

**CHRIST, FAITH
AND
THE CHALLENGE OF CULTURES**

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I. CHRIST, FAITH AND THE CHALLENGE OF CULTURES

by
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INTRODUCTION

In his last words, the risen Lord sends his apostles to the ends of the earth: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations; baptize them ... and teach them everything I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19f; cf. Acts 1:8).

Christianity entered the world conscious of a universal mission. From the first, the followers of Jesus Christ recognized their duty to pass on their faith to all men. They saw in the faith a good which did not belong to them alone, but one to which all had a claim. It would have been disloyal not to carry what had been given to them to the farthest corners of the earth.

The point of departure of Christian universalism was not the drive to power, but the certainty of having received the saving knowledge and redeeming love which all men had a claim to and were yearning for in the inmost recesses of their beings. Mission was not perceived as expansion for the wielding of power, but as the obligatory transmission of what was intended for everyone and which everyone needed.

Doubts have arisen today about the universality of Christian faith.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Holy See's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, gave this address to the presidents of the member bishops' conferences of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences and the chairmen of their doctrinal commissions in a meeting held March 3-5, 1993, in Hong Kong.

Many no longer see the history of worldwide mission as the history of the diffusion of liberating truth and love, but as a history of alienation and violation. The new consciousness expressed here demands that Christians consider radically who they are and who they are not, what they believe and what they do not believe, what they have to give and what is not theirs to give.

Within the frame of this address, I can only attempt a small step in such a large undertaking. My intention is to consider the right and capacity of Christian faith to communicate itself to other cultures, to assimilate them and to impart itself to them. Basically, this would include all questions concerning the foundation of Christian existence: Why believe anyway? Is there truth for man, truth which is accessible and belongs to everyone, or are we destined, through various symbols, ever just to catch a glimpse of a mystery which is never really unveiled to us? Is speaking about the truth of faith presumption or duty? Even these questions cannot be confronted head-on and discussed in their entire magnitude. We have only to keep them in the back of our minds as the setting for our discussion of faith and culture.

1. CULTURE, INCULTURATION, THE MEETING OF CULTURES

Our first questions must be: What is culture? How does it stand in relation to religion; and in what way can it be in contact with religious forms which were originally foreign to it? First, we might note that it was modern Europe which first originated a concept of culture in which culture appears as its own domain distinct from, or even in opposition to, religion. In all known historical cultures, religion is the essential element of culture; indeed it is its determining core. It is religion which determines the structure of values and thereby forms its inner logic.

But if this is the case, inculturation of the Christian faith in other cultures appears all the more difficult. For it is difficult to see how a culture, living and breathing the religion with which it is interwoven, can be transplanted into another religion without both of them going to ruin. If you remove from a culture its own religion which begets it, then you rob it of its heart. Should you implant in it a new heart, the Christian heart, it seems inescapable that the organism which is not ordered to it will reject the foreign body. A positive outcome of the operation is hard to envision.

The operation can only have sense if Christian faith and the other religion, together with the culture which lives from it, do not stand in utter difference to each other. It only makes sense if they are interiorly open to one another, or to put it differently, if they naturally tend to draw near and unite. Inculturation, therefore, presupposes the potential universality

of each culture. It presumes that in all cultures the same human nature is at work. It presumes that seeking union is a common truth of the human condition abiding in cultures.

To put it in yet a different way: The program of inculturation only then makes sense if no injustice is done to a culture when, due to the universal human disposition toward the truth, it is opened up and further developed by a new cultural power. It would follow too that whatever in culture excludes such opening and exchange marks what is deficient in the culture, for exclusion of the other goes against man's nature. The sign of a high culture is its openness, its capacity to give and receive, its power to develop, to allow itself to be purified and become more conformed to truth and to man.

Let us attempt now a kind of definition of *culture*. We might say *culture* is the historically developed common form of expression of the insights and values which characterize the life of a community. Let us try to consider now more closely the individual elements of this definition in order to understand better the possible intercommunication of cultures which the term *inculturation* must mean.

A. First of all, culture has to do with knowledge and values. It is an attempt to understand the world and man's existence in the world, but it is not an attempt of a purely theoretical kind. Rather it is ordered to the fundamental interests of human existence.

Understanding should show us how to be human, how man is to take his proper place in this world and respond to it in order to realize himself in his search for success and happiness. Moreover, in the great cultures this question again is not posed individualistically, as if each individual could think up a model for coming to terms with the world and life. Man can succeed only with others; the question of right knowledge is thus also a question about the right formation of the community. The community, for its part, is the prerequisite for individual fulfillment.

In culture we are dealing with an understanding, which is knowledge, which gives rise to praxis, that is to say, we are dealing with a knowledge which encompasses the indispensable dimension of values or morals. We must add something else which was self-evident to the ancient world. The question of man and the world always contains the prior and actually foundational question of God. One can neither understand the world, nor live uprightly, if the question of the divine goes unanswered. Indeed, it gets to the root of the great cultures to say that they interpret the world so as to order it to the divine.

B. Culture in the classical sense thus includes going beyond the visible and apparent to actual causes, and thus culture at its core means an opening to the divine. Related to this, as we have already seen, is the notion that the individual transcends himself in culture and finds himself carried along in a larger social subject whose insights he can borrow, continue and develop further.

Culture is always bound to a social subject which, on the one hand, takes up the experiences of the individual and, on the other, helps shape them. The common subject conserves and develops insights which exceed the capacity of the individual, insights which can be termed prerational and superrational. In so doing, cultures appeal to the wisdom of the "ancients," who stood nearer to the gods; they appeal to primordial traditions which have the character of revelation; that is to say, they do not stem from men's probing and deliberating but from an original contact with the ground of all things. In other words, cultures appeal to a communication from the divine.¹

The crisis of a culture ensues then when the culture is no longer able to bring this superrational heritage into a convincing connection to new, critical knowledge. In such a case, inherited truth becomes questionable; what was once truth becomes mere habit and loses its vitality.

C. Something else comes to the fore here. Society marches onward, and therefore culture also has to do with history. On its journey through time, culture develops through its encounter with new reality and the arrival of new insights. Not sealed off, culture stands in the dynamic stream of time, which contains a confluence of currents moving toward unity.

A culture's historicity means its ability to progress, and this depends on its ability to be open and to allow transformation through encounter. To be sure, one can distinguish between cosmic/static and historical cultures. The ancient cultures are said to depict the mystery of the cosmos as ever the same, while the Judeo-Christian cultural world, in particular, understands the way with God as history. History is thus fundamental to it.

Such a distinction between static and dynamic cultures is to a certain extent quite correct, but it does not tell the whole tale, because even the cosmically directed cultures point to death and rebirth, to being human as the way. As Christians we would say they contain within them an adventistic dynamic, but this is a topic to which we will need to return.²

Our small efforts here to clarify basic categories of the concept of cul-

ture help us to understand better how cultures can meet and intermingle. We can now say that a culture's attachment to a cultural individuality, to a particular cultural expression, is the basis for the multiplicity of cultures and their respective characteristics. Conversely, we can ascertain that culture's historicity, its movement in and through time, embraces its openness. An individual culture does not just live its own experience of God, world and man. Rather, by necessity it encounters on its way and must come to terms with other cultures with their typically different experiences.

Hence, to the extent to which it is open or closed, internally broad or narrow, a culture comes to deepen and refine its own insights and values. This can lead to a profound evolution of its earlier cultural configuration, and such a transformation need not be in the least a question of alienation or violation.

A successful transformation is explained by the potential universality of all cultures made concrete in a given culture's assimilation of the other and its own internal transformation. Such a procedure can even lead to the resolution of the latent alienation of man from truth and himself which a culture may harbor. It can mean the healing passover of a culture. Only appearing to die, the culture actually rises, coming fully into its own for the first time.

For this reason, we should no longer speak of inculturation but of the meeting of cultures or *interculturality*, to coin a new phrase. For inculturation presumes that a faith stripped of culture is transplanted into a religiously indifferent culture whereby two subjects, formally unknown to each other, meet and fuse. But such a notion is first of all artificial and unrealistic, for with the exception of modern technological civilization, there is no such thing as faith devoid of culture or culture devoid of faith. It is above all difficult to envision how two organisms, foreign to each other, should all of a sudden become a viable whole in a transplantation which stunts both of them. Only if all cultures are potentially universal and open to each other can interculturality lead to flourishing new forms.

Up until now, we have been concerned primarily with what could be called phenomenological considerations, that is to say, we have noted how cultures work and develop. In so doing, we have argued to the potential universality of all cultures as the fundamental idea of a history which aims at unification. But then we ask ourselves: Why is this so? Why are all cultures only particular and therefore different from one another? Why are they, however, at the same time open to all other cultures and capable of reciprocal refinement and combination?

I do not wish to address the positivistic solutions to these questions — and these of course exist. It seems to me that precisely here reference to metaphysics cannot be avoided. The meeting of cultures is possible because man, despite all the differences of his history and social constructs, remains one and the same being. This one being, man, however, is himself touched in the depth of his existence by truth. The fundamental openness of each person to the other can only be explained by the hidden fact that our souls have been touched by truth; and this explains the essential agreement which exists even between cultures most removed from each other.

