

Sixth Plenary Assembly: Workshop Discussion Guide

DIALOGUE AT THE SERVICE OF LIFE

by

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INTRODUCTION

The two position papers have given us a broad picture of the challenges to life that we Christians face in Asia today and of the life-giving Good News and action of Jesus, to which we are called to be witnesses. Taking this as our starting point, our task is to reflect on the role of religion and religions in such a situation. In this paper we are going to talk about what the religions are called to do at the service of life alone or together, and of our own responsibility as Christians in that context. So we are not going to explore either the problems or the theology of interreligious dialogue as such. We are taking for granted that interreligious dialogue is possible and necessary.¹ We are rather asking what the religions in dialogue should do to promote life. In order to understand clearly the role of religion in society, it will be helpful to see the place of religion itself with reference to other elements that make up society. So I suggest a very brief analysis of society as an introduction, a recall and a framework to help our reflection.

AN ANALYSIS OF SOCIETY

We could look at society through a grid made up of six elements influencing each other: economics, politics, society, person, culture and religion.

Economically, Asian societies in general are in more or less rapid growth in recent years. Though a little of the prosperity may trickle down

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to the poor, the benefits of growth are not equally distributed. There is a widening gap between the rich and the poor. Women and children are exploited in the labor force. A liberal capitalist ideology is prevalent. A predominance of scientific and technical rationality may be slowly eroding Asian values. Ecological destruction is widespread.

Politically, there are more or less strong governments, more interested in providing a "peaceful" atmosphere for economic activity than in encouraging people's participation or in respecting human rights. Though one speaks of social rights, they may only mean the rights of the society as a whole or of the rich and the powerful and not of the poor. Authentic freedom is lacking for most people.

Socially, competition for scarce resources leads to social conflicts between groups based on ethnicity, caste or religion. The rights of minorities are not respected. The traditional Asian sense of social solidarity may be slowly eroded, with individualism and competition taking its place. Sex tourism exploiting women and children is common in some places.

Personally, people may be becoming more anxious, either because of their involvement in a competitive world or owing to the questioning of their traditional worldviews and value systems by the spirit of modernity. Personal anxiety may lead either to alienating behavior, shown in the use of drugs, apathy and violence, or to blind faith in fundamental religious movements. Speed and technology may affect unfavorably the quality of life.

Culturally, modernity, the consumer spirit and the mass media are making inroads into the traditional worldviews and value systems. Competing symbolic worlds may be causing confusion of identity.

Religiously, Asia has not become secularized like Europe. One could even speak of a certain revival of religion. But phenomena like fundamentalism and communalism, which use religion for political and personal ends, make the purpose and depth of such revival suspect. Religious identity is also becoming a cause of conflict and tension in many countries.

Looking at these six elements, one can briefly note their interrelationships. Economics and politics control the material conditions of life. They are mutually supportive. Religion and culture determine the world of meanings and attitudes, motivations and the system of values that guide basic options and moral judgements in life. The person-in-society is the agent who is guided by the world of meaning and acts on the material world. It is, however, also capable of changing his world of meaning or opting for another one. Let us pause for a moment to look more closely at

the role of religion in the complex of elements that make up society.

RELIGION AND SOCIETY

While culture refers to the complex of symbols, myths and rituals that structure the way that a particular group of people look at the world in relation to themselves, organize it and make it meaningful, religion refers to those parts of culture that deal with ultimate meanings concerning life and death, origins and ends, and the transcendent. In practice, the role of religion in a given situation could be quite ambiguous. It can legitimate the existing structures of society as God-given and inviolate. It is often the case of dominant groups in society making use of religious myth and ritual to legitimate their own dominance. Religion can be alienating. By focusing the attention of the people on the transcendent aspects of life it may discourage wholehearted involvement in present life and society. Religion can also be prophetic. In the name of the Ultimate, it offers a vision of a new society of freedom, fellowship and justice, challenges the limitations and oppressions of the present social order and urges it to change. Such criticism often emerges from the dominated or from people with a sense of the transcendent who are in sympathy with them.

Religion acts directly on culture by offering an alternate structure of meaning. It influences people by inspiring, motivating and encouraging them to change themselves and the social order. One way of talking about this is to consider religion as being counter-cultural or prophetic. Religion does not act directly on the economic-political sphere, though it can be critical of it, because it does not have its own economic or political theory. It can only point to basic values that need to be defended in any economic system.

In a society that is religiously pluralistic, in which members of different religions share the same socio-cultural and economic-political order, religions can fulfil their role of prophecy only in collaboration.² Let us remember that religions play this role through the believers. When people who believe differently belong to the same social group, they will have to find inspiration and motivation for their action, each in his or her own religion. But they will have to agree on the level of common human and spiritual values. Where there is no perfect agreement, they will have to continue to dialogue and at least converge towards an agreement. At the level of translating these values in terms of concrete economic and political policies, various economic and political theories and ideologies intervene, and there may be divergences within the group. They agree on the values, but differ on the appropriate ways of achieving them. But this diversity is not religious, but ideological or political. Thus, people who belong to the same religion may belong to different political parties. So we have diversi-

ty at the religious and the ideological level, but unity at the mediating cultural level of values.

