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## Mission in Asia Today

### Perspectives and Challenges

*Christian mission efforts in Asian countries did not produce a lot of success. There were some initiatives towards dialogue, particularly in the wake of Vatican II and its perspective of God's mission and the Kingdom of God. The Asian churches built on these grounds and developed the triple dialogue with the poor, the religions and the cultures of Asia. Today, with the fourth industrial revolution and artificial intelligence, the humanization remains as an important challenge in mission.*

Mission used to be seen as the proclamation of the Gospel, promoting conversions and the founding of the church in areas where the church is not yet present. St. Thomas the Apostle ventured to go to India and establish the church there, which continued its tenuous links to Syria over the centuries. An effort by the Syrian Church to have an outpost in North-west China in the 8<sup>th</sup> century did not succeed. The discovery of the Americas and a new route to Asia around Africa started the colonial period. The missionaries accompanied the traders and the armies. They found it easier to impose Christianity on the poor tribal populations of the Americas. With Christianity they also imposed their cultures thanks to large-scale migrations.

In Asia some early Franciscan efforts were not very successful. Then the Jesuits came with the Portuguese colonialists. Early missionaries like St. Francis Xavier “converted” poor fisher-people along the coasts. The Asians had developed cultures, older than those of the Europeans, and they also had the great Asian religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism/Taoism. So insightful

missionaries like Mateo Ricci and Roberto de Nobili adopted the way of dialogue with the cultures of China and India. Their relation to Asian religions may have been more polemical. But, unfortunately, they were not able to make much impact because the church structures remained basically Latin. Only the catechism and the popular devotional celebrations were in the vernacular languages.

There was however an unofficial movement of dialogue with Asian religions—Hinduism and Buddhism—from the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Actually, in India, it was the Hindu intellectuals who began the dialogue claiming that Jesus was an Oriental wise man, Westernized by the Europeans. A Belgian Jesuit missionary, Pierre Johanns, wrote a series of pamphlets with the general title *To Christ through the Vedanta*, showing how the search of the Hindu philosopher-theologians will find their answers in Christianity. In Japan, there were efforts to develop a Christian Zen method of meditation. After the Second World War, there were efforts to live an ashram life—Indian monastic life—dialoguing with the cultures and the religions of India. Henri Le Saux and Jules Monchanin from France were the pioneers. At a time, there were more than 60 Christian ashrams across India, though they do not seem to attract the Christian youth as the more active religious groups involved in religious and educational activities and in serving the poor and the socially marginalized by the caste system. Similar efforts were made in Japan too with

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<sup>1</sup> For this paragraph see R. H. S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Chennai: Christian Literature Society 1969.

***The Impact of the Second Vatican Council***

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) was an epoch-making event. From the point of view of mission, its document on the *Liturgy* encouraged and provided principles and structures (unfortunately not fully used) for inculturation in the liturgy and opening the door for inculturation in other areas. Its document on *Mission* deepened our vision and perspectives on mission. Its document on the other religions opened the door to serious and open dialogue with them. Its Constitution on the *Church in the Modern World*, encouraged dialogue with the cultures and other socio-political realities of the world. The Council freed the theologians to explore new possibilities of the mission of the Gospel to the cultures, the religions and the socio-political life of the people.

The new developments can be explored in three stages. First of all, the Second Vatican Council has deepened the vision of mission as God's own mission leading to the Kingdom of God, of which the church is only the symbol and servant. The religions are co-pilgrims marching together, influencing each other, towards the Kingdom. This march is animated by the Spirit of God whom we are called to discern and serve. Secondly, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) has enlarged the field of mission as a three-fold dialogue of the Gospel with the many poor, the rich cultures and the living religions of Asia, leading to the building up of authentic local churches. These three dialogues are obviously inter-related. Thirdly, the challenges we face today are universal in a fast globalizing world, though they may have Asian accents. These are the problems of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, artificial intelligence and secularization, individualism and social inequalities, consumerism and ecology.

