

PLURALISM OF RELIGIONS AND THE PROCLAMATION OF JESUS CHRIST IN THE CONTEXT OF ASIA

Mission in Asia is said to be in crisis. Some wonder why there are so few Christians in Asia, in spite of the presence of Christianity there since apostolic times. Others see the new millennium as a moment of promise when Asia will become Christian. Some feel that Christianity has failed in Asia because it has not made any serious efforts to dialogue with the developed cultures and religions of Asia. Others think that any efforts to promote interreligious dialogue undercuts the drive for proclaiming Jesus Christ as the only Saviour and spreading the Church. What seems clear from this discussion is that mission is encountering a special challenge in Asia, namely the active presence of developed religious traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. An additional factor today is that religious groups in Asia, affirming their identities, are in conflict, more or less violent. The Church is identified as a foreign presence in many countries and it is looked at with suspicion. It is in this Asian context that I would like to situate my reflections. I am not therefore talking about religious pluralism as an objective problem in the abstract. I am reflecting on the proclamation of Jesus Christ in the context of Asian religions. The hearers will certainly influence what and how we proclaim.

A POSITIVE VIEW OF OTHER RELIGIONS

My reflection starts with an effort to understand the phenomenon of religious pluralism. Many Asian theologians accept that God's salvific encounter with the members of other religions takes place in and through those religions, not in spite of them. The other religions therefore have a role in the salvific plan of God for humanity. Let me spell out the implications of this affirmation.

The Second Vatican Council asserted that "the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery."¹ God's "providence, evident goodness, and saving designs extend to all" people. There are "true and holy" elements in other religions²—the "seeds of the Word which lie hidden among them."³ The religions themselves are

¹*Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

²*Nostra Aetate*, 1-2.

³*Ad Gentes*, 11.

considered human efforts searching for God, "having their arms raised up towards heaven," as *Evangelii nuntiandi*⁴ later specifies it.

The Asian Bishops, however, at their very first general assembly in Taipei, in 1974, starting from their experience of Asian religions, accepted "them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation" and asked: "How can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them?"⁵ Speaking of prayer in their second general assembly, they assert that dialogue with the believers of other religions "will reveal to us what the Holy Spirit has taught others to express in a marvelous variety of ways. These are different perhaps from our own, but through them we too may hear His voice, calling us to lift our hearts to the Father."⁶ Here we see the Asian Bishops acknowledging a positive role in God's design of salvation for the religions themselves, not merely finding in them some true and holy elements.

Such a positive appreciation of other religions was given a symbolic boost by John Paul II when he invited the leaders of other religions to come together at Assisi in October 1986 to pray for peace in the world. Commentators pointed out that the invitation took for granted that the believers of other religions can be in contact with God in prayer and that their prayer is effective. Explaining his gesture, John Paul II affirmed that "every authentic prayer is from the Holy Spirit," thus acknowledging that their prayer is inspired by the Spirit. He further specified and formalized this affirmation in his encyclical letter *The Mission of the Redeemer*: "The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions.⁷ . . . The Church's relationship with other religions is dictated by a twofold respect: 'Respect for man in his quest for answers to the deepest questions of his life, and respect for the action of the Spirit in man.'⁸ The other religions, therefore, are not merely human efforts, but embody an ongoing divine-human encounter.

At this moment I would like to stress that every divine-human encounter is salvific and that, while there may be limits to the free human response, the divine offer of love and fellowship is always boundless. This supposes that all religions mediate or facilitate salvific divine-human encounter. We do not know how this is a participation in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ, as we Christians claim. In any case this seems a transcendental affirmation that does not involve any necessary historical manifestation. Every religion makes such transcendental affirmations. We can leave it at that, for the moment, and concentrate on what happens in life and history.

⁴No. 53.

⁵Gaudencio Rosales and C.G. Arevalo (eds), *For All the Peoples of Asia* (Manila: Claretian, 1997) 14.