PAPAL TEACHING

Pope John Paul II has underlined some of these points in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*. After referring critically to some of the problems of the contemporary world, like consumerism, ecological destruction, attacks on human life and the family, etc. John Paul goes on to say: "These criticisms are directed not so much against an economic system as against an ethical and cultural system" (no. 39). Talking about economic models, he confesses: "The Church has no models to present; models that are real and truly effective can only arise within the framework of different historical situations..." (no. 43). He points out the importance of culture and the role of religion in relation to it: "Evangelization too plays a role in the culture of the various nations, sustaining culture in its progress towards the truth, and assisting in the work of its purification and enrichment" (no. 50). "All human activity takes place within a culture and interacts with culture" (no. 51). Finally, recalling his appeal in a previous encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, "to the Christian Churches and to all the great world religions, inviting them to offer the unanimous witness of our common convictions regarding the dignity of man, created by God," he goes on to say: "In fact I am convinced that the various religions, now and in the future, will have a preeminent role in preserving peace and in building a society worthy of man. Indeed, openness to dialogue and to cooperation is required of all people of good will" (no. 60).

THE TEACHING OF THE ASIAN BISHOPS

Given the Asian situation as referred to above very briefly, and the theoretical reflection on the precise role of religion among the various elements that make up society, what does the Church in Asia feel challenged to do? Going through the documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences of the past twenty-five years I am struck by the consistent line of their reflections and plans of action. I think that one good way of celebrating FABC's silver jubilee is to become aware of these statements, and then ask ourselves: What have we done to implement them? What are our successes and failures? What are the causes? What should we do now and in the future?

At their first meeting in Manila, in November 1970, the Asian bishops declared:

We ask how we may more fully engage ourselves in the common task wherein all men of good will must be joined, of building up with-

in our nations societies which respond to the deepest aspirations of our peoples. as well as to the demands of the Gospel: societies "grounded on truth, guided by justice, motivated by charity, realized in freedom, and flowering in peace." (p. 5)³

Resolutely, we commit ourselves to the concern for the total development of our peoples. We believe that man's humanity is God's gift and making, and its promotion a task and duty laid on all of us by him. (p. 6)

We pledge ourselves to an open, sincere, and continuing dialogue with our brothers of other great religions of Asia, 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. (p. 9)

We can note already in these texts a clear orientation: a positive view of total human development and a commitment to it, the critical role of the Gospel, the readiness for dialogue with the members of other religions and all people of good will in the context of a common task. We shall find these themes recurring again, sometimes, further developed, over the next twenty-five years. At their meeting in Taipei in April 1974 on evangelization, the Asian bishops chose *dialogue* as the concrete manner of all evangelization: dialogue with culture, with the religions and with the people, especially the poor, of Asia. (cf. pp. 14-15) The Third Bishops' Institute for Social Affairs, in November 1975, also underlines the need for greater dialogue.

We will need to relate more fully with the ancient cultures and religious traditions of Asia and their deep spiritual heritage. We accept, therefore, that the task will call for greater dialogue, openness to ideas, acceptance of a relevant liturgy, and adaptation to the needs and exigencies of the local community. (. 209)

The nature of the dialogue with other religions is clarified further by the Third Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs in November, 1982.

Since the religions, as the Church, are at the service of the world, interreligious dialogue cannot be confined to the religious sphere but must embrace all dimensions of life: economic, socio-political, cultural and religious. It is in their common commitment to the fuller life of the human community that they discover their complementarity and the urgency and relevance of dialogue at all levels, socio-economic and intellectual as well as spiritual, among the common people in daily life, as among scholars and people with deep religious experience (p. 120).

The 11th session of the Fourth Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs in July 1988 introduces a new term into the vocabulary of the Asian bishops: *harmony*.

Today all religions should draw resources from the Asian traditions, and, sustained by their respective faith-convictions, should engage themselves jointly in the attainment of harmony (p. 320).

The socio-political implications of this harmony are spelt out in terms of ecology, human dignity and recognition of pluralism and interreligious harmony. "The test of true harmony lies in the acceptance of diversity as richness" (p. 321). Harmony among religions is seen as a key to harmony in society.

The Fifth Plenary Assembly of Asian Bishops' Conferences, in July 1990, in Bandung, spells out the discerning dialogue that the Church has to carry on with the modern world, seeing both its positive and its negative aspects.

We began by looking at the changing face of Asian societies, change with much danger of dehumanization. The danger is all too often realized. But the signs of hope that we have discerned offer the potential for humanized and humanizing change. The truly human can, moreover, never be divorced from the rest of divine creation. And when the truly human is discovered and deeply contemplated, it reveals to us the mystery of the Divine, of that creative Being who loves all creation in ways beyond even our deepest hopes and imaginings. So, though there may be negative and dangerous things occurring, the movement in Asia toward modernity calls for a joyful response from the Church as it accompanies our Asian people, as partner with them in all positive movements of the human spirit. The challenge for the Church is to work for justice and peace along with the Christians of other Churches, together with our sisters and brothers of other faiths and with all people of good will, to make the Kingdom of God more visibly present in Asia (p. 279).