When we speak of mission, we immediately think of the missionaries who go on mission to proclaim the good news and convert people. But the Second Vatican Council, when it wants to speak about mission, starts with the church but goes back to Godself. In its document on Mission it says: "The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit" (*Ad gentes* 2). The document goes on to explain how God wants to share God's own life with us, not only as individuals, but as a community built up in the course of history. But this should not lead us to think that the mission of God through the Son and the Spirit is limited to the church. The document on the *Church in the Modern World*, after speaking about the participation of the Christians in the Paschal mystery, goes on to say:

All this holds true not for Christians only but also for all men of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery. (*Gaudium et spes* 22)

As a matter of fact, the document on the *Church* makes a list of people to whom salvation is available which includes everyone, even those who do not belong to any religions. This list concludes:

Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life. (*Lumen gentium* 16)

In his encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, St. John Paul II affirmed formally the presence

and action of the Spirit in other religions and cultures.

The Spirit manifests himself in a special way in the Church and in her members. Nevertheless, his presence and activity are universal, limited neither by space nor time (DEV 53) ... The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions ... Thus, the Spirit, who "blows where he wills" (cf. Jn 3:8), who "was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified" (AG 4), and who "has filled the world ... holds all things together (and) knows what is said (Wis 1:7), leads us to broaden our vision in order to ponder his activity in every time and place (DEV 53) ... 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." (RM 28-29)

It is in this context that we have to understand the invitation of St. John Paul II to the leaders of all the world's religions to come to Assisi to pray for world peace. Marcello Zago, the organizer of this event, said:

At Assisi, the welcome given to the religious representatives and people being present at the prayer offered by various religions were in some way a recognition of these religions and of prayer in particular, a recognition that these religions and prayer not only have a social role but are also effective before God.<sup>2</sup>

God makes sure, therefore, that salvation is made available to everyone in ways unknown to us. It is in this context that it is difficult to understand the statement of the document *Dominus Iesus*, published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,

under the signature of the then Cardinal Ratzinger: "With the coming of the Saviour Jesus Christ, God has willed that the *Church* founded by him be *the instrument* for the salvation of all humanity" (§22, *italics mine*).

### ***The Kingdom of God***

The Theology Advisory Committee of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences published a set of *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue* in 1987. Explaining Thesis 2 which accepts religions as "significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation," it says:

Its experience of the other religions has led the Church in Asia to this positive appreciation of their role in the divine economy of salvation. This appreciation is based on the fruits of the Spirit perceived in the lives of the other religions' believers: a sense of the sacred, a commitment to the pursuit of fullness, a thirst for self-realization, a taste for prayer and commitment, a desire for renunciation, a struggle for justice, an urge to basic human goodness, an involvement in service, a total surrender of the self to God, and an attachment to the transcendent in their symbols, rituals and life itself, though human weakness and sin are not absent.

This positive appreciation is further rooted in the conviction of faith that God's plan of salvation for humanity is one and reaches out to all peoples: it is the kingdom of God through which he seeks to reconcile all things with himself in Jesus Christ. The Church is a sacrament of this mystery—a symbolic realization that is on mission towards its fulfilment (LG 1:5; cf. BIRA IV/2). It is an integral part of this mission to discern the action of God in peoples in order to lead them to fulfilment. Dialogue is the only way in which this can be done, respectful both of God's presence and action and of the freedom of conscience of the believers of other religions (cf. LG 10-12;

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<sup>2</sup> See Marcello Zago, Day of Prayer for Peace: *Bulletin of the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions* 22 (1987) 150.

*Ecclesiae Sanctae* 41-42; RH 11-12).<sup>3</sup>

The church is therefore the symbol and servant of the Kingdom of God and its mission is precisely to bring all things together. Such bringing together has cosmic dimensions if we keep in mind the vision of St. Paul in his letters to the Ephesians (1:3-10) and to the Colossians (1:15-20). In this project the church needs to collaborate with all the religions and cultures and also other peoples' movements.

The Indonesian Bishops observe: "Since in all religions and traditional religious beliefs the values of God's Reign are found as fruits of the Spirit, to the extent that there is good will they all strive towards the coming of the Kingdom."<sup>4</sup> The Bishops from the Philippines assert: "In the social context of the great majority of Asian peoples, even more use should be made of the model of the Church as servant, a co-pilgrim in the journey to the Kingdom of God where fullness of life is given as a gift."<sup>5</sup>

### ***The Broadening of Mission***

At their first General Assembly in Taipei, Taiwan, 1974, the FABC, preparing for the Synod of Bishops on Evangelization, described it as a threefold dialogue of the Gospel with the many poor, the rich cultures and the living religions of Asia. Missiologists make a distinction between proclamation and dialogue. While the former is unilateral, the latter is multilateral. Today we can say that proclamation itself needs to become dialogical.