⁶*Ibid.*, 35.

⁷No. 28.

⁸No. 29.

RELIGIONS IN THE SALVIFIC PLAN OF GOD

The next question is: What role do the religions have in the salvific plan of God for the world? In its recent observations regarding Jacques Dupuis's book *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*,⁹ the Congregation for Doctrine made a distinction between a 'theology of religions' and a 'theology of religious pluralism.' I think that with this question about the role of religions in God's plan, we are moving from the first to the second.

Our starting point is that salvation is now understood, not merely in terms of individuals being saved, but in cosmic terms made familiar to us by Paul. God's plan for the world is to reconcile all things (Col 1:20), to gather up all things (Eph 1:10), so that God may be all in all. (1 Cor 15:28) This plan of God includes the whole of history and the whole of humanity. Since we believe that there is only one God, we believe that there is only one plan through which God desires every one to be saved. (1 Tim 2:4-5) This means that we do not look at the many religions as different and unrelated ways of salvation. How then do we see their interrelationship? I think that there are two general paradigms in use today.

The official position sees the other religions related to Christianity in a linear mode as preparations to fulfillment. The relationship between the old and the new covenant is projected on to the other religions. They become pre-Judaic. Even when one recognizes the presence and action of the Spirit in them, it is characterized as the Spirit of Christ. John Paul II expresses this very clearly in his encyclical *The Mission of the Redeemer*.

Whatever the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures and religions serves as a preparation for the Gospel (LG 16). . . . The universal activity of the Spirit is not to be separated from the particular activity within the Body of Christ, which is the Church. Indeed, it is always the Spirit who is at work, both when he gives life to the Church and impels her to proclaim Christ, and when he implants and develops his gifts in all individuals and peoples, guiding the Church to discover these gifts, to foster them and receive them through dialogue. Every form of the Spirit's presence is to be welcomed with respect and gratitude, but the discernment of this presence is the responsibility of the Church, to which Christ gave his Spirit in order to guide her into all the truth (cf. Jn 16:13).¹⁰

Theologians in Asia, however feel that this seems an *a priori* statement that does not take into account their experience of other religions. The vast majority of the people, not merely in Asia, but also in the rest of the world, in the past and in the present, are dying without being fulfilled by the Church in the manner outlined above. Their experience must have some positive significance in the

⁹(Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1997).

¹⁰No.29.

plan of God. We have no right to claim that these experiences are illegitimate. Secondly, when we are in dialogue with them, the other religions do seem very different and it is very difficult to see them simply being fulfilled in the Church. In the first part of the 20th century there were efforts to see Christianity as the fulfillment of Hinduism. There were also many comparative studies which normally concluded to the superiority of Christianity. Few in India today talk like that any more. The experience of Christians like Swami Abhishiktananda is illustrative.¹¹ Early in his life in India he had tried to understand the Trinity as the fulfillment of the Hindu experience of the *advaita* (nonduality).¹² But later, when he actually had an experience of the Absolute in the manner of the Hindu Upanishads, his efforts to reconcile his Hindu and Christian experiences were unsuccessful, though this caused him much tension and pain for many years till a short period before his death.¹³ Thirdly, once we accept the freedom of the Spirit active in other religions and the freedom of the humans who respond to Her individually and socially, I do not know what right we have to judge and grade them from the point of view of our own faith-experience. This supposes a view of the Trinity that is Christ-centered. This seems questionable. Religions do not save. It is always God who saves. We need not even speak of religions as mediating salvation. I think that the role of religions is one of facilitation. They facilitate a relationship between God and the humans. We need not sacralize them in some objective way.