On the other hand, diversity leading to isolation can be accounted for by the finiteness of the human spirit. No one grasps the whole; the myriad insights and forms build a kind of mosaic displaying their complementarity and interrelatedness. In order to be whole, everybody needs each other. Man approaches the unity and wholeness of his being only in the reciprocity of all great cultural achievements.

To be sure, we must acknowledge that this optimistic diagnosis is not the whole story. The potential universality of cultures again and again comes up against almost insurmountable obstacles when we try to translate it into practical universality, for it is not only a question of the dynamic force of what we share in common. We must also consider the element of separation, the barriers and contradictions, the impossibility of crossing over because the dividing waters are too deep.

We spoke before of the unity of the human being, of his being touched by God in a hidden way through truth. We realize too, however, that there is also a negative factor in human existence, an alienation, which hinders knowledge and cuts men off at least partially from the truth and thereby from one another. In this undeniable factor of alienation lies the poverty of our efforts to promote the meeting of cultures.

While we might deduce from this fact that it is wrong to accuse all earthly religions of idolatry, it would be also incorrect to regard all religions only positively. We should not all of a sudden forget the critique of religion which not only Feuerbach and Marx burned into our souls, but also such great theologians as Karl Barth and Bonhoeffer.

2. FAITH AND CULTURE

Now we come to the second part of our considerations. We have discussed thus far the essence of culture and the conditions of cultural encounter and intermingling giving rise to new cultural forms. From the realm of principles, we must now venture into that of facts. But before we do so, we need to summarize once again the essential results of our reflections and ask ourselves what can unite cultures so that they do not become merely superficially attached to each other but that their meeting becomes the occasion for mutual enrichment and refinement.

The medium that brings them together can only be the shared truth about man, which necessarily brings into play the truth about God and reality as a whole. The more human a culture is, the greater it is, the more it will speak to truth which was formerly closed to it and the more it will be able to assimilate truth and itself be assimilated by truth.

At this juncture the Christian faith's special self-understanding becomes manifest. Christian faith, if it is alert and honest, knows quite well that there is a good deal of the human at work in its particular cultural expressions, much of which is in need of purification and opening up. But Christian faith is also certain that in its core it is the self-disclosure of truth itself and therefore is redemption. For man's real poverty is the darkness to truth. This darkness falsifies our actions and pits us against one another, precisely because we are tainted, alienated from ourselves, cut off from the ground of our being, which is God.

The communication of truth brings deliverance from alienation and division. It illumines the universal standard which does no violence to any culture but leads each to its own center, since each culture is finally the expectation of truth. This does not mean uniformity. Just the opposite. Only when this occurs can opposition become complementarity because each culture, based on a common standard, can now bear its particular fruit.

This is the great mandate with which Christian faith came into the world; it underlies the inner obligation to send all peoples to the school of Jesus because he is truth in person and thus the way of mankind. For the time being, we do not wish to join the dispute over the legitimacy of this mandate, but we shall need to return to this issue. For now let us put the following question: What conclusions should we draw from the aforesaid for the concrete relationship of Christian faith to the world's cultures?

First, we must state that faith itself is culture. There is no such thing as naked faith or mere religion. Simply stated, insofar as faith tells man who he is and how he should begin being human, faith creates culture;

faith is itself culture. Faith's word is not an abstraction; it is one which has matured through a long history and through intercultural mingling in which it formed an entire structure of life, the interaction of man with himself, his neighbor, the world and God. This means too that faith is its own subject, a living and cultural community which we call the *people of God*.

The historical character of faith as subject comes perhaps most clearly to expression in this concept. Does then faith stand as one culture among others such that one would have to choose whether to belong to this people as a cultural community or to another? No. At this point, what is special and proper to a culture becomes evident. The cultural subject *people of God* differs from the classical cultures which are defined by tribe, people or the boundaries of a common region insofar as the people of God exists in different cultures which for their part, even as far as the Christian is concerned, do not cease to be the first and unmediated culture. Even as a Christian, one remains a Frenchman, a German, an American, an Indian, etc.

In the pre-Christian world, also in the great cultures of India, China and Japan, the identity and indivisibility of the cultural subject perdures. Double membership is in general impossible, with the exception, of course, of Buddhism, which is able to unite with other cultures as a kind of inner principle. But the doubling of cultures first arises in any consistent way with Christianity, such that man now lives in two cultural worlds, his historical culture and in the new one of faith, both of which permeate him.

This interaction will never be an entirely accomplished synthesis; it includes the necessity of continuing efforts toward reconciliation and refinement. Again and again man must learn the transcendence toward wholeness and universality which is proper not to a specific people, but precisely to the people of God, which embraces all men. Again and again, on the other hand, what is held in common must be received into the realm of the particular and be lived or even suffered in actual history.

Something very important follows from this. One might think that the culture is the affair of the individual historical country (Germany, France, America, etc.), while faith for its part is in search of cultural expression. The individual cultures would allocate, as it were, a cultural body to faith. Accordingly, faith would always have to live from borrowed cultures, which remain in the end somehow external and capable of being cast off. Above all, one borrowed cultural form would not speak to someone who lives in another culture. Universality would thereby finally become fictitious.

Such thinking is at root Manichaeism. Culture is debased, becoming a mere exchangeable shell. Faith is reduced to disincarnated spirit ultimately void of reality. To be sure, such a view is typical of the post-Enlightenment mentality. Culture is reduced to mere form; religion, to inexpressible mere feeling or pure thought. The fruitful tension is lost which one would expect to characterize per se the coexistence of two subjects.

If culture is more than a mere form or aesthetic principle, if it is rather the ordering of values in a historical living form and cannot prescind from the question of God, then we cannot circumvent the fact that the church is its own cultural subject for the faithful. This cultural subject church, people of God, does not coincide with any of the individual historical subjects even in times of apparently full Christianization, as one thought one had attained in Europe. Rather the church significantly maintains her own overarching form.

If this is so, when the faith and its culture meet another culture hitherto foreign to it, it cannot be a question of dissolving the duality of the cultures to the advantage of the one or the other. Gaining a Christianity deprived of its concrete human complexion at the cost of losing one's own cultural heritage would be as mistaken as surrendering faith's own cultural physiognomy. Indeed the tension is fruitful; it renews faith and heals culture. It would therefore be nonsensical to offer a sort of precultural or decultured Christianity which would rob itself of its own historical force and degrade itself to an empty collection of ideas.

We may not forget that Christianity already in the New Testament bears the fruit of an entire cultural history, a history of acceptance and rejection, of encounter and change. Israel's history of faith, which has been taken up into Christianity, found its own form through confrontation with the Egyptian, Hittite, Sumerian, Babylonian, Persian and Greek cultures.

All of these cultures were at the same time religions, comprehensive historical forms of living. Israel painfully adopted and transformed them in the course of her struggle with God, in struggle with the great prophets, in order to make ready an ever purer vessel for the newness of the revelation of the one God. These other cultures came thereby to their own lasting fulfillment. They would all have sunk into the distant past had they not been refined and elevated in the faith of the Bible, thereby attaining permanence.

To be sure, Israel's history of faith begins with the call to Abraham: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house" (Gn 12:1); it begins with a cultural break. Such a break with its own antecedent history, such a going forth, will always stand at the beginning of a new

hour of the history of faith. But this new beginning reveals itself to be a healing power which creates a new center and which deigns to draw to itself everything truly human, everything truly godly. "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (Jn. 12:31) — these words of the risen Lord also apply here. The cross is first of all break, expulsion, elevation away from the earth, but precisely thereby it becomes a new center of magnetic pull, drawing world history upward and becoming a gathering of the divided.

Whoever joins the church must be aware that he is entering a cultural subject with its own historically developed and multitiered interculturality. One cannot become a Christian apart from a certain exodus, a break from one's previous life in all its aspects. Faith is not a private way to God; it leads into the people of God and its history.

God bound himself to a history which is now also his, and one which we cannot cast off. Christ remains man in eternity; he conserves his body in eternity. Being man and being body inevitably include however a history and culture, a quite particular history and culture, whether we like it or not. We cannot repeat the event of the incarnation to suit ourselves in the sense of taking away Christ's flesh and offering him another. Christ remains himself, indeed according to his body. But he draws us to himself.

This means, since the people of God is not a particular cultural entity but rather has been drawn from all peoples, therefore even its first cultural identity, rising from the break, has its place. But not just that. This first identity is necessary to allow the incarnation of Christ, the incarnation of the Logos, to reach its fullness. The tension of the many subjects in the one subject belongs essentially to the uncompleted drama of the incarnation of the Son. This tension is the real inner dynamism of history; it stands to be sure always under the sign of the cross; that is to say, it always has to contend with the counterstress of closed-mindedness and refusal.

3. CHRISTIAN FAITH AND NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS IN THE CURRENT HISTORICAL SITUATION

All of this follows if Jesus of Nazareth really is the incarnate meaning of history, the Logos, the self-manifestation of truth itself. It is then clear that this truth is the place where everyone can be reconciled and nothing loses its own worth and dignity. But at this point objections are heard today. To claim a religion's concrete statements of faith to be true is considered today not only presumption but also a sign of being unenlightened. Hans Kelsen expressed the spirit of our era when he maintained that Pilate's question "What is truth?" is the only appropriate standpoint vis-à-vis the great moral and religious problems of mankind. Truth is replaced by

majority decision, he says, precisely because there can be no commonly binding accessible standard for man.³

Thus the multiplicity of cultures becomes a proof of their relativity. Culture is put in opposition to truth. This relativism, a basic sentiment of enlightened man reaching today far into theology, is the gravest problem of our time. It is also the fundamental reason why praxis has replaced truth and thereby shifted the axes of religions. We do not know what is true, but we do know what we must do, namely, usher in a better society, the "kingdom," as it is frequently said, taking a word from the Bible and applying it in a profane, utopian sense.