Asia is a poor continent, except for some rich islands like Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan. There is not merely economic

poverty, but also social discrimination like the caste system in India, ethnic differences elsewhere and the marginalization and exploitation of women everywhere. Addressing these issues, various liberation theologies have emerged in Asia: Dalit theology in India, other liberation theologies like the theology of the Minjung in South Korea, the theology of Struggle in the Philippines and Women's theologies a little everywhere in Asia. There are also Tribal theologies, since a good majority of the converts to Christianity belong to the poor, marginalized and exploited tribal groups. Another important factor is that in Asia, not only Christians, but also other religious groups have developed theologies of liberation. So, there is not only a possibility, but a need to dialogue and collaborate with the other religious groups in our struggle for liberation.<sup>6</sup>

Asian cultures are rich and diverse. At the official level, especially with regard to ritual, there is not much encouragement from the central authority in the church towards inculturation. But in most countries real inculturation has been happening at the level of popular religiosity and fortunately this has been encouraged, though occasionally one speaks of abuses and exaggerations. Where the priests are with the people some control is always possible. But at the level of theology and spirituality a certain amount of initiatives has taken place. One can speak today of an Asian theology, both in general and in the individual countries. Of course, it has to co-exist with the "official" theology emerging from Rome and some control is not absent. But personal initiatives cannot that easily be controlled, especially when there has been a tradition of independent, creative reflection. There has also been an on-going dialogue between Third World theologians. Inculturation in religious art has its place. Not much production is noticeable

<sup>3</sup> See J. Gnanapiragasam/Felix Wilfred (eds.), *Being Church in Asia*, Manila: Claretian Publications 1994, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Peter C. Phan (ed.), *The Asian Synod. Texts and Commentaries*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2002, 26.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>6</sup> See M. Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom. Liberation Theologies from Asia*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1997.



at the level of literature, since the majority of the Christians are poor people and Christians themselves are small minorities in most societies with Asian systems like Yoga and Zen. Music has taken an important role in popular religiosity.

Among the threefold dialogue of the Gospel with the realities of Asia, a focus on the dialogue with the poor, which I have evoked already, can be said to lead to a sharpening of the vision and practice of mission.

### ***Mission in the Modern World***

Much of the talk on inculturation in Asia has focused on the re-expression of the faith in the local cultures, whether indigenous, popular or elite. We have not so far explored the dialogue of the faith with modern scientific and technological culture, which has a universal impact. I think of three stages. First of all, there was the modern world in which were cultural tendencies like globalization, individualism, consumerism, the destruction of creation and secularization. The humans became self-sufficient. Then we had a stage where, besides believers and non-believers, there were people who consider themselves spiritual, but not religious. They had some ethical values. But they did not need an Ultimate Being, whom they consider as controlling their life and restricting their freedom. Today we speak of the Fourth Industrial Revolution animated by Artificial Intelligence, where robots are replacing the humans and eventually the humans themselves tend to become robots. Different people may be at different stages of this development according to the circumstances of their life and work. They may also move from one to another stage.

Technology and egoism mark the first stage. We have to realize that whatever we may be doing we are not machines, but humans-in-community and we have to live and work together. We are mutually dependent in various ways. So, we have to humanize ourselves. A sense of self-sufficiency characterizes the second stage. As long as everything goes well one is not disturbed.

But natural and human catastrophes, serious illnesses, etc. make us realize that there is something or someone beyond, who controls our own and the world's history in ways that are beyond us. Our sense of self-sufficiency and autonomy is illusory. If one does not become aware of it in one's own life, one only has to look around.

Robots and artificial intelligence are highly advanced tools. But they are artificial, not natural. They are created and controlled by the humans for their own purposes. They have no consciousness and responsibility. We need to remain their masters and not become their slaves. In a sense we have to resist and withstand a process of dehumanization in the modern world. Otherwise the humans themselves will become machines. This is what is happening in our factories which are becoming sorts of concentration camps, where the humans become instruments. The modern world, therefore, is bringing a lot of new challenges in mission.

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