I would like to note in this text especially the stress on the human and on the mystery of creation which makes possible an approach that is common to all religions. Let us close this series of texts from the Asian bishops with one that links closely dialogue and life. It comes from the 12th meeting of the Fourth Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs, in February 1991.

Those of different faiths are summoned to live and work together for a more human world. In other words, they are summoned to a dialogue of life, a dialogue in the context of ordinary life and which is in the fullest sense for life (p. 328).

This constant teaching of the bishops has been supported by their Theological Advisory Commission:

In the developing, multireligious societies of Asia, struggling towards liberation and wholeness, all religions are called to provide a common and complementary moral and religious foundation for this struggle, and be forces for growth and communion rather than sources of alienation and conflict. They can do this only through dialogue and collaboration. The religions have a prophetic role in public life. They should not become victims either of those who seek to keep them apolitical and private, or of those who seem to instrumentalize them for political and communal ends.⁴

Before going on to suggest what the religions could do in dialogue to promote life, I would like to make a few brief theological reflections to help clarify the issues further.

TWO KINDS OF DIALOGUE

I think that it is clear now that we are talking about two kinds of dialogue.

There is first of all an ongoing *dialogue between religion and society*. I have specified the role of religion in this context as prophetic. Prophecy involves not only a critique of society, but also the presentation of an alternate vision of a new social order and way of life. Religion itself can only provide general principles and values of this new order. It is for the believers to embody these principles in a concrete, viable social order and way of life. Such an embodiment supposes a mediation of some sort of ideology or practical theory. This is subject to change and improvement. There is nothing absolute about it. The official teaching authority of the Church may limit itself to spelling out the general principles and to saying that it has no concrete alternatives to the existing social order. But this does not mean that the members of the Church living in the world can take a similar stand. They have to make concrete options and get involved in socio-economic projects. This is what makes for the Church's real dialogue of life with the world.

This supposes that we have a well-trained, committed and active laity. Unfortunately, when we speak of the Church we tend to think mostly of

the clergy and the religious. The clergy and the religious are also in the world, and the dialogue with the world is a challenge that they also have to face. But the leadership in this belongs to the laity. As I had suggested earlier, this dialogue can take a diversity of forms depending upon the other partners of dialogue. One dialogues directly with the culture and with the persons. One's dialogue with the socio-political and economic world is mediated by culture and appropriate social, political or economic theory. It will, therefore, be interdisciplinary in nature.

The second kind of dialogue is that *between the believers of various religions*. Here, the focus of dialogue is not the religions or their beliefs in themselves, but their common concern for humanity and its development. It supposes, however, that there is a smooth relationship between them. This means that prejudices and misunderstandings are removed. Each group respects the other as human persons with liberty and conscience and as believers. There is a feeling of community-in-difference. The community is not merely at the level of values, but also at the religious level. It need not depend on agreement in formulas of faith. It is a sense of con-naturality between people whose interest in life and people is more than secular and materialistic.

This dialogue also supposes the absence of fundamentalism and communalism. *Fundamentalism* is a simplistic affirmation of one's own religion and its worldview as the only true one. It is often more an emotional response to questioning and uncertain situations than an intellectual position. It is a search for easy security. Fundamentalists are not open to dialogue. *Communalism* thinks that people who share the same religious belief also have the same economic and political interests. So, religious affiliation becomes the basis of an economic and/or political power block, from which other believers are excluded. As a matter of fact, the other believer is seen as a threat to one's own interests.

Fundamentalism can be overcome only through true religion that respects the dignity and freedom of the others and the freedom of God's dealings with humans. Communalism can be overcome only through the realization of the equality and participation of all citizens in a common nationhood, so that the others are respected because of their personhood and not in terms of their religious (or caste or linguistic or ethnic) affiliation.

Dialogue may be the best way of freeing people from fundamentalist and communalist orientations. Through dialogue we make them experience other believers as persons and such experience may be helpful in removing ignorance and prejudice. We are here at the level of the *dialogue of life*, because we are not so much exploring the other's belief by trying to

share their religious experience or their theological reflection. One is at the stage of creating a basic trust in the others as human persons, even if they believe differently.

IALOGUE AND CONSENSUS

Given this basic trust, the focus of dialogue is, as I have said, the common concern of all on the building up of a better human community based on *common human and spiritual values*. Believers do not have to agree either about their religious beliefs or about economic and political theories and policies. But they do search agreement at the level of values.

These common values are based on the reality of *the human as person and community*. The dignity of the human person is spelt out in terms of respect for life, identity, freedom, conscience, equality, justice, fellowship, etc. Today, these have been spelt out in many international documents as human and social rights and most countries have agreed to uphold them.

These values, though they are human, do not seem to be obvious. Many of them have not been respected in the past and, sometimes, even in the present. Not all the cultures and religions may give them the same weight or interpretation. The reason, of course, is that the human is viewed through a variety of cultural and religious lenses. The consensus we have now at an international level has evolved through centuries and it still has to evolve. Such a consensus can be reached only through dialogue.