Church-centeredness, Christ-centeredness, God-centeredness, all of these seem to give way to kingdom-centeredness, the centering on the kingdom as the common task of all religions, under which point of view and standard they are supposed to meet.⁴ So there is no reason any longer to approach them in their core, to bring them into relationship with each other in their moral and religious messages. On the contrary, the religions thereby become distorted in their deepest being, in that they are expected to serve as a means to a future structuring which is really foreign to them and empties them of content.

The dogma of relativism also works in another direction. Christian universalism concretely carried out in mission is no longer the dutiful passing on of a good, namely, truth and love intended for everyone. Rather mission becomes the arrogant presumption of a culture which thinks itself superior to the others and so would deprive them of what is good and proper to them.

The conclusions drawn from this relativism differ from culture to culture even if they are related in their basic thrust. In Latin America today there is a movement under way which calls itself *teologia india*, the title referring to the indigenous peoples. The movement mourns the passing of the old religions of that continent and would like to revive them in some fashion.

The religions are seen as the ways of the different peoples to God and thus basically as equally valid paths to salvation. Each people has the right to its way; Latin America must finally be liberated from the alienation which it experienced when Western Christianity was imposed upon it.

The situation is a little different in Africa, where in contrast to Latin America, the original tribal religions are still vigorous. But even here a reverse movement can be seen, due to the self-doubt afflicting Christianity today and the reduction of its religious substance to mere moral impera-

tives. Why should Africa give up its religious identities to the advantage of a religion whose proclamation and implantation in retrospect appear to not a few to be only another self-alienating aspect of the colonialism imposed upon them?

Whoever looks more closely can easily see that there can be no simple return to the past. For it is not only the case that the convergence of mankind toward a single community with a common life and destiny is unstoppable because such an inclination is grounded in man's essence, but also because the diffusion of technological civilization is irrevocable. It is a romantic dream to want to preserve pretechnological islands in the sea of humanity. You cannot enclose men and cultures in a kind of spiritual nature reserve.

Virtually no one, whether in Latin America, Africa or Asia, seriously wants to exclude himself from natural science and technology, which originated in the West. But since technology, like natural science, appears to be neutral, the thought suggests itself: Why not accept the achievements of the modern age while at the same time, however, keeping the indigenous religions? This seemingly so enlightened notion, however, does not work. For in reality modern civilization is not mere multiplication of knowledge and know-how. It deeply encroaches upon the basic understanding of man, the world and God. It changes standards and behavior. It alters the interpretation of the world at its base. The religious cosmos is necessarily moved by it. The arrival of these new possibilities of existence is like an earthquake which shakes the intellectual landscape at its very foundations.

In any case, it occurs more and more frequently that Christian faith is discarded as a European cultural heritage and the former religions are religiously reinstated, while at the same time technology, though nonetheless Western, is passionately adopted and exploited. This division of Western heritage into the useful, which one accepts, and the foreign, which one rejects, does not lead to the salvation of ancient cultures. It can now be seen that what is great and forward-looking, I would say the adventistic dimension of the ancient religions, meets its downfall because it seems incompatible with the new knowledge of the world and man, while magic in the broadest sense of the word, everything which promises power over the world, remains intact and becomes for the first time life-determining. The religions thus lose their dignity because what is best in them is eliminated and what was dangerous in them alone remains.

The situation of Asia vis-à-vis Christianity is different still from the situation in either Latin America or black Africa. For here we are not dealing with preliterate tribal cultures, but with high religious cultures which

also have produced a great legacy of sacred texts and writings of philosophical and theological reflection.

In Africa, Christianity encountered the indigenous religions at a moment in which they themselves, in youthful vigor, were still in search of the ultimate word. One can recognize a certain analogy to the situation of the Mediterranean world in the moment of its encounter with Christ, even if the analogy contains much dissimilarity as well as similarity, as all analogies do. Christianity's early proclamation to the Greco-Roman world confronted religions which were moribund; they had lost their inner credibility and vitality. People were searching for something new. One need not hesitate to say that there was a longing for monotheism, for one God over all the gods.

Philosophy saw him from afar but could not chart a course to him; re-aming philosophy, it was unable to replace religion. The Christian proclamation was here the interiorly awaited answer which could apprehend philosophical thought and fill it with religious reality.

In Africa, there was and is a similar need for the self-transcendence of the tribal religions. These too are not adequate to the needs of the historical moment; Islam and Christianity are trying to answer the question raised by the religions themselves.

The situation is different in India, China and Japan insofar as the traditional religions themselves have produced philosophical reasoning which interprets the world as a whole and, in so doing, assigns a rational place in the structure of life and culture for religion. Hence Christianity could not be experienced here as it was in the Mediterranean region or even in black Africa as a new stage of life in its own pilgrimage already pointing in the same direction. Rather Christianity appeared more as a foreign culture and religion establishing itself next to one's own and threatening to supplant it.

Conversions to Christianity have for this reason largely remained marginal in comparison to the whole of society. Nonetheless, the confrontation between the Christian and Asian religious worlds was not without effect, but rather ushered in a deep process of transformation, especially in Indian religiosity. Neo-Hinduism, as represented for example by Radhakrishnan, rests on the fusion of traditional Indian traditions with a late form of Western Christianity. One can no doubt see it as a synthesis of culture and religion, but perhaps it would even be better categorized as a type of philosophy of religion in which modern Western relativism combines with traditional Eastern spirituality, offering a kind of rational basis for religious and cultic perspectives which, to be sure, have largely lost

their original sense in this new vision.

If this is a case of a synthesis in which the Indian moment remains determinative, one could see, say in Panikkar, a union accenting more the Christian component. But here too we are dealing with a philosophy of religion rather than religion. Between, or perhaps better, beyond such attempts, the path must be found for the true encounter of cultures and religions, an encounter not characterized by loss of faith or truth, but by a deeper contact with truth which makes possible giving all that which went before its full and deep significance.

Such a synthesis of truth cannot be invented at a desk or else it will never transcend the status of philosophy or mere theory. Rather a process of lived faith is necessary which creates the capacity for encounter in truth and thus, as the psalm says, "places in a wide place" (31:9). But it naturally must be guided and ordered to the thinking of faith. That is the great task confronting theology in Asia today, a task which concerns at the same time the entire universal church.

Our gathering here in Hong Kong should be an encouragement to undertake this work and at the same time help us to clarify the necessary principles involved. The church fathers can ever show us the way to attain the right principles since they faced a quite similar task in their encounter with the religions of the Mediterranean area with its endemic philosophies of religion. For although the faith in the gods and thus the immediate sense of the ancient cults had disintegrated, new philosophical justifications of the pagan religions were devised which show very similar characteristics to the philosophies of religion of our century, for example, to Radhakrishnan.

I shall mention only two striking examples. The Roman rhetorician Symmachus (c. 345-402), who passionately defended the preservation of the ancient Roman religion, provides us the first. He became especially famous for petitioning Caesar to reinstate the goddess of victory in the Roman senate. The key line of his memorandum justifying his request reads: "*Uno itinere non potest veniri ad tam grande secretum*" — "one cannot succeed to such a great mystery by only one road." This passage is a classical expression of the Roman idea of religion. The divine mystery is so great that no human way can exhaust it; no religion may encompass it. It can only be approached from different sides and must be represented in various forms.

Symmachus did not want to abolish Christianity; he but wanted to integrate it into his notion of religion. Christianity should learn to see itself as one way to see, seek and speak about God, recognizing that there are

also other ways. Even Christianity may not presume to exhaust the great mystery.

Perhaps the problem can be seen even more clearly in the case of the emperor Julian the Apostate (332-363), who wanted to suppress once again "intolerant" Christianity and re-establish the ancient cults, all this against the backdrop of neo-Platonic philosophy. Julian criticized the Old Testament and the Christian faith from the same standpoint as Symmachus. His main complaint against Christianity and his single objection to Judaism involve the First Commandment: "Thou shalt not have strange gods before me." He could not and would not recognize the uniqueness of the one God. Even the God of Israel, the God of Jesus Christ, is for him one appearance of the divine, but one which does not deplete the "great mystery." For this reason, the God of the Old Testament and the God of Christians must tolerate other gods besides him. For this reason, the Nazarene cannot be recognized as the one incarnate Logos who is the only mediator of all mankind.

In the dispute with enlightened philosophical polytheism, the fathers have identified the supporting foundations of biblical faith; relativizing them annuls this faith and robs of its identity. What remains after its abandonment would be select elements of biblical tradition, but not the faith of the Bible itself. I shall attempt very briefly to indicate these basic elements as derived by the fathers from Sacred Scripture.