A NEW PARADIGM

For these reasons, there is a search for a new paradigm. God's salvific will is universal. God reaches out to people in various ways throughout their history. (Jn 1:9; cf. Heb 1:1) This divine-human dialogue leads to the emergence of various religions. But God's will is the eventual gathering up of all things. History is oriented towards this final reconciliation. We may call this the kingdom of God. At the opportune time (*kairos*), the Word of God becomes human in Jesus. God's self-manifestation in Jesus is not meant to make all other manifestations illegitimate. Rather it is the *sacrament*—symbol and servant—of the Kingdom. God's intervention in Jesus is continued by the disciples of Jesus, namely the Church. The mission of the Church is the building up of the Kingdom. It also welcomes those who are called by God to become disciples of Jesus so that they could be symbols and servants of the Kingdom. It is part of the mission of the Church to dialogue with the believers of other religions in

¹¹For similar experiences see Dennis Gira and Jacques Scheuer, eds., *Vivre de plusieurs religions? Promesse ou illusion?* (Paris: L'Atelier, 2000).

¹²Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaita Experience*, rev. ed. (Delhi: ISPCK, 1884).

¹³Abhishiktananda, *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998).

order to promote universal reconciliation. We do not know what form this future Kingdom will take. But we know that the Church is not this Kingdom at this moment. It realizes it partially as its symbol and servant, walking towards it in pilgrimage together with others. The pluralism of religions, however real in history, is not seen as an absolute. The ultimate reconciliation that we hope for is not really the reconciliation of the religions, but of the believers, and we do not know what form this will take. The basic unity of the divine plan is assured by the action of God, Father, Word and Spirit. Within this plan, the Word and the Spirit play various roles through their manifestations. The Word Incarnate is certainly aware of a special role. But it is at the service of the universal mission of God. In the words of a group that had met together in India to explore a vision of mission in the new millennium:

Creation itself is a self-communication of God, who is reaching out to all peoples through the Word and the Spirit in varied ways, at various times, and through the different religions. This ongoing divine-human encounter is salvific. However, God's plan is not merely to save individual souls, but to gather together all things in heaven and on earth. God is working out this plan in history through various sages and prophets. Jesus, the Word incarnate, has a specific role in this history of salvation. But Jesus' mission is at the service of God's mission. It does not replace it. Taking a kenotic form, it collaborates with other divine self-manifestations in other religions as God's mission is moving towards its eschatological fulfillment. As disciples of Jesus we must witness to the Abba and his Kingdom of freedom and fellowship, love and justice. The 'preparation-fulfillment' framework that links Judaism and Christianity cannot be projected on to other religions.¹⁴

PROCLAMATION AS A THREEFOLD DIALOGUE

It is now time to look at the other pole of the dialectic, namely the proclamation of Jesus Christ. Let me point out first of all that I am talking about the proclamation of Jesus Christ and not simply about the mission of the Church. The mission of the Church is still being understood as *plantatio ecclesiae*—the implantation of the Church in a particular place. In the history of India, the impact of Jesus has been wider and more real than the impact of the Church. Some years after the well-known book of Raymond Panikkar *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*,¹⁵ another Indian theologian, M. M. Thomas, wrote a book entitled *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*.¹⁶ In that book we see how many Indians in the 19th and 20th centuries were inspired by Jesus Christ both in their personal life and in their social action. They made a distinction between Jesus and the Church, though we may not like it. It is true

¹⁴Thomas Malipurathu and L. Stanislaus, eds., *A Vision of Mission in the New Millennium* (Mumbai: St. Paul's, 2001) 203.

¹⁵(London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964).

¹⁶London: SCM Press, 1969.

that we cannot think of the Church without Jesus Christ. But Jesus Christ does seem able to inspire people without the mediation of the Church. There were Indians like Brahmabandab Upadaya, Manilal Parekh and Panditha Ramabhai who became Christians, but later slowly distanced themselves from the Church.¹⁷ Others like Keshub Chandra Sen and Mahatma Gandhi professed to follow Jesus, though they did not want to join any Church.¹⁸ We see that the Kingdom is being built up independently of the Church. The mission of God and the mission of Jesus are not limited to the mission of the Church.