We can look at such a *consensus in two ways*. One can look at it from a *purely rational, secular* – i.e. non-religious – point of view. But the distinction between the sacred and the secular is a limited Western phenomenon. Most cultures and religions do not accept such a dichotomy. The other way is to search for a consensus *at the level of human values*, even though people may explain and justify them in very different ways according to different cultures and religions.

Religions may be more or less open to some of these values. It is here that dialogue may help, not only mutual understanding, but also mutual challenge and learning. The treatment of women is a good example. If we take different countries in Asia, there are cultural differences, But there seems to be a certain evolution towards a common point of view. But at the religious level, there seems to be a clear difference between Islam and other religions. But Islam itself seems to be in a time of evolution, with a clear tension between fundamentalistic currents and liberal voices. In such a situation dialogue may be the best way of helping Muslims to move towards the acknowledgement and protection of the rights of women. Di-

alogue may succeed where force or condemnation will not. In a society of believers, religions are not irrelevant to the defence and promotion of human values. On the contrary, they help to root them in ultimate perspectives and provide deep inspiration and motivation for their pursuit.

When religions are in a confrontational mode, the believers who are in a minority in a country may tend to be self-defensive. They may hesitate to denounce injustice or promote particular values for fear that the majority or the people in power may suppress their freedom and rights, or harass them in many ways. People in power may also try "divide and rule" tactics on the different groups of believers. But where there is consensus among believers and common action, the minority status of a group of believers is not strictly a factor.

A search for consensus and harmony through dialogue is an integral dimension of evangelization, because the Christians are in this manner contributing to the growth of the Reign of God. This is now a common teaching of the Asian bishops and of recent Popes. John Paul II has said:

Interreligious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission... He (God) does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression... Other religions constitute a positive challenge for the Church... (Dialogue) can assume many forms... from a sharing of their respective spiritual experiences to the so-called "dialogue of life," through which believers of different religions bear witness before each other in daily life to their own human and spiritual values, and help each other to live according to those values in order to build a more just and fraternal society.⁵

Such a perspective of evangelizing dialogue supposes that the Christians can have a positive impact on other people and their cultures, without necessarily making them Christian. For example, India was a witness to a reform movement within Hinduism in the last century, with the reformers themselves acknowledging the influence of Christianity on them.⁶ Correspondingly, the pilgrim Church is also constantly learning: from the humanistic movements in the past: the Church was slow to work for the abolition of slavery or to defend religious freedom, for example; and from the more holistic cultures of the Orient in the present, as the success of Eastern methods of prayer in some circles in the West shows.

BASIC HUMAN AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

How can we envisage the practice of such dialogue in the service of

life? Since the service of life and the defence and promotion of human and spiritual values is a common project for all believers, we need to encourage *Basic Human Communities*, which commit themselves to this service.⁷ Their collaborative action is the living context in which the dialogue is taking place.

At this level of common action, religious differences, though they need not be ignored, are not primary. As we have pointed out above, at the level of a multireligious community, there are no Christian values, but human values, just as there are no Christian economics or politics.

Such Basic Human Communities may coalesce into a regional or national movement on a particular occasion or for a particular cause. But if dialogue has to keep an experiential, human dimension, it has to be lived and practiced at the small local level. Such belonging to a Basic Human Community does not do away with the need of belonging to a *Basic Christian Community*. People who are collaborating with the human community have to find their inspiration and motivation in their own religious faith, and this they can have only in the Christian community.

Therefore, we need not put in opposition the basic human and the basic Christian communities. They are rather related in a kind of dialectic. People who are engaged in action in a basic human community fall back on the religious resources of the basic Christian community, but then bring some of these resources to the human community in a spirit of dialogue, and thus enrich it, without any imposition, however. Christians can also live and promote what they consider specifically Christian values and witness to them. But they are at the religious level and not merely at the human level. Pope John Paul II has spelt out this Christian specificity in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*:

In the light of faith, solidarity seeks to go beyond itself, to take on the *specifically Christian* dimensions of total gratuity, forgiveness and reconciliation. One's neighbor is then not only a human being with his or her own rights and a fundamental equality with everyone else, but becomes the *living image* of God the Father, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and placed under the permanent action of the Holy Spirit. One's neighbor must, therefore, be loved, even if an enemy, with the same love with which the Lord loves him or her; and for that person's sake one must be ready for sacrifice, even the ultimate one: to lay down one's life for the brethren (cf. John 3:16). (no. 40)

A DIALOGUE OF ACTION

This dialogue in the context of common action by a basic human community can be called a *dialogue of action*. It is a dimension of what is usually called the dialogue of life. If the dialogue of action is pursued in the proper manner, then it leads to other forms of dialogue.

From the point of view of believers, any project of action has four moments. There is a first moment of *discernment*. The basic human community looks at the situation and, after an analysis, identifies not only the human value that it has to defend and promote, but also sees how it is being abused and what concrete actions can be taken to stop the abuse. The discernment is made in the perspective of what is human. In spelling this out the perspectives of different religions may already emerge and dialogue may be necessary to move towards a convergence. The second moment is that of the *common action* itself. The third moment is one of *reflection* on the action. This might involve a certain evaluation too. A fourth moment seeks to *integrate the action* in the context of religious belief. This would involve prayer.