A. The first great commandment is at once the first article of faith and faith's foundational principle of identity: "The Lord, our God, is one Lord." All "gods" are not God. Therefore only the one God can be adored in truth; to worship other gods is idolatry. Without this fundamental decision there is no Christianity. One finds oneself outside the Christian faith where it is forgotten or relativized. Christology, ecclesiology, worship and sacrament can only be correctly treated when this decision is made. Christianity revolutionized the ancient world with this confession of faith. The ancient world had proceeded from the exact opposite principle, as the Emperor Julian had again formulated it at the end of antiquity.

The one God is by no means an unknown theme in the history of religion. One can indeed say that the vast majority of religions are acquainted with him. Hence they know that the gods are not the final power but only relative powers. The religions are in general also aware that the "gods" are not "God." At the same time, the one God is, to be sure, frequently without a cult or at least is unimportant cultically because he is too distant from the life of man. Hence cultic practice addresses the gods, so that in the religions God, for all practical purposes, is often concealed almost entirely behind the gods.

Christian faith was for the Mediterranean world and then again for Latin America and Africa liberation from the gods because now the one God had shown himself and had become "God with us." The pivotal words with which Jesus rebukes Satan, the tempter of mankind, read: "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve" (Mt 4:10; Lk 4:8; Dt 5:9; 6:13). Without accepting this command one cannot stand on the side of Jesus Christ in the religion professed by the Bible.

B. Christian existence starts with this fundamental decision and has rested on it ever since. Where the difference between worship and idolatry disappears, Christianity is undone. The Bible and the language of the fathers calls the required decision *conversion* (*metanoia*). A theology which omits the concept of conversion would overlook the decisive category of biblical religion. Christian faith is a new beginning and not merely a new cultural variant in an ever developing religious framework.

For this reason, the fathers stressed emphatically the newness of Christianity. The act of conversion is essential to the special understanding of the truth of Christians. In a large number of religions, as we have seen, the reality of the one God was certainly not unknown, but this one God remains too distant. His mystery is inaccessible. Thus the concrete contents of religion can only be symbolic in nature. They are not truth but relative appearances beside which other appearances are possible.

The Christian faith recognizes in the God of Israel, in the God of Jesus Christ, the one true God, truth itself manifesting itself. Therefore Christian conversion is according to its essence faith in the fact of truth's own revelation. While mystery is not thereby abolished, relativism, to be sure, is excluded, for relativism cuts man off from truth, making him a slave. Man's real poverty is darkness to truth. He becomes free for the first time when he is obliged to serve truth alone.

Yet another point is important in this consideration. The fathers first of all emphasized very strongly the character of conversion as decision, and accordingly, the character of faith as exodus. When this point was secure, they emphasized more and more also the second aspect, namely, that conversion is transformation, not destruction. Conversion does not destroy the religions and cultures but transforms them.

With this insight, the fathers came more and more to oppose the iconoclasm of narrow-minded Christian fanatics. Temples were no longer dismantled but converted to churches. The inner continuity between the religions and Christian faith became visible. It came to a resurrection of what was best in the former religions. It was not a relativistic philosophy of reli-

gion which gave them continued existence; in fact, it was this that had made them ineffective in the first place. Faith gave the religions the space in which their truth could develop and become fruitful. Both aspects of the act of conversion are important, but only after the first step has succeeded, namely the decisive turning to the one God, can the second, transforming conservation, ensure.

C. The mystery of Jesus Christ is to be understood only in this context of the First Commandment and the act of conversion which it demands. For Jesus, who did not abolish the Old Testament but fulfilled it, the First Commandment remained the supporting foundation of everything further; the *shema Israel* constituted the underlying content of faith: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord."

I make bold to assert that the centrality of this passage for all Old Testament literature is also the essential reason for the unique place of the Old Testament in the Christian faith. Since the whole Old Testament is built around this one sentence, it is for this reason a "canon," Sacred Scripture, for Christians. Only for this reason it attests to Jesus and vice versa. Jesus is the key to the Old Testament because he makes this sentence concrete in his very flesh.

Unfortunately, lack of time does not permit us to present the Christological question as it should be presented. For this reason, I should like all the more to refer to the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, in which the essential issues are very vividly and clearly stated. This encyclical must form the standard for all further work on the theology of religions and mission. It cannot be studied and received intensively enough. I must settle here for a brief allusion.

The problem which arises in India, but also elsewhere, comes to expression in Panikkar's famous phrase: "Jesus is Christ, but Christ is not (only) Jesus." In order to see the full extent of the question, we should replace the word *Christ* with *Logos* or *Son of God*, since *Christ* is a salvation-historical title in which the full metaphysical depth of the mystery of Jesus does not yet come to light.

In his historical life, Jesus was reticent about the use of this title. The post-Easter tradition explains the title more and more decidedly by the title *Son*, which finally replaces it, and which then again John interprets in depth by the concept *Logos*. This process of the development of revelation is already, however, very prominent in the synoptic tradition. Peter's confession reads quite simply in Mark: "You are the Christ [the Messiah]." Matthew reads: "You are the Christ [the Messiah], the Son of the living God" (Mk 8:29; Mt 16:16). Jesus says expressly to Peter that the lat-

ter did not learn this confession from flesh and blood, that is, from either his culture or his religious heritage, but that "my Father who is in heaven has revealed" this to him (Mt 16:17).

Hence this confession, the fundamental confession of the entire church of all times and places, is expressly removed from mere human traditions and qualified as revelation in the strict sense of the term. Every interpretation which falls short of it is a return to the merely human. Christianity stands or falls with this confession. It can no longer be separated from Israel's basic confession: "The Lord, our God, is one Lord." The only God shows himself to us in his only Son and wishes to be worshiped as the only God in him. This answers in principle the question of the reversibility of the Christological formulas.

When Panikkar denies the simple reversibility, he is correct insofar as the two natures, the divine and the human, remain distinct. Jesus' human nature has its beginning in time; the divine nature of the Logos is eternal. Both are so different, as creator and creature are different, and therefore are not exchangeable. Nevertheless, in the incarnation, the eternal Logos has so bound himself to Jesus such that the reversibility of the formulas results from his *person*. The Logos can no longer be thought of apart from his connection to the man Jesus. The Logos has drawn Jesus to himself and so united himself to him that they are only one person in the duality of natures.

Whoever comes into contact with the Logos touches Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is more than the sacrament of the Logos. He is the Logos himself, who in the man Jesus is a historical subject. Certainly God touches man in many ways even outside of the sacraments. But he touches him always through the man Jesus, who is his self-mediation into history and our mediation into eternity. Christ is not a mere theophany, an appearance of God, but rather in him the being of God himself enters into unity with the being of man.

If we — with Peter, with the entire New Testament, with the entire church — confess Jesus as Christ, the Son of the living God, then we do not only wish to say that this Jesus has become the highest manifestation of the divine for *us*, while others elsewhere may well have found their own unique saviors. Faith, in the sense of the New Testament, means precisely that we are being torn away from our subjective or merely human-cultural estimations, that he who takes us by the hand is the one who passes over the sea of time without sinking because he is the Lord of time. Faith as "theological" act transcends all experience. It is an act of assent which we can only make to the living God, who is truth in person. We may not confer this obedience on any relative reality. This is what Peter means when

he says to the leaders and elders of the people of Israel: "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

In his letters from prison, Paul develops the cosmic significance of Christ and thereby opens up for us an "inclusive" Christology in the sense of what we said earlier about conversion. Faith in Jesus Christ becomes a new principle of life and opens up a new space for living. The old is not destroyed but finds its definitive form and full meaning. This transforming conservation as the fathers splendidly practiced it in the encounter between biblical faith and its cultures is the real content of "inculturation," of encounter and cross-fertilization of cultures and religions under the mediating power of faith.

It is here that the great tasks of the present historical moment lie. Without a doubt, Christian mission must understand and receive the religions in a much deeper way than it has until now. On the other hand, the religions, in order to live authentically, need to recognize their own adventistic character propelling them forward to Christ. If we proceed in this sense toward an intercultural search for clues to the one common truth, we will find something unexpected.

The elements Christianity has in common with the ancient cultures of mankind are greater than those it has in common with the relativistic-rationalistic world. The latter has severed itself from the common sustaining basic insights of mankind and led man into an existential vacuum threatening his ruin if no answer is forthcoming. For the knowledge of man's dependence on God and eternity, the knowledge of sin, repentance and forgiveness, the knowledge of communion with God and eternal life, and finally the knowledge of basic moral precepts as they have taken shape in the Decalogue, all this knowledge permeates the cultures. It is not relativism which is confirmed. On the contrary, it is the unity of the human condition, the unity of man who has been touched by a truth greater than himself.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Cf. Josef Pieper, *Überlieferung: Begriff und Anspruch*, Munich 1970; and *Über die platonischen Mythen*, Munich 1965.
2. Th. Haecker especially emphasized the concept of the adventistic in pre-Christian "paganism." Cf. Th. Haecker, *Vergil: Vater des Abendlandes*, Leipzig, 1931; reprinted, Munich 1947.
3. Cf. V. Possenti, *Le società liberali al bivio: Lineamenti di filosofia della società*, Marietti 1991, p. 315-345, esp. 345f.
4. Cf. the indications of J. Dupuis, "The Kingdom of God and World Religions," in *Vidyajyoti, Journal of Theological Reflection* 51 (1987), pp. 530-544.

II. TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF INCULTURATION IN ASIA: THE FEDERATION OF ASIAN BISHOP'S CONFERENCES, 1970 — 1995

by
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In November, 1970, on the occasion of Pope Paul VI's visit to the Philippines, one hundred eighty Asian bishops gathered together in what would prove to be a historic meeting. "Never before," writes Indian theologian Felix Wilfred, "had Asian bishops come together to exchange experiences and to deliberate jointly on common questions and problems facing the continent. The meeting marked the beginning of a new consciousness of the many traditional links that united the various peoples of this region of the globe."¹ The assembled bishops published a short but theologically rich "Message," and twenty-two resolutions, the first of which was an agreement to urge the episcopal conferences of Asia "to authorize and support a permanent structure for the effective implementation of the decisions of this meeting."² Four years later, in April of 1974, the bishops met in Taipei, Taiwan at the first plenary assembly of what had been organized as the Federation of Asian Bishop's Conferences (FABC), and since then a plenary assembly has been held approximately every four years: in Calcutta, India (1978), in Bangkok, Thailand (1982), in Tokyo, Japan (1986), in Bandung, Indonesia (1990), and — to celebrate its twenty-fifth anniversary — in Manila, Philippines in 1995 on the occasion of Pope John Paul II's journey to celebrate World Youth Day. In between plenary assemblies the FABC has sponsored an Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church (Hong Kong, 1977), an International Congress on Mission (Manila, 1979), a Consultation on Christian Presence among Muslims in Asia (Varanasi, 1983), and a number of "Bishops' Institutes" on the missionary apostolate (BIMAs), interreligious affairs (BIRAs), and social action (BISAs). In addition, with plans originating in 1982, the FABC has set up a theological commission to provide greater theological depth to the Federation's work. At its Manila meeting last year, therefore, the FABC could look back on twenty-five years of activity which had yielded an impressive body of documents that are incredibly rich, amazingly visionary, and truly worth careful reading and study.

In resolution thirteen of the 1970 meeting, the bishops pledged themselves to the development of "an indigenous theology...so that the life and message of the Gospel may be ever more incarnate in the rich historic cultures of Asia..."³ Carolus B. Putranta, in his 1986 survey of the FABC documents up until 1982,⁴ does not include indigenization — or, as it is more often termed in later documents, "inculturation" — among the major themes addressed in the Federation's first twelve years of existence; the reader of the documents, however, cannot but be struck at how the effort to theologize in an Asian way seems to be the driving force behind

every FABC meeting, seminar or consultation. The term "inculturation," may not be the best description of the process by which the variety of Asian religious, cultural and economic contexts are taken seriously in the theological enterprise;⁵ nevertheless the search for ways to make the church more truly Catholic by making it more truly Asian functions as the leitmotif of every FABC concern.

This paper is an investigation into the ways the FABC approaches the question of inculturation in its various documents. It will survey the six statements of the plenary assembly, but will include as well the documents from the various "bishops' institutes" and the other three major meetings the FABC sponsored: the colloquium on ministries, the international missionary conference and the consultation on Muslims in Asia. Also included will be the four published statements from the Theological Advisory Commission. While all of these documents obviously do not have the same theological authority, all of them together can give a clearer and broader picture of the FABC's conception of the method and content of a theology that emerges from and speaks to the Asian context.

The paper will consist of three parts. Part I will investigate those sections of the documents which treat the question of inculturation *explicitly*. Part II will point out several approaches to inculturation that appear *implicitly* in the documents. Part III will focus on several theological themes which the FABC identifies as central to the construction of an Asian theology.

The perspective presented here is admittedly an "etic"⁶ one. I am not myself an Asian, and, although I worked in Asia (Philippines) for the better part of the decade of the 1970's, I have not lived in Asia for some fifteen years. However, I offer the fruits of my investigation to readers of *Studia Missionalia* for a number of reasons. First, as Cardinal Simon Lourdusamy has pointed out, the FABC texts have had considerable influence in the thinking of non-Asian episcopal conferences, and represent a valuable contribution to the ongoing dialogue that needs to take place among all the churches of the world.⁷ They are accessible, in other words, to people not particularly familiar with the complexities of Asia, and a study of them can be helpful for others' efforts to understand the Gospel in their own contexts. This study might serve as an introduction to a valuable resource for non-Asian theologians, and perhaps even for Asian theologians as well. Secondly, at least in the documents published by the Theological Advisory Commission, there is a clear call for "feedback and discussion from theologians and theological students who may take the time to read and study these pages."⁸ The sense I get from the very open style and atmosphere of *all* the FABC documents is that studies, comments and reflections would be welcome. Thirdly, while an "etic" perspective might

not be as valuable as an “emic” one, the outsider may very well see aspects within a text or a situation that an insider has not seen or even *cannot* see. Whether this will indeed be the case here, of course, I leave to my Asian readers to decide.

I. EXPLICIT REFLECTION ON INCULTURATION

Explicit references to or explanations of the notion of inculturation in the FABC documents are actually quite sparse. In the Federation’s early documents, produced soon after Vatican II, the notion of the importance of culture in the church’s pastoral activity and theology was rather a novelty, and terminology for the process was still unclear. Some still spoke of “adaptation;” others preferred “indigenization” or “inculturation” or “incarnation.” In the 1970 message of the Asian Bishops’ Meeting, the term “inculturation” appears in paragraph 24, and is immediately tied to dialogue with Asians of other faith traditions and respect for Asian cultures and traditions. In resolution 13, as was mentioned above, the bishops pledged themselves to the development of an *indigenous* theology, “so that the life and message of the Gospel may be ever more *incarnate* [my emphasis] in the rich historical cultures of Asia, so that in the necessary process of modernization and development, Asian Christianity may help to promote all that is ‘authentically human in these cultures.’”⁹ Inculturation, incarnation or indigenization, then, are linked in this early document especially to Asian cultures and traditions, but to Asian religious traditions as well.

The 1974 plenary assembly, the theme of which was “Evangelization in Modern Day Asia,” issued both a longer and a shorter form of its final statement. In paragraph 26 of the longer statement the assembly speaks of “indigenization” as the process that “renders the local church truly present within the life and cultures of our peoples. Through it, all their human reality is assumed into the life of the Body of Christ, so that all of it may be purified and healed, perfected and fulfilled.”¹⁰ Two things are to be noted here. First, “indigenization” is again linked to “cultures,” but also — rather vaguely — to “life.” Secondly, in terms reminiscent of LG 17, indigenization is called for in order that “human reality” can be purified, healed, perfected and fulfilled — the process, in other words, is “one way,” in that indigenization takes place when *cultures* and *human reality* are changed by the influence of the Gospel. In the shorter and briefer version of the final statement, which, while expressing the same content, is organized quite differently, we read in paragraph 20 that there are three key elements in evangelization in Asia today, *one* of which is “inculturation” — “which renders the local church truly present within the life of our people.”¹¹ Again we see that the process, now termed “inculturation,” is the way the church becomes authentic within the context of Asian life.

Both forms of the statement argue that the way the church must evangelize in modern-day Asia is through the “building up of the local church” (9), and that this is done by means of a three-fold *dialogue*: with culture, with Asian religions, and with the Asian poor. “Indigenization” or “inculturation,” however, refers to the cultural existence of Asian Christians, and not to the other two.

In 1978 the second plenary assembly of the Federation was devoted to reflection on “Prayer — The Life of the Church of Asia.”¹² In paragraphs 10 and 11, reflecting on some aspects of the Asian religious context and the challenges it presents, the assembly refers to a double movement that is the necessary “task of inculturation” (11) — one both of assimilation and translation. Christianity must “assume into the full Christian life of our peoples what is good, noble and living in our cultures and traditions” (11), as well as bring to fulfillment whatever seeds of the Gospel have been planted in Asian cultures previous to evangelization. In the briefer version of its statement there is specific mention of some of the gifts that Asian spirituality can give to the entire church: a holistic view of prayer, traditions of asceticism, techniques of contemplation and popular expressions of faith (24). If taken seriously, these could go a long way not only to make the church more “at home” in Asia, but to transform some of the understandings of prayer and spirituality themselves in the Christian tradition — both in Asia and in other parts of the world. Inculturating the Gospel, therefore, is seen not just as a technique for evangelization, but a way of coming to a deeper understanding of Christianity itself. What we have here, I believe, is an advance over the 1974 statement, for rather than being conceived as a “one-way” process by which the Gospel is “inserted” into a culture to challenge and purify it, inculturation is presented here as a “two-way” process of mutual critique and enrichment.

At the 1979 International Mission Conference in Manila, Philippines, a workshop was held specifically on inculturation,¹³ and the process was described explicitly. Inculturation is not “mere adaptation of a ready-made Christianity into a given situation; rather, it is the creative embodiment of the Word in the local church” (6). The process of inculturation is one of dialogue and results in a “discovery of the seeds of the Word which lie hidden in given cultures and living traditions” of Asia (7). Although the Word, the Gospel, is unchanging, the process of inculturation will purify, heal and transform not only the local Asian culture within which one is searching, but also the church itself — on both the local and universal levels (9). Theologizing, the final paragraph of the workshop report says, should be “contextual,” by “taking into consideration the ways of thinking and the sets of meanings and values that shape the lives of the people” (19). The workshop report comprises only a brief two and a half pages, but it is a real gold mine of reflection about the nature of the inculturation

process. Inculturation, we see, is a two-way process, in which both the Asian reality and the Christian evangelizer are purified, healed and transformed.

