

THE MANILA CONFERENCE OF CHRISTIAN ORGANIZATIONS
FOR INTERRELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER IN EASTERN ASIA

From March 4th to 7th, 1982, a Conference of Christian Organizations for Interreligious Encounter was held in the outskirts of Manila under the sponsorship of the Nanzan Institute, drawing together for the first time representatives of 16 organizations from 8 countries in Eastern Asia.

The idea for the conference had been brewing for a couple of years in response to the imbalance that we in Japan were feeling as our ties to Europe and the United States were growing stronger, while our ties to Asia were weak and unproductive. After several months of correspondence, we succeeded in tracking down a sizable number of institutes, centers, and commissions all dedicated to the same goals, each of them responding enthusiastically to the call for a meeting. Bringing together people from throughout the whole of Asia seemed too grand a step to begin with; and even in restricting invitations to one section of Asia, many significant individuals carrying on interreligious dialogue and research without a supporting organization behind them were in principle excluded. Both decisions were difficult ones to make, but distances and economics seemed to require them. Almost as an afterthought we decided to invite a representative from the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), and to our embarrassment learned that an Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs had already been set up in Taipei with the expressed aim of coordinating the interfaith efforts of the Catholic Church in Asia. The head of that office, Rev. Albert Poulet-Mathis, not only agreed to attend the Conference, but welcomed the initiative as "a providential answer to one of our most earnest wishes."

The Raskob Foundation for Catholic Activities in the United States was approached with the plan and generously agreed to sponsor the Conference. In this way a group of sixteen participants (see box on the following page) was assembled in Taytay, Rizal, at the Maryhill Retreat Center run by the Immaculate Heart of Mary Mission Society (CICM).

The entire first day of meetings was spent exchanging information, the various representatives attempting to outline the aims and activities of their organizations, the problems they face, their hopes for the future. Along with the vast amount of documentation this made available for the first time, a spontaneous consensus of the need for working together was formed.

PHILIPPINES

Dolores SIKAT
Institute of Oriental Religions and Cultures

Peter GOWING
Dansalan Research Center

Adolfo de NICOLÁS
East Asian Pastoral Institute

MALAYSIA

+Anthony SELVANAYAGAM
Catholic Research Center

TAIWAN

Yves RAGUIN
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Institute of East Asian Spirituality

Albert POULET-MATHIS
FABC Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs

THAILAND

Michael Seri PHONGPHIT
Thai Interreligious Commission for Development

INDONESIA

Michael SASTRAPRATEDJA
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HONG KONG

Sebastian SHIN
Diocesan Commission for Non-Christian Religions
Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre

KOREA

KIM Sung-Hae
Institute for Theological Research

JAPAN

Raymond RENSON
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YUKI Hideo
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Thomas INMOOS
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Jan VAN BRAGT
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James HEISIG
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The next two days were given over to a free discussion of common working problems faced in the concrete organization of interreligious dialogue, and a deliberate attempt to arrive at specific proposals for closer collaboration with one another in our common aims. The full report of the Conference has been published in the first issue of a new bulletin entitled INTER-RELIGIO (one of the concrete outcomes of these meetings). What follows below is the last third of that report, which we thought might be of general interest to the readers of the Nanzan BULLETIN. Copies of the longer report are available upon request.

Issues

That night on the veranda the group gathered for another several hours, trying to digest the day's information by thinking out loud to one another in smaller clusters. Eventually the chairs turned to form a large circle and Rev. Gowing caught the mood. "I had no idea there was such activity going on elsewhere. One gets so bogged down in one's own 'show...'" And from there the discussion turned to common concerns and issues which were to become the agenda for the following day. Running throughout the conversation like point and counterpoint were two contrasting interests: those closest to the official Churches were continually coming back to the need to promote the idea of dialogue itself and to find ways to train Church leaders for the task, while those engaged in the work itself were anxious to discuss concrete issues encountered in dialogue. In this way one by one the biases hidden in the notions of "dialogue," "interreligious," "institute," and even "Asian" came up for consideration. The questions were not new to any of those assembled, but somehow they seemed to take on an urgency and a vitality there with so many individuals from so many different settings all engaged in the same goals. Exhaustion from the day's work gradually claimed its toll and the group thinned out, leaving a few late-owls to sort out an agenda for the next morning—which it had already become by the time the last lights went out.

After a hearty breakfast the meetings were once again underway. Revs. Van Bragt and Swyngedouw, who co-chaired the day's discussions, began by outlining a number of major issues and expressing the hope that the talks would lead to concrete proposals on the following day. Condensing eight hours of

rapes into a few pages is editing enough, and I will not complicate matters further by imposing any order on them other than to trace the flow of ideas as they emerged around the main questions put forth:

1. *Interreligious dialogue in Asia seems to be carried on largely by non-Asians. Not only the reports of the previous day but the very composition of the group confirms this. Is dialogue itself an Asian concept? Might it not be that the Western preference for a "choc des idées" needs to be replaced in Asia by an orientation to a "conciliatory attitude"?*
2. *Dialogue, at least in our area of Asia, seems everywhere to be the initiative of Christians. Does this mean that no need is felt outside of the Christian community? Or perhaps the need is present but not articulated? Could it be that the Christian call for dialogue is a less subtle but no less aggressive imposition than the straightforward preaching of Christianity as the sole way to salvation?*

From a Christian perspective, it was agreed, dialogue is indeed a priority and one that belongs to the very nature of our belief, however long it has been ignored. One member mentioned that in professing faith in the Divine as personal we commit ourselves to an interpersonal approach to religion, whereas the impersonal Absolute common to many Asian religions does not so readily make such a demand. Others pointed out that the call to dialogue arises from sources outside of the sphere of religion, forces that are creating a global community and sweeping religions along in the process willy-nilly.