The mission of the Church itself has been understood in a new way in Asia. In their first plenary assembly the Asian Bishops spoke of mission in Asia as a threefold dialogue with the poor, the rich cultures and the great religions of Asia. They asserted that in Asia the proclamation of the Gospel took this form. Therefore they saw them as three dimensions of mission or proclamation.¹⁹ Further experience and reflection have led the Asian theologians to see the threefold dialogue as interrelated, so that we cannot do any one of them without also doing the others. They also saw them as integrated in a single thrust. Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom as a community of freedom, fellowship and justice against the forces of Satan and Mammon. Promotion of this new community of the Kingdom is the goal of mission. But it cannot be done without transforming culture and reforming and collaborating with the religions. We are not therefore talking of three different dialogues. The threefold dialogue constitutes a single project of mission.²⁰

There is a tendency however in some circles to distinguish proclamation from dialogue and even to oppose them. The threefold dialogue is then seen as a preparation for proclamation, which is then narrowed down to increasing membership in the Church. The Asian Bishops at the special synod for Asia pointed out that even proclaiming Jesus Christ can be done in Asia only in a dialogical way. We are ready to gladly welcome disciples of Jesus in the Church community, if the Spirit inspires them, but we need not make it the only, nor even the principal objective of mission.

The relation of the Church to other religions, therefore, is primarily one of dialogue. In mission we are not primarily opposed to other religions. Our real enemies are Satan as the structural power of evil and Mammon as selfish attachment to wealth and pleasure. These are manifested in various ways in our world. While all religions, including the Church, do indulge in compromises, all are, at least in principle, opposed to Satan and Mammon. In struggling against them we

¹⁷Robin H. S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1991).

¹⁸S. J. Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1974).

¹⁹Gaudencio Rosales and C. G. Arevalo, eds., *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 1:16.

²⁰Cf. M. Amaladoss, "Integral Evangelization. Presynodal Reflections," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 61 (1997): 223-32.

find the other religions not as enemies but as collaborators. Such collaboration is interesting, enriching and essential, not because they all say the same thing or at least agree on some things, not even because they are complementary to each other, but because, coming from different directions with different orientations, they challenge not only the world but also each other dialectically, leading to a convergent movement towards the Kingdom.

I could say further that today in Asia, the Church seems to be particularly aware of a vocation, not only to dialogue with other religions, but also to facilitate a dialogue between them.

PROCLAIMING JESUS CHRIST

In this new paradigm, proclaiming Jesus Christ becomes a very complex activity. We may be among people who have not heard about Jesus Christ, but among whom the Word and the Spirit have been present and active in various ways through their history. Our mission therefore starts as contemplation, trying to become familiar with the mystery of the Word that we encounter among these people. It is only in that context that we can credibly and authentically proclaim to them the Incarnate Word in a relevant manner. The people to whom we are proclaiming the Incarnate Word have encountered it in other forms and they will have to become aware of the multiple manifestations of the Word and integrate them in a creative and relevant way. This can be done only in a dialogical manner. We are not in a perspective of partial-full nor even of complementarity. We are in a context of different free relationships between God and the humans. We are inviting them to a new relationship with a new self-manifestation of God, which we consider special.

Once we see that the encounter here is not one between light and darkness, truth and falsehood, then we are obliged to spell out what is specific about our particular experience of God in and through the Incarnate Word. What we have to show is not so much what we have in common with other religions, but rather what is different. Perhaps it is easy to show how much we agree. But the more we agree, the less there is any special need for our message. So we have to focus on our own specificity and difference. In what way is Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, special to us and to them. To proclaim Jesus Christ in Asia is therefore to show that he is someone special and different inviting them to relate to him and find in him their inspiration and empowerment. We should also be clear that this specialty does not consist primarily in the dogmatic statements that we can make about him. We do not preach a creed. We do not proclaim and prove that Jesus is the Son of God. We announce the good news that the Kingdom of God is here. We point to a person who commands a following to build up that Kingdom. Once the people commit themselves to him, they will discover the divine depths of his personality in their own faith-experience. They may even spell it out in their own way. This process cannot be short-circuited. Let me now try to spell out some ways in which Jesus could be proclaimed in Asia today.