At least at the moment of discernment and at the moment of integration the believers may act both at the human and at the religious level. At the moment of discernment it is primarily human, but an interreligious conversation may be necessary to clarify doubts and hesitations. At the level of integration, it is primarily religious, but could include also an interreligious moment, even common prayer. What gives unity to the whole process is the common commitment to action. If the religious perspectives are not excluded on purpose, then they are bound to be present in some way, more or less consciously, both at the denominational and at the inter-religious level.

In this way the dialogue of action involves the dialogue of reflection and even of experience or prayer. But the context is always the common action. Such a practice of dialogue in the context of action can eventually facilitate the process of dialogue at a more strictly religious level. The project of common action creates a climate of trust and eliminates causes and motivations of division at the economic and political levels. This makes interreligious dialogue more disinterested. At this level, sharing of experience, interchange of ideas and perspectives and common prayer can be explored.

CONCLUSION

This will also be the ideal climate in which the Christians can witness and proclaim to every one their own belief in the fullness of life that Jesus

has brought to humanity and their vision of the Reign of God that Jesus proclaimed and realized. Such proclamation would be even easier, because it would be perceived as a purely religious witness without any economic or political implications. It will also be a proclamation that is not merely in words, but supported by life and action. Even when engaging in common action, there should be no difficulty for a Christian — as also for other believers — to go beyond the level of human value and commitment and witness to a specifically Christian dimension, in the line of the suggestion from Pope John Paul II, quoted above.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are the human and spiritual values that need to be defended in my country, in Asia in general, today?

2. How is the relationship between the different religious groups in the country? What are the causes that favor collaboration or cause tension? What kind of values concerning life do the other religious traditions stand for?

3. Can we identify groups of other believers in the country or in the region who are engaged in the defence and promotion of human and spiritual values in society and public life and with whom we can collaborate?

4. Can we mention some concrete action projects in defence of values in which different believers can collaborate here and now?

5. How can we prepare our people *theologically, pastorally, spiritually and practically* to get involved in Basic Human Communities and in common action with other believers? What are the main difficulties to be overcome?

6. *Does my/our* theology support an attitude of dialogue?

7. What role can Basic Christian Communities play in this process? What is the specific Christian contribution to this task?

8. What is the role of the laity in such projects? Are they ready for it? How can they be helped to prepare themselves?

FOOTNOTES

1. Cf. Theology Advisory Commission of the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences, *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*. *FABC Papers* No. 48. (Hongkong, 1987); See also G.B. Rosales and C.G. Arevalo (eds), *For All the Peoples of Asia* (Quezon City, Claretian Publications, 1992), especially the reports of the Bishops' Institutes for Interreligious Affairs. See also J. Dupuis, "The Church, The Reign of God, and the 'Others'", *FABC Papers*, No. 67.
2. Cf. M. Amaladoss, "Liberation as an Inter-Religious Project," in Felix Wilfred (ed), *Leave the Temple. Indian Paths to Human Liberation* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1992), pp. 158-174.
3. The page numbers in this and in the following pages refer to *For All the Peoples of Asia*.
4. Cf. *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, pp. 3-4.
5. Cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 55-57.
6. Cf. M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Hindu Renaissance* (London, SCM, 1969)
7. Cf. Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1988)

APPENDIX I

A CALL TO HARMONY

BUDDHISTS AND CHRISTIANS IN DIALOGUE

The Final Statement of BIRA V/2

1. Introduction

1.1. "Working Together for Harmony in Our Contemporary World" is the theme around which we have met at the Bishops' Institute for Religious Affairs V/2 in the Redemptorist Center, Pattaya City, Thailand, April 25-29, 1994, sponsored by the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. We are about 60 Buddhists and Christians from many countries in Asia, with a few friends from other continents. The gathering has been rich in personal sharing of experiences, reports on common action programs, perspectives of co-operation in the past, the present and the future and proposals for working together in the contemporary world, now and in the future.

2. The Asian Situation

2.1. All of us share a common concern for the state of humanity in Asia today. We are struck both by the positive and negative elements of its contemporary situation. Asia is in a crisis of growth. The various economies of Asia are opening up to forces of growth and change. But the growth is not benefitting equally all the people: the gap between the rich and

the poor is increasing. But the growth has its own negative consequences. Nature's limited resources are plundered without concern for the future. The environment is deteriorating, affecting the quality of all forms of life. Human labor is unjustly exploited, especially that of women and children. The people's desire for participation in public life is frustrated in many ways. Human, economic and social rights and freedoms are controlled and even denied. A certain militarization, restricting rights, contributes in many countries to an atmosphere of enforced tranquility favorable to economic activity.

2.2. The impact of modernity and technology and the production of goods in abundance are creating a spirit of materialism, consumerism and hedonism that erode the traditional human and spiritual values of Asia. A growing individualism undermines the spirit of the family and community. Minorities are discriminated against in the name of religion, race, caste or sex. The problems of refugees and migrant labor are serious causes of concern in many countries in the region.

