

AN ASIAN PERSPECTIVE ON INTERRELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER

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As reported in the last issue, the Second Inter-Religio Conference was held in September of 1983 at the Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre in Hong Kong, and devoted to the topic "Facing Religious Pluralism in Asia." This issue of INTER-RELIGIO features four of the papers presented there, the first attempting an overall perspective, the next three focusing on particular Asian countries. The remaining papers of the Conference are to be printed in the next issue.

To claim a perspective as "Asian" is always to run the risk of simplification and generalization, especially when it is applied to religions, cultures, and world views. Therefore, in speaking about an "Asian perspective" we have first to keep in mind the limitations of what we are doing. At the same time, however, in order to say anything at all about an "Asian perspective," it is necessary to lay out the main features of Asian societies. At present the Asian situation is characterized by

- 1.the emergence of religious consciousness;
- 2.the struggle of people to overcome misery, oppression, and poverty.

The phenomenon of *the emergence of religious consciousness* is very complex, but approaches to the problem often tend to emphasize only one aspect of the problem. This religious emergence can be found in various forms, for example the rise of a new interest in Eastern spirituality with its accent on mental concentration, contemplation, and a life-style which helps people attain what they call "the really real." We can see also various religious movements giving emphasis to the consciousness of the political dimensions of religion. This happens mainly in countries or regions where those movements have a firm base in the religion of the masses, as for instance in movements inspired by the liberation theology in Latin America and the Philippines. The emergence of religious consciousness is also to be seen in Iran and perhaps in Indonesia, though in somewhat different form. And there are other forms of religious consciousness, like neo-conservatism, fundamentalism, charismatic movements, and the like which also belong to this general phenomenon.

It is not easy to explain how these movements have come about. One

explanation tells us that the emergence of mysticism was encouraged by an inner desire of people to widen their consciousness, to make use of their own hidden spiritual powers which are not recognized by modern world. This accenting of suprarational experience is a protest against rationalized modern technological and bureaucratic society. Another explanation would have it that these phenomena are really reactions against institutionalized, legalistic, or moralistic religions. Mystical experience is thought to restore the harmony within the universe which has been destroyed by the development of modern society. The rise of various small religious communities is often regarded as a reaction against the anomie of an impersonal society. It is an effort to overcome the alienation caused by industrial society.¹ Movements inspired by the theology of liberation like we find in the Philippines have come into existence due to a consciousness of an historical situation in which the majority of the people are living in dehumanizing conditions and due to an awareness of the liberating message of their own religion.

What is the meaning of the emergence of religious consciousness for this interreligious encounter in Asia?

1. Humans are always in search of truth. Truth cannot be possessed and there is no end for searching it. Looked at from this point of view the Asian interreligious encounter should be truly religious and existential.
2. Human beings understand humanity as "a hermeneutical undertaking, i.e. as a task of understanding their own situation,"² including their religious experiences. An interreligious encounter always implies a hermeneutical process which enables a renewal of religious experiences. The openness towards a new perspective to truth is inherent in human nature as a constant drive to interpret experience and reality.
3. The phenomenon of religious reformations confirm the historical dimension of religion. A consciousness of the relativity of religious expression prevents the human person from ever absolutizing a particular opinion. An Asian perspective on interreligious encounter excludes any fundamentalism. I would recall here what Rubem Alves said of fundamentalists: that they are people who feel as if they have "reached perfection" in their work, who want to be free from encountering reality as it is—always precarious, incomplete, changing, frustrating, and saddening.

The second main feature of Asian situation is *the struggle of people to overcome misery, oppression, and poverty*. The majority of Asian peoples are living in inhuman conditions caused by unjust social structures. Poverty and misery are not caused by the mentality of the people, but are a problem of socio-economic structures. New ideologies are also offering solutions in overcoming poverty. As A. Pieris indicates, there are various forces involved in the efforts of overcoming misery:

1. Religious forces:
 - A. Gnostic soteriologies represented by the higher forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and so forth.
 - B. Biblical theism: Islam and Christianity.
2. Secular forces:
 - C. Western technocracy based on the capitalist model of development.
 - D. Socialism, particularly of the Marxist variety.³

Western technocracy which is supported by the multi-nationals and militarism has failed to cope with the problem of misery, and has even created a widening gap between the rich and the poor. Technology can be conceived as "technique plus structure." The techniques have hardware components (tools) and software components (skills and knowledge). The structures mainly consist of economic, social, and cultural structures. In transferring Western technology Asian peoples transfer also Western economic, social, and cultural structures. As Johan Galtung says: "The total picture, thus, is one of transfer of technology as structural and cultural invasion, an invasion possibly more insidious than colonialism and neo-colonialism, because such an invasion is not always accompanied by a physical Western presence; often not even the elites with allegiance to the West are to be found anywhere. The invasion thus becomes entirely acceptable to the elites who reject the West in all its aspects - except its technology."⁴

Socialism with its various versions has attracted many followers, since it offers a solution for changing social structures. But the difficulty is that this socialism has not yet been integrated into the culture and religion of the people, so that it fails to bring about changes which promote social justice. Moreover, capitalistic forces still maintain a strong grip on most Asian countries.