The final message of the participants at the 1983 consultation on Christian presence among Muslims in Asia¹⁴ contains two short paragraphs on inculturation. Again we see that inculturation, like dialogue, is not a mere *tactic* of evangelization, but is part of the very nature of a worthy preaching and witnessing to the Gospel. "Genuine inculturation" is effected, says the document, as Christians live out authentically their "double heritage of faith and country," and engage in both interreligious and intercultural dialogue (31). Paragraph 32 is a call to live out Christian life, conceptualize Christian religious experience and concretize Christian worship in ways that cherish and respect the cultural heritage of areas of Asia that are predominantly Muslim.

From 1984 to 1991 the FABC sponsored some twelve workshops on the theology of dialogue, and in the first workshop there appears a short section on "Dialogue and Inculturation."¹⁵ The section suggests that two themes (harmony and the church's nature as a sign or sacrament) should be considered for the inculturation of the Gospel in Asia. What is important for our current reflections, however, is the connection made between the process of inculturation and the practice of dialogue (12). Inculturation is again proposed as a "two-way" process, one that is carried out with deep respect for the other, one that is marked by openness and readiness for transformation on the part of both sides, and one that includes both attention to culture and to the religious traditions of Asia.

In a small but significant paragraph in the conclusions from a theological consultation held in Thailand in 1991,¹⁶ inculturation is given a Christological, paschal focus. The foundation for inculturation, we read, is the conformity of the church to its Master. Just as Jesus conveyed the mystery of God within a specific context, so must the church. And just as Jesus died for his convictions, the paragraph implies, so must the church; it must die to its preconceptions and die for its vision of God's challenging and redeeming presence within Asian realities. Only then can it rise fully Christian and fully Asian, fully inserted "in the surrounding cultures, in all aspects of their life, celebration, witness and mission" (35).

No doubt the fullest statement on inculturation of any FABC-related document is found in the document entitled "Theses on the Local Church" by the Federation's Theological Advisory Commission.¹⁷ In these pages it is clear that inculturation is an ongoing process of mutual critical correlation — "encounter," as the document says (5.4 and 5.5) — between Gospel and culture. The Gospel needs to find roots in the local culture, and

often this can be done only by a prophetic critique of that culture (6.8). Nevertheless, the deeply religious culture of Asia also needs to purify the way the Gospel is presented, and can even open up aspects hitherto unnoticed or neglected in the Gospel itself (5.13). Ultimately, the Asian theologians note, inculturation is "a meeting of the Spirit with the Spirit" (8.5), because God's spirit is present and active among Asian peoples beyond the boundaries of Christian faith. One listens with an Asian spirit to God's spirit, and listens as well with God's spirit to the Asian spirit; such is the dynamic of inculturation.

II. IMPLICIT REFLECTION ON INCULTURATION

Explicit reflection on inculturation in the FABC documents, as I have said, is in fact relatively sparse. One will look in vain for explicit treatment of inculturation (beyond a casual mention of the term) in the 1982 statement of the plenary assembly which focused on "The Church — A Community of Faith in Asia"¹⁸ in the 1986 statement which reflected on the laity in Asia,¹⁹ in the statement of the fifth plenary assembly entitled "Journeying Together Toward the Third Millennium,"²⁰ and in the 1995 statement on Christian discipleship in Asia today.²¹ In the various bishops' institutes and special meetings as well, explicit treatment of inculturation is rare.

Nevertheless, as I have already mentioned, the documents of the Federation are fueled by the vision of inculturation, and the importance and reality of the process is like a leitmotif or background for practically everything the Federation has published. This section of the paper will explore, therefore, several ways that the process of inculturation is described implicitly.

A. Inculturation as Threefold Dialogue

As Ladislav Nemet points out, the reason for a relative lack of *explicit* references to inculturation in the FABC documents is due to the fact that, for the Federation, the reality of inculturation "is a more complex encounter between Gospel and a local church in the *whole* Asian reality, made up of religions, cultures, poverty and the poor."²² As early as the 1974 document "Evangelization in Modern Day Asia"²³ the Asian bishops spoke about a threefold dialogue as constitutive of authentic evangelization in Asia: dialogue with Asian culture, by which the local church is rendered "truly present within the life of our people," dialogue with the great religions "so that the seed of the Word in them may come to full flower," and dialogue with the poor, "uniting with them in the struggle for a more human world" (Briefier Statement, 20). As was mentioned above, the document named only the first aspect of this dialogue as "inculturation," but it does not take much

thought to realize that *all three* of these dialogues comprise what we would call today the entire inculturation process. This threefold dialogue is repeated time and time again in subsequent documents, but — interestingly, I believe — not always in the same order. There is no prioritizing demanded by the documents, one can conclude, but a fidelity to all three aspects is always necessary if a pastoral direction or theological expression is to be genuinely Asian. If the Christian community truly *dialogues* (with all of that word's implications)²⁴ with culture, with religions and with the poor, it will truly become “a Church of Asia not simply a Church in Asia,” and will no longer be seen as a foreign presence.”²⁵

B. Inculturation Implied by Method

Method, or the way one proceeds to develop a particular line of thought, also implies an attention or lack of attention to issues involved in the inculturation process. What is clearly evident as one reads the various FABC documents is the employment of a method that starts from experience, from lived, actual realities. In every document issued by a plenary assembly (with the exception of the third plenary assembly which begins with a theology of church) and in many documents that result from the various bishops' institutes, the starting point for reflection is Asian reality. Asia, say the documents, is a continent in transition, undergoing modernization, social change and secularization.²⁶ These things threaten traditional values in Asia, and so the church needs to witness to the rich spiritual heritage that are the hallmarks of Asian religiosity in all its variety.²⁷ Asia is described in the 1986 document on the laity from the fourth plenary assembly as “an arena of conflict and division, the world's exploited market place, the continent of suffering humanity,...cradle of culture, birthplace of great religions, a continent awakening to new and gigantic responsibilities,” and that the task of the church is to “confront the dark realities in the heart of Asia” (1.1 and 3.0.1).²⁸ While Asia is filled with dangers and challenges, there are increasing signs of hope as the poor become more and more recognized, democracy and human rights develop, human communities emerge and people become more and more committed to serious dialogue.²⁹ The problems and opportunities of the global economy, with both life-giving and death-dealing forces, are the context in which the church lives and theology is done in Asia today.³⁰ What this method implies, it seems, is something that is even beyond the scope of the often-repeated three-fold dialogue. A truly Asian church and Christian expression is one that grapples with, reflects on, critically embraces and perhaps even takes prophetic stances against the modernizing and globalizing trends that are having such a strong impact on Asia, and in which Asia is involved in the whole complex global economy. This reflection is not exclusively Asian, of course, but it is a reflection that needs to take place within the Asian context. It is a genuine and urgent way that Gospel

and Asian realities intersect, and a way that both expands the understanding of the Gospel and sheds Christian light on global movements that have rooted themselves in Asia.³¹

C. Inculturation as a Result of Praxis

More than one time the documents reflect the importance of *praxis* in the development of a truly Asian Christianity. In the final document issued by the Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church,³² for example, the combination of the lived life of the basic ecclesial communities (46), the situation of lack of priests, and the realization of the centrality of Eucharist in the Christian community prompts the document to suggest that "serious consideration be given to the possibility of acknowledged leaders emerging from basic communities...being made eligible for ordination to the presbyterate" (105). Since the document foresees that these leaders would ordinarily exercise a secular profession and would exercise priesthood on a part-time basis, one can only imagine what new forms of ministry, rooted in Asian everyday realities and developed out of grassroots wisdom, could emerge from continued reflection on this decision (*praxis*). This may be a form and theology of priesthood in harmony with present structures in the church, but perhaps distinctly different from it, one that "fits the culture, attitudes and values" (46) of the local situation.

At the seventh Bishops' Institute for Social Action (BISA VII) a particular theological method involving *praxis* was employed: what the institute called "The Pastoral Cycle."³³ In previous BISAs, the document explains, the participants had been *exposed* to particular Asian realities; in this institute, however, they were *immersed* in the reality. Rather than just visiting areas, or driving through in air-conditioned Land Rovers, the participants spent time in hand-on experience, living with families, spending time with people. "Exposure is like a doctor's visit for diagnosis; immersion is like the visit of a genuine friend entering into a dialogue-of-life" (8). A second stage of the Cycle is *social analysis*, by which the social, economic, political, cultural and religious systems of society are reflected on in their complex interrelationship, particularly in terms of the pitfalls and possibilities of religion. The Cycle then moves on to a particularly Asian perspective: *contemplation*. Prayer is involved in every stage, the document insists (13), but it is particularly here that peaceful, contemplative prayer is employed so that "the mystery of God's preferential presence and activity among the poor" (11) is recognized as a true theological and pastoral source. In the light of all this, then, the fourth stage of *pastoral planning* is embarked upon, so that the insights gotten from experience, analysis and prayerful theological reflection can be translated into authentic and effective action. And then the Cycle begins over again.