2.3. The spread of the media, while facilitating rapid and easy communications of a most helpful type, on the one hand, nevertheless has become a powerful agent in the spread of pernicious propaganda, besides promoting alienating and harmful, even immoral, entertainment. The loss of moral values and the effects of the tourist industry has contributed to the exploitation of women and children and to the spread of deadly diseases, like AIDS. The traffic in drugs has also become a menace in many Asian countries.

2.4. Asia is also the land of great ethnic, cultural and religious diversity, but with a vision of tolerance. While this diversity is a source of richness, it is also the occasion for various tensions and conflicts in the context of the struggle for economic and/or political power and dominance. These tensions also acquire sometimes a religious dimension. At the same time the religiosity of the Asian people also provides resources for creatively resolving these conflicts.

2.5. We are, however, happy to note a growing desire for peace and freedom, justice and community among the people and to welcome the initiatives of groups of concerned people who try to meet these challenges. Many of these groups promoting integral development are interreligious. We have heard during these days about many experiences of collaboration between Buddhists and Christians in many countries of Asia.

2.6. It is in this context that a vision of harmony can be a source of common inspiration and a goal of collaborative action for Buddhists and Christians.

3. The Vision of Harmony

3.1 In the cultural and religious traditions of Asia, harmony is a characteristic of the Reality that all of us are called to experience and realize. Though our ignorance and egoism, craving and sinfulness are often causes of division and conflict, harmony, as liberation and fullness, joy and peace, realization and *nirvana*, remains a desired goal for our effort through life. Pluralism and diversity are seen not as a problem but as richness. Even conflict and tension can be creative in the perspective of a harmony that is not static, but dynamic as life and movement.

3.2. Harmony can be perceived and realized at various levels: harmony in oneself as personal integration of body and mind; harmony with the Cosmos, not only living in harmony with nature, but sharing nature's gifts equitably to promote harmony among peoples; harmony with others, accepting, respecting and appreciating each one's cultural, ethnic and religious identity, building community in freedom and fellowship; harmony in our collaboration as a means of promoting harmony for all in the world; and finally, harmony with God or the Absolute or with whatever we perceive as the ultimate goal of life.

3.3 While agreeing to collaborate in the common pursuit of harmony for all, Buddhists and Christians may differ in their analysis of the causes of disharmony, in their emphasis on the means of promoting harmony and in the motives that inspire them.

4. The Buddhist Perspective

4.1. For the Buddhists the cause of disharmony in the world is ignorance of the true nature of reality, which is co-dependently originating, rendering everything inconstant and ego-less. This ignorance leads to craving and attachments, giving rise to suffering. Enlightenment or realization is achieved through the Eight-Fold Path, practiced in terms of moral precepts and behavior and contemplation and insightful meditation. Through contemplation and meditation one acquires insightful knowledge of reality or wisdom, to which is also added helpful concern for others in great compassion. The social concern of Buddhism finds exemplary expression in the life and rule of the Emperor Ashoka, who promoted *dharma* for all peoples, in an atmosphere of religious tolerance and universal compassion. Buddhists have always felt free to collaborate with other believers and all people of good will. In recent times there have been movements of socially-engaged Buddhists in many countries.

5. The Christian Perspective

5.1. For the Christians, creation itself is seen as the victory of harmony over chaos. The sinfulness and egoism of the humans introduce, not only death, but also disharmony into the world, between the humans and nature, between people themselves and between people and God. God, however, promises to re-establish harmony in the universe through his Son Jesus Christ and through the Spirit. This harmony is seen as *Shalom* (peace) or the Reign of God or the reconciliation of all things. Christians are learning an inclusive vision of the Reign of God as wider than the visible Church. In Asia, they have also been collaborating with people of other faiths and ideologies in the promotion of the Reign of God, overcoming the hesitations and fears of the past. They follow the way of Christ in self-sacrificing love and self-emptying service and look forward to the newness of the creative Spirit, which can call them to prophetic action.

6. What We Have in Common

6.1. We, Buddhists and Christians, agree in our concern for the sufferings and oppressions of people in the world. We agree that religion must focus on personal and social transformation in this world, leading to universal harmony. We agree that we can engage in this common service of kind compassion together. We agree that in order to be together at the service of harmony in the world, we must promote harmony among ourselves through authentic dialogue and mutual respect.

7. A Call to Harmony

7.1. Through our sharing of experiences we have become aware of the different dimensions of the ongoing dialogue between Buddhists and Christians in Asia at various levels. We feel the need, however, to promote these various levels of dialogue in every way. The dialogue of life will help us to remove fear and prejudice and to promote mutual understanding and appreciation. It will develop mutual friendship, while respecting the identity of each one. Mutual giving of gifts, speaking of fine words, doing good and adaptability can help such dialogue of life and remove temptations to religious fundamentalism. The dialogue of common action finds expression in our common commitment to remove the causes of disharmony among people and to promote harmony and peace, development and fellowship among them. The dialogue of spiritual experience helps us to discover each other in depth and to look at the other from the other's point of view. In a spirit of openness to the other believer, it helps us to explore each other's spiritual ways. An increasing number of Christians find the practice of Buddhist methods of meditation and contemplation, as well as collaboration in their acts of great compassion, helpful in the deepening of

their own spirituality. Buddhists have found the sharing in Christian experience and meditation, both in inter-monastic and in popular settings, helpful in appreciating Christian witness. They have also shown interest in the apophatic traditions of Christian mysticism. The dialogue of discourse should involve, not only experts, but also ordinary Buddhists and Christians. It will help to remove prejudices, clarify attitudes, discover convergences and offer a mutual critique.

