness of truth (Jn 16:13). For this reason, the Church goes out to meet individuals, peoples and their cultures, aware that in every human community are found the seeds of goodness and truth, and conscious that God has a loving plan for every nation (Acts 17:26-27).

## **Conclusion**

Asian Churches and the Religions of Asia are awakened to a new consciousness regarding the need for interfaith dialogue. While we want this consciousness to grow into fullness in terms of deeper communion and wider collaboration for the common cause of the wholeness of the human person, justice and love in society, integrity and harmony of creation, we are equally taken up in the dynamic patience of God, which allows space and time for the greater maturation of the process in which we are engaged in this consultation. Dialogue, which is a grace of God and the fruit of the stirring of the Spirit, keeps us in the eschatological tension of movement and waiting: movement in stillness and stillness in movement: the Lord is both and beyond both!

## **VI. THE JOINT STATEMENT OF THE CONSULTATION**

1. The urgent need to seek new relationships with neighbors of other religious traditions brought together representatives of the member Churches of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) and of the member Conferences of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) to consider the theme “Living and Working together with Sisters and Brothers of other Faiths in Asia.” The first such CCA/FABC initiative, this gathering involved 55 participants from 14 countries. All were conscious of the significance of this historic event, giving thanks to God for his gift in Jesus Christ who brought them together.

Many insights emerged from our common deliberations. From them we highlight a few which we believe to be particularly significant for our Churches.

2. Asia's dominant reality is, on the one hand, the massive presence of diverse religious traditions and ideologies and, on the other, its widespread poverty and political oppression. Further, with the increasing politicization of religions and the frequent clashes between religious communities, there is an increasing awareness that peace within and between nations is not possible without peace between religions. Conscious of their respective spiritual resources, people of all traditions share a responsibility to work for a new (2 Cor 5:17) society. In such a context, dialogue becomes an urgent priority for the Churches.

3. Dialogue, then, is not primarily a matter of talking. It is, in the first instance, an attitude, an openness to the neighbor, a sharing of spiritual resources as people stand before the great crises of life and death, as they struggle for justice and human dignity, as they yearn for peace (John 14:27). In this, Christians have a contribution to make. In dialogue, Christians and their neighbors enter into a reciprocal relationship which becomes a process of mutual learning and growth.

4. We enter such relationships of dialogue on the basis of our faith in God through Jesus Christ, conscious that the Holy Spirit is guiding us towards an enrichment of human life and deeper appreciation of truth. This faith gives us our identity as Christians and empowers us to share with the neighbors our faith and vision, our words and silence.

5. As "mission," "evangelism" and "evangelization" have different nuances for Christians of different traditions, so too has the relation between dialogue and mission. However, we affirm that dialogue and mission have their own integrity and freedom. They are distinct but not unrelated. Dialogue is not a tool or instrument for mission and evangelization, but it does influence the way the Church perceives and practises mission in a pluralistic world. Mission invites us to participate in God's continuing activity through the Spirit to mend a broken creation, to overcome the fragmentation of humanity and to heal the rift between nature, humanity and God. God's recreating activity is prior to and more comprehensive than the Church's mission, and it directs our attention beyond the Church to the Kingdom.

6. Dialogue offers opportunities for Christian witness. Christians, while sharing insights from their faith, will be attentive to the insights of sisters and brothers of other religious traditions. Thus, the way is open for mutual criticism and mutual enrichment among all those who bring a religious perspective to the human quest. All life has a pilgrim character, and neighbors of other religious traditions are our fellow pilgrims on the



way. In humanity's shared pilgrimage, the Church is called to be an effective sign and symbol of the Kingdom of God.

### **Pastoral Recommendations**

Dialogue is a lifestyle, which can be learnt only by doing. At the same time interreligious dialogue has theological underpinnings.

1. It is important that persons in leadership positions in the Churches take the theological understanding of, and participation in, interreligious dialogue seriously.

2. The theological basis of interreligious dialogue and courses on religions outside Christianity should be included and strengthened in the curriculum of the seminaries and other houses of formation. Not only seminarians but bishops and clergy as well as lay people should be given opportunities to update themselves at this point.

3. Christian institutions, like schools and hospitals, could become centers for interreligious dialogue, not for the sake of evangelism, but within an enlarged theological-religious framework. The public schools, too, in some areas, could become places where interreligious understanding may be furthered.

4. A commission on interreligious relations could be established or activated at the local, regional and national level to work alongside other religious bodies so as to foster interreligious understanding and cooperation. Insofar as possible, these efforts should be carried out in an ecumenical spirit.

5. Christian groups (youth, women and men) and their counterparts in other religions should be encouraged to visit one another, cooperate in community development, and participate in people's movements for human rights issues and promotion of justice and peace (dialogue of life).

6. Interreligious gatherings for prayers and meditation on important national and international days, as well as occasions of religious festivals, should be encouraged.

7. Guidelines for interreligious dialogue (such as those which have been prepared by CCA and FABC, and other national and international Christian bodies) should be widely distributed, studied and

used, revised and adapted if necessary.

8. Careful thought should be given by the proper religious authorities to the pastoral problems of mixed religious marriages and funeral services for a multireligious family.

9. Attention should be given through the appropriate channels to the religious phenomena of fundamentalism and fanaticism.

10. The mass media should be used to promote interreligious understanding and harmony.

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  - c. Towards a New Understanding of Women's Role
  - d. Laity and Ministry to Youth
  - e. The Laity in the World of Education
  - f. The Asian Laity in the World of Health Services
  - g. The Laity in Mission
  - h. The Laity in Politics and Public Service
  - i. The Laity and the Family
  - j. The Laity in the World of Work
  - k. Trusting, Entrusting the Laity in Media
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