Religion in Asia places high value on human dignity and shows a deep concern about human misery. But unconsciously these religions tend to legitimize the status quo and hence strengthen the injustice in society. Here I should like to add a few remarks about the relation between religion and poverty:

1. Poverty cannot be regarded as having value in itself.
2. Poor people should not be regarded as having no value or should not regard themselves as valueless.
3. It is completely wrong to perceive the poor as having no dignity at all and the rich as having to share their dignity with the poor. All rights flow from human dignity, and there is no separating human dignity from human persons. It is not something that can "disappear" or "be recovered." It is not a matter of one group in possession of human dignity giving it to "those who do not have it," but of acknowledging, affirming, and enabling expression for that which belongs to all.

The existing social structure conditions the poor to think about

their dignity and rights in terms of gifts from those who are more privileged. The evil affecting human dignity has its roots in the social structure, i.e. in the infrastructural level (Socio-economics) and at the superstructural level (ideology, law and value system).

4. Verbal recognition of human dignity is itself not sufficient to overcome poverty. It must be accompanied by structural change. One cannot maintain human dignity without at the same time changing the social structure which bars respect from those who are not respected in a society.
5. We have said that poverty cannot be regarded as having value in itself, but part of the problem here is that religion has mystified poverty. In the history of religion we observe that poverty is ambivalent.
 - It is regarded as an opportunity for opening one's heart to God.
 - On the one hand, poverty is regarded as something negative, but on the other hand it has been used as means for conversion.
 - Poverty is considered as something to relativize the importance of wealth: wealth is not the ultimate end.
 - Poverty is seen as an evil to be eradicated.

Due to its ambivalence poverty can be utilized as a legitimation of poverty itself. Through its mystification poverty has been regarded as having value in itself. This mystification has been internalized by the poor to justify their poor conditions; but it could also be used by the haves to keep the poor remaining poor. One of the functions of religion is to interpret reality. In the words of C. Geertz, religion is a system of meaning by which people interpret disorganized and chaotic phenomena that confronts them in life, at "points where chaos—a tumult of events which lack not just interpretation but interpretability—threatens to break in upon man: at the limits of his moral insight."⁵ Religion reconciles oppositions experienced in man's life including man's social life by justifying the status quo of society. Indeed, it "supernaturalizes" relationships between the dominant and dominated groups.⁶

6. In this connection religious ideas should be seen as a system closely related to other social systems. Accordingly, meaningful theological reflection has to include structural analysis, that is a method which tries to show the interrelationship and interdependencies between systems. Based on structural analysis and theological reflection religion has to make decisions and take action. This religious involvement should be regarded as an integral process of reflection and action.
7. Solidarity and identification of believers with the poor can be a

driving force for change. Solidarity is not to be understood as the will to experience poverty as something having value in itself, but as a means for affirming that the poor have their value and dignity. Here religion could be of great help in fostering the process of conscientization. The poor are generally immersed in a culture of silence:

- overpowered by their feelings of helplessness;
- submissive towards the interplay of powers which they perceive as irrational or magical;
- adjusting to the social order instead of participating actively in it; and
- ignorant about the interrelationship between nature and humanity, culture and humanity, history and humanity.

This irrational perception of reality should be developed in the direction of:

- consciousness as a subject;
- dissatisfaction with stagnancy; and
- awareness of one's social position in relation to the larger social system.

In other words, a unity should be fostered between action and reflection that would in turn produce greater creativity.

What meaning do these observations have for interreligious encounter in Asia?

1. Religion exists not for its own sake but for the sake of people. It is therefore the primary concern of religion to help people and to defend their human dignity, or, in the words of the theme chosen at the Theological Conference held in Sri Lanka in 1979: "Asia's struggle for full humanity." This struggle for full humanity, it seems to me, ought to be the basis for cooperation between the various religions of Asia. A dialogue between religions must be able to inspire a common commitment to take the side of the weak and the poor.
2. A spirit of searching together for the meaning and value of humanity and human dignity and for making ourselves deeply sensitive to humanity should accompany our common struggle. It is therefore necessary that religions liberate themselves from their narrow and time-worn attachments. This means, among other things, that religion has to develop an openness towards a humanistic ethic that gives priority to the salvation of humanity. This is primarily important in a society in which there is a need to have a basis for common responsibility.
3. Religion has to insist on liberating people from the various determinisms that result from the development of modern society. Religion must protect people and society from being used as a means to build a technological society with a completely ration-

alized future. For what is rational does not always coincide with what is moral.

4. Religion has to exercise its prophetic function vis-a-vis totalitarian ideologies that tend to determine the whole process of history and to undermine human freedom and creativity.

From an Asian perspective, interreligious encounter should foster the deepening of religious experiences and strengthen the unconditional commitment to justice, freedom, and peace.

NOTES

1. For an analysis of this, see the articles in *Concilium*, Vol.1, Nr.9, 1973; J. Needleman, G. Baker, ed., *Understanding the New Religions* (New York:Seabury, 1978).
2. E. Schillebeeckx, *Christ. The Christian Experience in the Modern World* (London: SCM Press, 1970), p.739.
3. A. Pieris, "Contemporary Ecumenism and Asia's Search for Christ," in P.S. de Achutegui, ed., *Towards a Dialogue of Life* (Manila: Cardinal Bea Institute, 1975), pp.165-66.
4. J. Galtung, *The North/South Debate: Technology, Basic Human Needs, and the New International Economic Order* (New York: World Order Models Project, 1970), p.15.
5. C. Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York, 1957), p.100.
6. See F. Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka* (Bangalore, 1974).