8. Conclusion: A Call to Action

8.1. Though we are happy that initial steps towards dialogue and collaboration have been taken in many places, much more remains to be done.

8.2. We recognize the need to educate Buddhists and Christians in the teachings and practices of one another so that, giving up prejudice, they may learn mutual respect and appreciation and be ready for mutual inspiration and collaboration. Such education today needs to be not only religious, but inter-disciplinary.

8.3. We need to promote non-exclusive, multi-faith groups and organizations at all levels, local, national and international, which will engage in the multiple dimensions of dialogue. The ideal locus of such dialogue will be their collaboration in promoting justice and freedom, peace and harmony among people, upholding their rights, especially of the poor and the oppressed, with particular attention to women and children and the environment, not hesitating to condemn injustice wherever it is done.

8.4. Though we are here speaking of the Buddhists and Christians, the praxis of dialogue will open out to peoples of all faiths and all people of good will. While we find motivation and inspiration for our commitment, each in his or her own religion, we will have to develop a common language that will facilitate a shared understanding of problems and the commitment to solving them.

8.5. At the personal level we have to help change the attitudes of the mind and to promote selflessness and social concern as aspects of authentic religion.

8.6. We should pay particular attention to encourage dialogue at the level of spiritual experience as a source of strength and as an experience of community that transcends human and earthly boundaries. We could explore possibilities of occasionally meditating together or sharing each other's meditation and contemplation.

8.7. Our experience of life and sharing together has been brief. But we

go back enriched and encouraged and with renewed determination to cultivate harmony among ourselves in the context of promoting harmony in the world and among all peoples.

* * *

“Collaboration in the social field has become today a form of dialogue of continually increasing importance for the renewal of religions and for joint service to humankind and to society. In this way, the religions gain credibility in the modern world and indirectly, by their witness of life, they positively dispose people to religious values. Moreover, from collaboration there often grows mutual sympathy and friendships that breaks down prejudices and barriers, opening the way to other forms of dialogue.”

Fr. John Shirieda, SDB

APPENDIX II

HARMONY AMONG BELIEVERS OF LIVING FAITHS CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA Concluding Report

Introduction

1. August 1-5, 1994, 31 Muslims and Christians from the countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand met in Pattaya, Thailand, to study the theme: “Harmony among Believers of the Living Faiths: Christians and Muslims in Southeast Asia.” The seminar was organized by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (P.C.I.D.) of the Vatican.

2. Cardinal Francis Arinze, President of the P.C.I.D., opened the meeting with words of welcome. Opening remarks were presented by Datuk Dr. Haji Ismail Ibrahim, Director General of the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Mons. J.B. Manat Chuab-samai, Bishop of Ratchaburi, Thailand, and Attorney Ulka Ulama of Jolo, Sulu, Philippines. Cardinal Arinze delivered the keynote address entitled: “In Openness and Collaboration.”

Harmony in Southeast Asian Cultures

3. Dr. Imtiyaz Yusuf of Mahidol University, Bangkok, Thailand, spoke on the theme: “Muslims and Christians in Southeast Asia Working for Peace.” Mons. Fernando Capalla, Coadjutor Archbishop of Davao, Philippines, delivered an address entitled: “The Role of Religious Groups in Modern Pluralistic Societies — Ideals and Realities: Traditions of Har-

mony in Southeast Asia as a Basis for Christian-Muslim Dialogue.” Reports from each country delineated issues affecting Muslim-Christian relations in that nation. Mixed groups identified and explored the areas of concern which influence Christian-Muslim relations in the region, as well as those issues which the two religious communities should face together as conscientious believers in God.

The Need for Dialogue

4. The participants agreed on the need for ongoing dialogue between Muslims and Christians. The objective of dialogue is to increase understanding, respect and collaboration between the followers of Christianity and Islam. Dialogue should not be confined to theological discussions, but must be fulfilled in a “dialogue of action” in which Muslims and Christians together address the challenges of modern life. If dialogue is to be truly effective in building more harmonious and just societies, it must reach the grass-roots and correct the misconceptions which each community has of the other. Bearing witness each day to the values of one’s respective religion, in openness, esteem and co-operation towards others, can be called “the dialogue of life.”

A Unity of Values and Perceptions

5. The speakers noted that Southeast Asia is by nature pluralistic. Despite religious, ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity, one can perceive a unity of values and perceptions which have often been expressed in various ways. Harmony, in the created universe, within the human family, and internalized in the individual person, has for centuries been an ideal to which peoples of the region have striven.

