

ASIAN CHURCHES IN DIALOGUE

Topic: Asian Churches in Dialogue:
Liberation, Inculturation, and Interfaith Dialogue
 Convener: Edmund K.-F. Chia, Catholic Theological Union
 Moderator: Jonathan Y. Tan, Xavier University, Cincinnati
 Presenters: Edmund K.-F. Chia, Catholic Theological Union
 Gemma T. Cruz, St. Ambrose University
 Respondent: Peter C. Phan, Georgetown University

Leaders of the Catholic Church in Asia, both bishops and theologians, have repeatedly insisted that the church must carry out its evangelizing mission in Asia in the mode of dialogue. This dialogue has three partners: the Asian people, especially the Asian poor (integral liberation); Asian cultures (inculturation); and Asian religions (interfaith dialogue). It is practiced in a fourfold manner: in common life, in action, in theological exchange, and in religious experience. This kind of dialogue in Asia has been studied by Peter C. Phan in his recent trilogy: *Christianity with an Asian Face* (2003), *In Our Own Tongues* (2003), and *Being Religious Interreligiously* (2004). Against the background of these books the panel explored the Asian Church in greater detail, especially with reference to the advances made by the Federation Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC).

Gemma Cruz, a feminist theologian from the Philippines, began the dialogue by highlighting the harsh realities of the Asian context. She pointed to the many stark contradictions prevailing in the Asian continent: a land of plenty, yet populated by the majority of the world's poor; the birthplace of the great world religions, yet the site of many of the worst interreligious conflicts; a continent of women and the young, yet a place where abuse and human trafficking have been increasingly feminized and involving many children. Cruz then referred to Asian theologies which have surfaced in the past decades in response to these contextual realities of Asia. Many of these, such as Dalit Theology, Burakumin Theology, Minjung Theology, and the Theology of Struggle, actually arose from the wounds of intense suffering and oppression in particular contexts. The essential thrusts of these theologies is that the church embrace a fundamental option for the poor, spelt out as a church that lives in evangelical poverty, a church that defends the rights of the poor, and a church which regards the poor as evangelizers. To that end the church must be, first of all, a church which listens to the cries of the people, and then a church which speaks the truth no matter how threatening it may be to the powers that be, a church which has justice as its basis for being, and a church which celebrates the triumph of good over evil. Such is the task of integral liberation and such is the evangelizing mission of the dialoguing church in Asia.

Edmund Chia, a Malaysian who had served for many years in the FABC, spoke on how the Asian bishops discern this evangelizing mission and its implications for theology. He summarized this in the following five sutras: (1) As the West becomes increasingly post-Christian and Christianity becomes increasingly post-Western the

Asian Churches are positioned to lead the universal Church discern how Christianity should exist in an increasingly multireligious and multicultural world. (2) The totality of life is the raw material of theology. Theology is the dialogue with these religious and cultural life realities. It begins with dialogue, is done through dialogue, and ends in promoting dialogue. (3) Theology must assist in evolving a Christianity which is at once authentic as is inclusive. It integrates the pre-Christian faith of the peoples, attends to the issue of multiple religious belonging, and facilitates a Christianity comfortable with existing alongside other religions. (4) In an era where the myth of the clash between the Islamic world and the West (read: Christendom) is gaining currency, Muslim-Christian dialogue stands as a priority. The experiences of the Asian Churches must inform this dialogue. (5) Interreligious Dialogue where Christianity is in a position of weakness is significantly different from interreligious dialogue where Christianity is in a position of strength. The experiences of both must be brought into dialogue.

In his response, Peter Phan, the foremost Roman Catholic Asian theologian in North America, affirmed the various theses proposed and went on to posit that Asian theology is poised to make significant inroads in the Western world, especially since many in the West are experiencing a disillusionment with the Western church. He then pointed to the rise of scholars of Asian descent at the CTSA and also those presently studying at theologates in the United States. In due time, he quipped, Euro-Americans will not only find themselves in the minority in the North American academy but will also be working out of paradigms advanced by Asian theologies, much the same way theologians in Asia have for many centuries been reflecting through Western categories. This cross-fertilization should augur well for the development of a truly World Church, with the concomitant theology which can be at once universalized as well as localized. Hence, dialogue needs to be promoted with the Church in Asia, which itself is striving to be a Church in dialogue.

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