In a theological consultation that was held in Thailand in 1991,³⁴ the participants say clearly that “since doing the truth comes before the formulation of doctrine, the churches in Asia should not await a satisfactory theological answer before going further in the *praxis* of dialogue and proclamation. It is in the systematic reflection on sustained *praxis* that we shall discover what God is saying to the churches” (53). Earlier in the document reference was made to the fact that the commitment to the threefold dialogue mentioned above is a commitment that involves genuine conversion. The church in Asia needs to “pass over” (16) to the poor, the Asian cultures and to other religions. Particularly in terms of passing over to the poor we can see what this would mean for inculturation. While numerically marginal in Asia, the church has significant institutional presence; the question now is whether such institutions like schools, hospitals, clinics and orphanages are more aligned with the rich and powerful than with the poor, and the question is further whether such institutions and the privileges they include should not be given up. In this way the church might experience freedom to be in genuine solidarity with the poor, letting the poor’s agenda be its agenda, and the poor’s values be its values. Such passing over and real dialogue might hold out the possibility for a real recreation, allowing the church to grow “anew from local turf” (17). Both in this document and in the final statement of the 1995 plenary assembly³⁵ reference is made to the paschal dimension of Christian *praxis* in Asia. The church is called to die to itself, says the former; it is from a position of weakness, says the latter — being a minority group, a “little flock in Asia” — that new life and therefore genuine Asian-ness will emerge (14.3). If the church would slough off its wealth and its pretense, it could be more like the church in the centuries before Constantine, and could retrieve some of the freedom to be truly in touch with the men and women of its times that the early church enjoyed.

D. Inculturation as an Imperative of Grace

In this survey of the FABC documents from 1970 to 1982. Carolus B. Putranta named four “basic theological assumptions” which undergird the documents’ reflections: (1) the universality of the grace of Christ, (2) the inseparability of Jesus and the Cosmic Christ, (3) the conviction that the final stage of history has been inaugurated in Christ, and (4) the relativity of the church to Christ.³⁶ Of these four theological assumptions, the one that implies an attitude to inculturation is that of the universality of grace. Time and time again the documents make the point that God’s presence has always permeated Asian realities. God has drawn Asian peoples to Godself through Asian religions, in which are hidden genuine seeds of the Word;³⁷ forms of prayer in these religions can enhance and greatly enrich the already venerable tradition of prayer life in the Christian church;³⁸ all Asians are on a common pilgrimage “in relentless quest for the Abso-

lute,” and are all “attuned to the work of the Spirit in the resounding symphony of Asian communion.”³⁹ God’s saving grace is at work in all religions; it is not limited to Christians, but is offered to every person. God’s grace, says BIRA II, “may lead some to accept baptism and enter the church, but it cannot be presumed that this must always be the case.” God’s ways are mysterious and unfathomable, and no one can determine the direction of divine grace.⁴⁰ Each people, and each culture, says the International Mission Congress, is called by the Spirit “to its own fresh and creative response to the Gospel.” In every local church, “each people’s culture, meanings and values, each people’s traditions are taken up, not diminished or destroyed, but celebrated and renewed, purified if need be, and fulfilled.”⁴¹ At the second bishops’ institute for the lay apostolate in 1986 the participants wrote that the more they are in touch with the religious and cultural issues of the Asian people, the more faithful they are to Jesus’s vision. The church is a community that searches for God’s Reign in the “joy and hope, griefs and anguish” (GS 1) of the world.⁴² Asia is the context “of God’s creative, incarnational and redemptive action,” in which Asia’s salvation is being enacted, “in ever new, ever mysterious ways.”⁴³

The “basic theological orientation”⁴⁴ of the FABC documents is clearly “creation centered.” The religions, the cultures, the social movements of Asia today are transparent to God’s activity and grace; the “natural” in Asia is more than natural, it is “holy ground.” This is why the threefold dialogue with culture, religion and Asia’s poor is possible; this is why it is not simply a “one-way” encounter of fulfillment and purification, but a “two-way” encounter of mutual critique and enrichment. And this is why, ultimately, that inculturation is not a mere option, or one of a list of agenda for the Asian church. Inculturation is demanded by the nature of the Gospel itself, for it is the Gospel of a God who calls men and women to salvation through a dialogue with their humanity.⁴⁵ The stuff of ordinary life, in other words, the stuff of ordinary, everyday Asian experience, cannot be regarded as something that the Gospel *replaces*, or something to be used as a mere *vehicle* for more relevant evangelization. Rather it can be seen as a true theological source, a *locus theologicus*, to be taken on an equal basis with the venerable *loci* of Scripture and Tradition when Christians attempt to express and embody their faith. Scripture, Tradition, culture, religiosity, social location and the movements of social change are all equal partners in a mutually critical conversation.

E. Inculturation and Authenticity

One final implied treatment of inculturation in the FABC documents is the employment — unconsciously for certain — of what I have called elsewhere a “transcendental model” of doing contextual theology.⁴⁶ In this way of doing theology what matters is not so much the *content* of what

is written or spoken but the *authenticity of faith and cultural connectedness* with which theology is done. As a result, a particular theological expression may not *look* particularly Asian, in that it might use concepts and symbols that are not exclusively Asian, but such expression *may* be authentically Asian because it is the result of an Asian person or community which has striven to express Christian faith as an authentic cultural subject. This approach, I believe, appears in various places in the documents, but as an illustration I will focus on two examples: from the document issued by the third plenary assembly, and from the document produced by the Colloquium on Asian Ministries.

The topic of reflection at the third plenary assembly of the FABC was "The Church — A Community of Faith in Asia."⁴⁷ In section two of the final document, the bishops outline an ecclesiology that they understand to be adequate and challenging to Asian reality. What emerges is a sketch of the nature of the church that is extremely close to the vision of the church expressed in the documents of Vatican II. Thus the church is at its deepest level a communion rooted in the Trinity (7.1), the purpose of which is discipleship in the Gospel (7.3), which issues forth in mission (7.9). The church exercises its communitarian nature in participation and co-responsibility (7.6), in unity with its leadership (7.7) and in true catholicity (7.8).

On the one hand, one might think that this is just a carbon copy of Roman ideas of church; on the other, it could be a considered judgement by Asian people of faith how best to describe the community of Christ. Its language may be quite Western, but if the vision it proposes is truly carried out in the church's constant *praxis*, the church will be seen as eminently Asian as it wrestles with the realities that surround it and seeks to be faithful to the vision of the Gospel.

Similarly, in the 1977 Colloquium on ministries, the approach to ministry — and ordained ministry in particular — is remarkably similar to the approach laid out by contemporary Western scholars. All ministry is rooted in the priesthood of Christ, and all Christians are participants in that priesthood by virtue of their baptism. The task of the ordained minister — for example, the presbyter or priest — is to be "at the service of the community, building it up into a Christian fellowship and providing it with spiritual guidance as he participates in the bishop's commitment to his flock."⁴⁸ Again, this could be understood as a mere Western approach to ministry, since there is no obvious evidence of Asian images or languages. But, as the result of the reflection of Asian theologians in touch with the needs of Asia on the one hand and the Tradition of the church on the other, it is a profoundly *Asian* expression of ordained, presbyteral ministry.

* * *

While there are relatively few *explicit* reflections in the FABC documents on inculturation, there are several recurring notions that imply an understanding of inculturation that is quite profound. The rich notion of the three-fold dialogue with culture, religion and the poor, the methodological commitment to starting with Asian reality and reflecting on concrete *praxis*, the theological conviction of the universality of divine grace and the subsequent goodness and holiness of the human, and the authenticity of theological reflection as an activity of authentic Christian and cultural subjects, all point to a notion of inculturation that emerges out of a mutually critical encounter between Gospel and Asian life.

III. SOME THEMES OF INCULTURATION

Besides locating explicit treatments of inculturation and the various implicit understandings which emerge from a study of the texts, one can explore the notion of inculturation operative in the FABC documents by focusing on certain recurring themes in them. A number of themes might be mentioned — the need to understand and harness the power of the media, the importance of the laity as primary agents of inculturation, the imperative of developing Asian programs of formation for religious and seminarians; concern for youth, women, the family, ecology, and “displaced persons” (refugees and migrant workers). Since space is limited, however, I will focus here on three other themes that seem to emerge in the documents as particularly important: the themes of prayer and spirituality, the notion of harmony, and the local church.

A. Prayer and Spirituality

A theme that constantly recurs in the documents is the need for prayer and spirituality. If the church is to contact the Asian spirit, the Federation said in 1974, it needs to be “devoted to prayer, and to contemplation.”⁴⁹ Christianity has not always been perceived as contemplative, and so part of evangelization is to emphasize the rich tradition of contemplation and spirituality within the Christian tradition.⁵⁰ Perhaps more importantly, however, is that for Asian Christians truly to get in touch with their deepest selves, they must give themselves over to a dialogue with the rich spiritualities of Asia and experiment with the many authentically Asian ways of prayer. The second plenary assembly emphasized that Christian prayer had much to contribute to Asian sensibilities, but it also insisted that Asian prayer has much to offer to Christian spirituality as well: “a richly-developed prayer of the whole person in unity of body-psyche-spirit; contemplation of deep interiority and immanence; venerable sacred books and writings; traditions of asceticism and renunciation; techniques of contemplation found in the ancient eastern religions; simplified prayer-forms and other popular expressions of faith and

piety easily available even to simpler folk, whose hearts and minds so readily turn to God in their daily lives.”⁵¹ BIRA IV/7 recommended that a network of centers of spirituality be developed where, “besides study and research, seekers of God and truth of all religious affiliations could meet and share their spiritual experiences.”⁵² Inculturation will not happen overnight, says BIRA IV/1, and it will not be accelerated by artificial or superficial attempts. In order to ensure an inculturation that is both authentically Asian and authentically and faithfully Christian, Asian Christians must cultivate a love for meditation and prayer, and use the discipline of non-violence.⁵³ In the practice of spirituality will emerge a truly inculturated liturgy, ecclesial structure and expressions of theology.