The Challenges of Modernization

6. Southeast Asia today is experiencing a profound process of modernization. This includes technological progress and economic growth. It has brought about rapid change in society and in the ways people understand the purpose of life and human relations. While affirming the important benefits to humanity which have been brought by modern life, Christians and Muslims in dialogue must face those elements of modernization which they find incompatible with their religious convictions. Their approach to these issues should be creative, a genuine contribution by those whose worldview is shaped by faith in God, rather than merely reactive and negative.

7. As believers in God, we cannot accept uncritically every aspect of modern life. The process of secularization tends to uproot humanity and push religion to the margins of life. A strong individualism, which is often

seen as an import from Western Europe and North America, can easily champion the rights and fulfillment of the individual at the expense of the family and the wider society. Former patterns of communal living and solidarity seem to be giving way to intense competitiveness in the marketplace and increased polarization among religions and ethnic groups. Traditional cultural values, such as those of harmony and solidarity, are seen to be endangered by the process of modernity.

Identifying the Problems

8. While unable to study the following issues in depth, the participants identified some of the main problems which demand a response from their respective communities:

a. Social and economic injustice results when the gains of modern prosperity are enjoyed by a relative few, while many are exploited and marginalized.

b. The mass media, which has tremendous potential for building understanding and respect among religious believers, has sometimes promoted models of an alien lifestyle and perpetuated suspicions and prejudices.

c. The ecological crisis deeply affects Southeast Asia and should engage the attentions of Muslims and Christians.

d. Poverty forces many Southeast Asians to migrate, in many cases leading to the breakup of families and subjecting the migrants to exploitation.

e. All aspects of the exploitation of women and children for labor and sex are an abomination which should be effectively forbidden by law.

f. Graft and corruption demoralize society and weaken people's initiative to work hard and serve generously.

Obstacles to Dialogue

9. Muslims and Christians encounter obstacles to dialogue which must be overcome if they are to build a harmonious society together. They often hold misconceptions and prejudices about each other's religion. Lack of sound information and experiential knowledge can permit fears to grow and difficulties to multiply. Some fear that dialogue will dilute religious conviction and zeal. The fear that dialogue may be misused as an instrument of conversion leads others to remain indifferent or skeptical of the effort.

The Roots of Fear

10. Fear sometimes has historical and sociological roots, that go back to colonial times, that can affect the way one group regards the other. Minorities have a fear of being dominated, politically or economically, by majorities. Family upbringing can play a key role, positively, in shaping the way that the new generations regard those of another religion.

Pioneering Efforts at Dialogue

11. For these reasons, it is important to affirm and encourage the pioneering efforts of those Christians and Muslims who are actively committed to pursue dialogue. To be more effective and credible to the whole community, dialogue should be carried on by persons who are firmly grounded in the faith and practice of their own religion. The participation of women in dialogue is to be encouraged.

Exclusivist and Extremist Trends

12. The participants are concerned about exclusivist and extremist trends in religion. We believe that Muslims and Christians need to study and understand the root causes of this phenomenon, as well as its effects in society. While extremism and intolerance are denounced both by the Qur'an and the Gospel, we are concerned that exclusivist and extremist tendencies can lead to violence and to the violation of the rights of others. We affirm the rights of all to understand and practice their faith according to their convictions, but we are convinced that religion is meant to be a force for harmony in society, rather than a divisive element of conflict.

The Family

13. In this Year of the Family, the participants are particularly concerned about threats to family values. We uphold the family, grounded in love and fidelity, as the basic unit of society and oppose all efforts to subordinate its prerogatives to an exaggerated individualism. We affirm the traditional definition of the family as a heterosexual union of husband and wife and we do not approve of efforts to place homosexual liaisons on the same level. On the basis of our religious beliefs, we reject abortion and disavow the concept of abortion as a means of population control. We further affirm the responsibility and rights of parents to educate and guide their children in matters of sexual behavior in accordance with their religious beliefs.

Government Concerns

14. Interreligious dialogue is an ally of our governments in their desire to build a pluralistic society where people of different races, languages, cultures and religions can live together in peace and harmony. We all, Christians and Muslims, long for unity in the region which is characterized by peace — not war, by communal harmony — not conflict, by mutual respect — not suspicion, by justice — not exploitation. We pledge ourselves ready to work together with our government leaders to make Southeast Asia such a region.

Asking God's Blessing

15. As we conclude this seminar, we commit ourselves, to support one another and all those engaged in interreligious dialogue. We thank Almighty God for the spirit of openness and trust that prevailed among us and we humbly beg His guidance and blessing on our endeavors.

The participants adopted a resolution to express gratitude to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue for making the seminar possible. They thanked the National Commission for Interreligious Dialogue of Thailand for hosting the seminar.

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15. As we conclude this seminar, we earnestly entreat in support one another and all those engaged in inter-religious dialogue. We thank Almighty God for the spirit of openness and trust that prevailed among us and we humbly beg His guidance and blessing on our endeavors.

FABC PAPERS is a project of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), designed to bring the thinking of Asian experts to a wider audience and to develop critical analysis of the problems facing the Church in Asia from people on the scene. The opinions expressed are those of the author(s) alone and do not necessarily represent the official policies of the FABC or its member Episcopal Conferences. Manuscripts are always welcome and may be sent to: FABC, G.P.O. Box 2984, Hong Kong.