THE CROSS OF CHRIST

Jesus Christ has been acclaimed as a great moral leader by many Asians. The Dalai Lama, Bhikku Buddhadasa of Thailand and Thich Nhat Hanh of Vietnam have all written books about Jesus to show that he was a perfect Bodhisattva.²¹ Indian leaders like Keshub Chandra Sen, Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi and Radhakrishnan have acclaimed him not merely as a great moral leader, but as someone who had a special, intimate experience of God, experiencing the divinity in himself.²² What most Asians find special about Christ, but difficult to accept, is the cross of Christ. The Church too would look upon it as the scandal that keeps people away from him. The reason for this may be the manner in which the mystery of the cross is presented. Even now it is traditional to look upon the passion and the cross of Christ as a punishment for the sins of humanity. The suffering and death of Christ are presented in sacrificial terms drawn from the Old Testament. This image of Jesus does not seem to be attractive to the Asians. But on the other hand, people do seem to be drawn to Jesus suffering in solidarity with suffering humanity as a manifestation of his love and fellowship. Gandhi saw the sufferings of Christ as the height of his nonviolent love. The suffering Christ is the preferred image of many Hindu painters.²³ What seems to attract them is the vulnerability of a divine figure.

Suffering is a universal human experience. The affirmation that life is suffering is the first of the four truths of Buddhism. In Hinduism, suffering is seen as the fruit of one's actions—*karma*. The aim of *sadhana* or religious effort is to become free of suffering. Suffering is seen as an evil that one has to escape from. It is meaningless. Even with the possibility of being born again death is not a welcome experience. In modern societies death is lived as an ever-present threat. In such a situation, Jesus seems to give a positive meaning to suffering and death as an expression of love and self-gift. Just the idea of 'suffering with' is expressive of solidarity. When this solidarity is with the unjustly oppressed poor, it can become a sign of nonviolent protest. This is a sign that even Buddhists understand. Gandhi, of course, stressed this very much. Jesus on the cross was one of his favorite images.

Physical suffering is often endured by the ascetics and yogis of Asia as a means of self-discipline leading to the acquisition of special powers. In Jesus it is the sign rather of self-emptying, humility and powerlessness. It is in continuity with his washing of the feet of the disciples at the Last Supper. Suffering as a

²¹Cf. Buddhadasa, *Un bouddhiste dit le Christianisme aux bouddhists* (Paris: Desclée, 1990); Dalai Lama, *Le Dalai-Lama parle de Jésus* (Paris: Brepols, 1996); Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (London: Rider, 1996).

²²See the book of S. J. Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ*.

²³Cf. Richard W. Taylor, *Jesus in Indian Paintings* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1975).

sign of *kenosis* or self-emptying also provokes echoes in some Buddhist traditions that speak of egolessness.

The cross of Jesus therefore may be a scandal at first sight. But looked at deeply it gives a positive meaning to suffering which remains an enigma to most people in or outside Asia. Jesus does not seek to escape suffering, but welcomes it, not as a punishment, but as a sign of solidarity in the human struggle against injustice.

The image of Jesus in the multireligious context of Asia is not that of Jesus the king who comes to destroy the other religions and to impose his sacred power. He should not be identified with the victorious armies of the colonial empires. He does not come to dominate others with an exclusive claim to truth. He is rather the suffering servant who comes in humility to love and to serve and to give himself totally to promote the ongoing divine-human encounter.