BIRA IV/12⁵⁴ spoke about Christian spirituality as threefold. “At heart” (36), it is a spirituality of dialogue, a life in touch with the Spirit, who is present and active in all cultures and religions. Christian spirituality, in other words, is nourished not only by its own traditions, but by the traditions that are at the center of Asian religious sensitivity. In order to profit most fully from such dialogue, Christians need openness, and that openness is the result of a spirituality of *kenosis* or self-emptying. An Asian Christian spirituality is one in which Christians are continually divesting themselves of power, and continually purifying themselves of self-centeredness, and growing more open to the other. “*Kenosis* implies death and resurrection, that dying to self which brings fullness of life (Phil 2:6-11). Hence, it is communitarian; it is centered on the eucharist, where together we experience death and resurrection in Christ” (39). Finally, a genuine Asian Christian spirituality is transformative. It is not simply seeking to cultivate the inner life, but needs to bear fruit in working for justice, peace and ecological integrity in Asian society.

What is fascinating to see in this description of spirituality is how it emerges out of a genuine encounter of traditions. On the one hand, Christians need to learn and be transformed by Asian tradition; on the other, this is no compromise of Christian ideals and principles — rather, Christianity finds new life, shape and voice as it strives to inculturate itself in Asian context.

B. Harmony

In June and July, 1988, participants gathered at Sukabumi, Indonesia, to reflect on the theme of harmony.⁵⁵ Harmony, it had been recognized at BIRA IV/1, “seems to constitute in a certain sense the intellectual and affective, religious and artistic, personal and societal soul of both persons and institutions in Asia.”⁵⁶ It may very well be the basic “cultural text” out of which Asian theology in all its diversity could be constructed.⁵⁷ In reflecting on the theme, the participants said that, despite many forces of

fragmentation that exist undeniably in Asia, there are nevertheless many signs of harmony emerging in Asian life. Asians are thirsting for peace; a greater sense of human dignity, equality and interrelatedness is emerging; true patriotism is developing; and the media are uniting millions (BIRA IV/11, 4). Above all, Asians are gradually becoming convinced that dialogue and mutual cooperation are effective ways of achieving a harmony in all aspects of human life (BIRA IV/11, 5). Traditional Asian cultures provide resources as well whereby these emerging signs of harmony can be cultivated: "Sensitivity in human relationships, close ties of love and cooperation in families are highly valued in our cultures. Furthermore, traditionally, the various groups in Asian societies were held together harmoniously through forces of syncretism, spirit of tolerance, mysticism and through messianic movements" (BIRA IV/11, 6). Although these need to be appropriated critically, such traditional values are allies and not enemies.

Christianity can be interpreted also in terms of a religion that fosters harmony between humanity and God, among the peoples of the earth, and with the cosmos itself. The doctrines of Creation, Covenant and the People of God, but particularly those of the Reign of God and the Trinity, are all ways of expressing the one Mystery at the heart of Christian faith: God is involved in human history and calls creation to harmony-in-community (BIRA IV/10, 6-9; IV/11, 7-11).

What appears in these few pages is hardly a full theology of harmony, and much less a complete Asian theology inspired by the theme, but the notion of harmony holds out immense promise as a basic view out of which an Asian theology and Christian practice can be developed. In my correspondence with the FABC office in Hong Kong in the course of preparing this article, I was informed that the Theological Advisory Commission is now at work preparing a more expansive reflection on the theme.

C. The Local Church

The first plenary assembly was emphatic when it said that "the primary focus of our task of evangelization, then, at this time in our history, is the building up of a truly local church (9)."⁵⁸ The development of a local church is a theme that constantly recurs in the documents and is a project that is seen as a *sine qua non* in the development of an Asian Christianity. The local church, if it is truly so, is the "realization and the enfleshment of the Body of Christ in a given people, a given place and time" (10). If the church is truly to be a "sign of salvation,"⁵⁹ it needs to be local, for it will only communicate God's saving love when it ceases to be structured, governed and symbolized in a foreign way, and speaks to people in language and ways of being that a particular people understands.

But this radical particularity does not mean isolation from other communities of faith; on the contrary, the more one is immersed in the reality of culture, time and place, the more one needs to be in communion with other local churches — both for the good of one's own community and for the good of the others (11).⁶⁰ Being church means being in dialogue, and such dialogue is not only with a local culture; it is a dialogue as well with local churches throughout the world. "This is the mystery of the 'local Church'; in Asia this is the mystery of the Asian Churches" (24).

Each local church is determined by the context in which it finds itself, and so needs to discover time and time again "what ministries and ministerial structures she requires in order to fulfil her mission"; and in order that this creative response to context can be effected, local churches should be recognized as basically autonomous (25). Local churches are not "parts" of a whole, but contain within themselves a certain integrity that is fully realized in communion with other local churches.⁶¹ A local church, while not *the* entire church, is *an* entire church. Developing into a local church, therefore, is at the same time the development of an Asian Christianity and an Asian theology. It is in many ways the key to the whole process of inculturation.

CONCLUSION

Biblical theology has pointed out for some time that in the Bible, as in human life in general, there exist two kinds of time. One, chronological time, or *chronos*, is simply time in terms of one moment following the next; the other, qualitative time, or *kairos*, is time in terms of meaning and opportunity. In the history of the church, and indeed in the history of Asia, twenty-five years of efforts at inculturation by the FABC is not significant in terms of *chronos*; in terms of *kairos*, however, it is a time filled with blessings, challenges, and, I believe, with significant progress. In Asia, in Latin America, in Europe, in Africa, in North America, the church is just beginning to discover its mission to embody, to incarnate and to discover the Gospel in particular contexts. As we move forward together, we can only be thankful to the FABC for its courageous, creative work.

FOOTNOTES:

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1. Felix Wilfred, "The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC): Orientations, Challenges and Impact," FABC Papers, No. 69 (January, 1995), 2.
2. Asian Bishop's Meeting, November 29, 1970. Resolution 1. Published in G. B. Rosales and C. G. Arévalo, eds., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of*

- Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970-1991* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books; Quezon City, Philippines, 1992), p. 8. Hereafter, the book will be abbreviated as FAPA; a general reference to the page numbers where a particular document appears will be given, and then the paragraph numbers will be given in the text, or, when appropriate, following the citation in the note.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
 4. Carolus B. Putranta, "A Brief Survey of the FABC Documents, 1970-1982," FAPA, pp. 263-269.
 5. L. Nemet, "Inculturation in the FABC Documents," *East Asian Pastoral Review*, 31, 1 and 2 (1994), 94.
 6. On the distinction between "etic" and "emic" perspectives, see C. H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 403. On the limits and advantages of such an outsider perspective, see S. B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), pp. 13-16.
 7. Lourdasamy's observation is referred to in C. G. Arévalo's "General Introduction" to J. Gnanapiragasam and F. Wilfred, eds., *Being Church in Asia: Theological Advisory Commission Documents (1986-92)*, p. 5. The observation also appears in the statement of the third plenary assembly in 1982. Cf. FAPA, p. 54, 3.4.
 8. Arévalo, "General Introduction": p. 5.
 9. FAPA, p. 9.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
 11. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
 12. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-48.
 13. *Ibid.*, pp. 138-141.
 14. *Ibid.*, pp. 165-173.
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
 16. *Ibid.*, pp. 335-347.
 17. *Being the Church in Asia*, pp. 50-76.
 18. FAPA, pp. 49-65.
 19. *Ibid.*, pp. 198.
 20. *Ibid.*, pp. 273-289.
 21. "Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life," Final Statement of the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly, January 10-19, 1995. Published by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 16 Caine Road, Hong Kong.
 22. Nemet: 94.
 23. FAPA, pp. 11-25.
 24. See: Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, esp. Paragraphs 42-54. In W. R. Burrows, ed., *Redemption and Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), pp. 104-107.
 25. BIRA IV/12, paragraph 50, in FAPA, p. 333.
 26. "Evangelization in Modern Day Asia," *Ibid.* p. 13.
 27. "Prayer — The Life of the Church in Asia," *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.
 28. *Ibid.*, pp. 178-179.
 29. "Journeying Together Toward the Third Millennium," *Ibid.*, pp. 275-279.
 30. "Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life," pp. 2-3
 31. On the connection between the FABC reflections and U.S. realities, see John S. Cummins, "Asia, Continent at a Crossroads," *America*, 173, 11 (October 14, 1995), pp. 4-6.
 32. FAPA, pp. 67-92.