JESUS IN HISTORY

Jesus as the Incarnate Word in history gives it a new importance. Jesus is God with us. In Jesus, God has chosen to achieve his divine purpose with regard to the world and to the humans in and through history, in a historical way, dependent, not only on time and space, but also on the free interaction of the humans. This means that God is not adopting merely transcendent, transhistorical means to transform history and the humans. God takes seriously the ongoing struggle between good and evil, justice and injustice in the world. God becomes human in Jesus and gets involved in that struggle, taking the side of the poor and the oppressed. He does not use miraculous means to impose God's will on the world. Rather, he launches a new social movement with a group of his disciples, which becomes the Church. His disciples carry on the struggle with Satan and Mammon and their various manifestations in history and seek to build up the Kingdom of God as its symbol and servant, even if they know that the Kingdom will be fully realized only at the end of time.

The role of Jesus in the salvation of the world is often described purely in nonhistorical terms: Jesus saves the humans by uniting himself with humanity in his incarnation or by paying for all their sins in his passion. This sidelines what he did during his life and the social movement he launched. It also ignores the historical impact that his disciples have had in transforming peoples, cultures and even religions. They have spread across the world and have witnessed to Jesus. They have made many blunders and sought improper alliances with political power. They have harmed and destroyed cultures. But they have also influenced history for good in many ways, some times in spite of themselves, by mediating Jesus. I have already referred to instances in India where people have reacted positively to Jesus, though they have remained critical of the Church.²⁴

²⁴Cf. Errol D'Lima and Max Gonsalves, eds., *What Does Jesus Christ Mean? The Meaningfulness of Jesus Christ amid Religious Pluralism in India* (Bangalore: Indian

The incarnation points to the sacramental dimension of the world and of history. We love God in loving the other. We encounter Jesus in the poor and suffering people of the world. The Gospel comes as good news to the oppressed and the marginalized of the world. Without being exclusive, these perspectives are specific to an incarnate God who makes sure to leave behind him a social movement of disciples whom he calls and sends on mission. Such a mission has continued in history through charismatic figures in, and sometimes at the margins of, the Church. I think that a renewed interest in history in the Asian religions is due also to their contact with Christianity. Gandhi is a good example. He traces his *satyagraha* or search for Truth to the Bhagavad Gita. But he would agree that it is the encounter with Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and on the cross that sends him to rediscover his own roots in the Gita. An influence need not always be inspirational: it can also be dialectical and provocative. Bhikku Buddhadasa of Thailand, for instance, sought to show that the *Dhamma* of Buddhism is itself socialistic, reacting both to Western political movements and to Communism.²⁵

AN ASIAN JESUS

Dialogue with Asian religions can also lead us to discover aspects of Jesus that have been obscured by the Western tradition. The postsynodal document *The Church in Asia* attributes to the Asian Bishops a desire to "rediscover the Asian countenance of Jesus."²⁶ They can hardly do this without a dialogue with Asian cultural and religious traditions. The Wisdom tradition of the Bible was influenced by the Orient through Alexandria. It is more sensitive to the presence of the divine in nature and more open to its many manifestations. Wisdom was often personified in the Bible. It was seen as the principle of life and creativity, of freedom and joy, of order and harmony. In the Gospels Jesus is seen as the incarnation of Wisdom leading to the Johannine hymn to the *Logos*. Jesus as Wisdom is not dominating and aggressive. He is humble, manifesting himself to the childlike. He mediates the love of God as *Abba* through his miracles and illustrates it in his parables. He serves and shows the way. He reaches out to the poor and the suffering. He teaches self-giving love.²⁷

The preferred image of Jesus in the West, at least as presented to the East, seems to have been that of Christ the King who seeks to extend his kingdom all over the world, not hesitating to use merchants and armies in the process. This

Theological Association, 1999). See also "La pertinence de la mission chrétienne dans le contexte de la pluralité religieuse," *Spiritus* 41 (2000): 115-240.

²⁵Bhikku Buddhadasa, *Dhammic Socialism* (Bangkok: Thai Interreligious Commission for Development, 1986).

²⁶No. 20.

²⁷See M. Amalados, "The Asian Face of the Good News," *Mission Today* 2 (2000): 166-72.

image is supported by the image of Jesus on the cross, sometimes used to create a sense of guilt, because he suffered all this for me, but also used as a standard to inspire the crusades. A third image is that of a mystic Christ who mediates salvific grace through the sacraments.

In Asia, Jesus would be seen rather as a wandering Sage—a *Sannyasi*—who had no roots because he belongs to everyone everywhere. But he is a new kind of *Sannyasi*, who does not run away from the world, but stands detached in the midst of it. He is witnessing to the forgiving and self-giving love of God, showing people by being the *Way* to liberation and wholeness. He loves others and gives himself to them totally, even unto death. He does not lead an armed struggle, but a movement of people with new values and perspectives that is seen as a threat to established order. He does not need a powerful institution to back him up. He has a simple message—a new commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you!" He invites every one to experience God, neither in an ascetical nor in a mystical way, but in ordinary life in loving the other and in sharing, especially with those most in need. He empowers people and inspires them to act. He chooses followers who will walk along his path as itinerant prophets, with little baggage, staying where they feel welcome, ready to be persecuted for their convictions that upset established order, setting up open communities characterized by their fellowship and sharing (Matt. 10).

Jesus as the Wisdom of God will interest all the Asians, but particularly the East Asians who are inspired by the Confucian tradition. The image of the way has also a Taoist resonance.

THE JESUS WITHIN

The incarnate Word leads us to experience the Word in us and in the world. Western religious approaches are often characterized by a dichotomous attitude that separates God as creator from the world that he has created. Indian religions speak rather about *advaita* or nonduality. God and the world are not-two (separate beings). God is the deepest principle of my being, the source of my self. This deep oneness may be clouded over by ignorance and egoism. But we are called to become aware of it, experience it and let it transform our lives. Christian tradition tends to speak of the God within in terms of the Spirit. We can prescind here from the activity of apportioning different roles to the three persons in the Trinity. What is important is the awareness that God is not apart from us in such a way that we need a bridge maker or *pontifex* to bring us together. God is within us as a source of life and communion.

Sr. Sara Grant, reflecting on the implications of the *advaita* to Indian Christianity, spoke about the challenge of "our manner of thinking of baptism and the gift of the Spirit as though God somehow 'came in from outside,' as it

were, and were not already present 'in' us by the very fact of our being at all."²⁸ She suggests that we adopt as the basis of our theological expression "the experience of 'God' as the immanent yet transcendent self instead of 'God up there' or 'out there' of traditional imagery."²⁹

In the context of this Indian *advaitic* tradition, Jesus is seen, first of all, as a human person who has experienced in himself God as the immanent-transcendent in a special, personal way. As such a person, he is also a model to lead us to a similar experience of God within us, empowering us. When Paul says: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20) he is not speaking in metaphor only. When John makes Jesus say: "That they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one" (John 17:22-23), he is not talking of high mysticism, but of a living experience. The Gospel of John has always had a special attraction to Indians. I think that so far we have not really succeeded in communicating this image of Jesus to India and Asia. Traditional mission has emphasized sacramental and institutional Christianity. The contemporary emphasis on Jesus as liberator has opened up the social dimension. A few have tried to focus on this spiritual-mystical dimension without much success in their efforts to interest others in it. One of the problems is that the *advaitic* tradition has not been integrated in Indian Christian theological and spiritual reflection. It remains an unmet challenge when we speak about proclaiming Jesus Christ in India today.

RELIGIONS IN CONFLICT

Religions in Asia today are in conflict. Any sort of proclamation will have to take this fact into account. We will have to look into the causes of this conflict and see how they affect our proclamation.³⁰

In a postcolonial situation many nations in Asia are new and are in the process of achieving unity as nations. In such a context the realization of national and group identity is an issue. Besides other factors like ethnicity and language, religion is also a deep element of identity. This means that a member of another religion is also seen as socially other, irrespective of constitutional provisions in the matter. In any case, apart from countries inspired by Communism which have no public role for religions, countries like India and Indonesia do try to treat all religions in an equal manner, at least constitutionally. However, in most Asian countries Christianity is seen as a foreign religion. In spite of brave words and sporadic projects concerning inculturation, Christianity is far from being Asian, in liturgy, in theology, in resources, in organization, in the arts, etc. Such

²⁸Sara Grant, *Towards an Alternative Theology. Confessions of a Nondualist Christian* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1991) 56.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 51.

³⁰Cf. M. Amaladoss, "Difficult Dialogue," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 62 (1998): 567-79; "Dialogue as Conflict Resolution", *ibid.* 63 (1999): 21-36.

foreignness affects also its proclamation, particularly the way it is perceived. The groups that are attracted by its proclamation may be drawn by factors that are nonreligious—for example, the need for a new social identity.

Other reasons for interreligious conflict are religious fundamentalism and communalism. Fundamentalism is a reaction to the influence of secularizing forces like Western science and technology and atheistic political ideologies like Communism. People tend to cling to what they see as certainties concerning essential realities, provided by scriptural affirmations interpreted in a literal manner. Besides this, all exclusivist religions are also mildly fundamentalist. Communalism thinks that people who share the same religious beliefs also share the same economic and political interests. It uses the force of religious identity as a political tool. Most religious groups in Asia today tend to be communalist, while some may also be fundamentalist. The causes however are nonreligious, as I have pointed out. But this does not offer a peaceful atmosphere in the sphere of religion in which dialogical proclamation can be done easily. Proclamation in the way I have described it is still possible. Any other form of proclamation in exclusivist tones will be opposed. Most Asian Bishops at the special synod for Asia did mention this difficulty.

CONCLUSION: A CALL TO HARMONY

It is in this context of religions in conflict that Asian Christians speak about harmony. The Bishops of Asia, coming together for their sixth plenary assembly in Manila in 1995, spoke of a vision of life. It is a communion of life in diversity through dialogue. It is a holistic life of integral development for every human person characterized by compassion and solidarity. It involves sensitive care for the earth and a reverential sense of the sacred. It leads to an experience of harmony and inner peace.³¹ They recognize that Jesus came into the world that we “may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). He communicates this life by announcing and inaugurating the Kingdom of God. Here is the image of Jesus that they wish to proclaim, which they think “resonates with the Asian peoples’ vision of life”: “man of the creative Spirit, friend of God, person of interiority, bringer of harmony, lover of the poor, healer and liberator, bold prophet, suffering companion, victor over death, sharer of his Spirit.”³²

Asian theologians spell out the same challenge in their document *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*.

Jesus Christ is continuing his Spirit-filled mission of restoring peace and harmony with God and among humans. . . . In virtue of Christ’s Spirit of communion in love his disciples are called to be effective signs of union with God and unity of human kind, sacrament in its fullest sense of human harmony. . . . It should

³¹See Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia*, vo. 2 (Manila: Claretian, 1997) 5.

³²*Ibid.*, 7.

overflow in active commitment of justice, peace and the integrity of creation. The community of Christ's disciples, as a tiny minority among the teeming millions of Asia, as a "little flock," will never be able to do it alone. They are, with open mind and a humble heart, to recognize in all sisters and brothers, of whatever faith-conviction and culture, fellow wayfarers to God's Reign. It is through a triple dialogue with cultures, with religions and with the poor, through a mutually enriching interchange in its various modes and at various levels, not the least in the dialogue of life with people of other faiths and religious traditions, that Asian Christianity is to strive for human and cosmic harmony in Jesus Christ.

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