One positive aspect of the Christian initiative can be seen in Japan. For while it is true that Japan is a world leader in interreligious dialogue in the WCRP and elsewhere, without a Christian presence the religions of Japan seem to lack the motive to talk with one another. During the trip to Europe with the Buddhist monks, many of the monks admitted that it was the first time they were talking to members of other sects. The growth of the World Federation of Buddhism is not to be ignored, but their initiatives represent only a small part of the wider picture.

One complicating factor in assessing the role of Christians is that in lands where they are in the minority, Christians tend to belong to the middle classes which gives them a natural superiority and better base of operations for dialogue. Even if the spirit of Vatican II and WCC commitment to

dialogue has only been weakly appropriated by Christian leaders, they are in a privileged position to assume the leadership. Another is that Christian thinkers in Asia who might be looked to for leadership have by and large been educated in the West and carry back with them a great number of interpretative models and organizational ideas foreign to the Asian reality. The result is that programs they help to staff and establish do not break free of the dependencies that have plagued Christian education in Asia these many centuries.

As one of the Asian members pointed out, the translation of religious realities into academic issues is far more important for foreigners than for the Asians themselves. One does not feel the need to do research on one's own lived identity spontaneously, and when that need is introduced, it creates a false sense of cultural superiority in the outsider who with very little experience at all talks much more "intelligently" of the religious sensitivities of a group of people than they can of themselves. If this in turn sparks a sense of inferiority in those who have only trusted their unreflective, cultural instincts, the dialogue that results can only be a falsification of life. In this same regard mention was made of the fact that the drive to "dialogue" is in fact quite a modern phenomenon, and naturally attracts to itself all the biases that hold verbal, systematic exchange as of greater value than actual lived experience. The fact that Westerners interested in dialogue bring an agenda that is backed up by a financial security and a strong institutional commitment cannot but have an intimidating effect all its own. But the fact remains: like psychological tests created in Europe and applied to Asia, interreligious dialogue has not been imported to Asia as a value-free exercise in human communication. The spirit of tolerance and interpenetration and conciliation that comes most natural to the Asian may offend the Western spirit of righteousness, but it is the only base on which to found a truly Asian dialogue.

The fact that Christians are more experienced at dialogue as they understand it frequently creates a sense of inequality in those of other religions. Some have simply withdrawn from the initiatives of the Christians, which provokes a still greater sense of urgency among the latter. Some have joined without any conviction that they might have something to learn or to change because of the experience. In either case, the avoidance of confrontation may be interpreted by the Christian partner as a lack of conviction, when just as often it is an attempt to protect convictions from trivialization.

In spite of the many examples that were offered in illustration, the point kept coming back that, when all is said and done, dialogue remains a basic Christian commitment. If the Vatican Council has encouraged us to live in the context of what is truthful and valuable, wherever it may be, our failures at dialogue should not compromise this demand but rather remind us of the cultural overweight that keeps us from reaching the ideal of true Christian dialogue.

Returning to one of the topics that had been talked about the previous evening, several members spoke of the need to recognize that the root causes for current interest in dialogue are not to be found in our inherited theological apparatus but in phenomena taking place in the secularization of culture. Driven into similar predicaments of losing their once dominant cultural positions and having to survive in a pluralistic world, many religions have naturally taken to talking with one another. While this is not everywhere the case (the Muslim-dominated countries can be considered an exception), it is something that transcends differences of East and West, North and South. This is said not to cast skepticism over motivations for dialogue, but to avoid the dangers of confusing causes with effects.

At this point the chair introduced two more questions:

3. *Even with Christian domination of the dialogue, it is only a small minority in the Christian community that feel the need for dialogue at all. As had been stated several times, the Asian Bishops themselves do not as a group show a firm commitment to its importance, and at the grass-roots level there seems to be little call coming from the Churches for them to think otherwise. How deep is the need for dialogue felt within Christianity?*
4. *Is the activity in dialogue going on at present merely a passing fashion to which we might expect a backlash and then its disappearance for something else?*

Picking up the topic of religious pluralism once again, one of the group offered the sobering impression that dialogue and ecumenism, in spite of their critical facade, can easily become walls to protect religious truth from the hostilities of a secular, scientific society rather than come to grips with it. In a way, the intellectual dialogue that goes on among academics of various religions is the safest place to stand, but it is a standpoint reserved for a very few. The point of allowing dialogue to filter down from its airy heights to the lived reality of religious men and women is not

merely in order that the riches of insight be shared with all, but also in order that it become a fully *historical* reality. The example was brought up of liberation theology, which has often been accused of merely importing ideas from Europe after they had outlived their time in their place of birth. The fact is that these ideas were put to work in praxis in the Third World, and it was this praxis that gave them their distinctive character. Something like this might as well happen with notions of dialogue imported from a Western elite and save it from becoming either a tactic of survival or a foreign imposition.

At this point the discussion broke off to welcome Archbishop Mariano Gaviola, chairman of the FABC, who had driven in from Lipa to address the assembly. He expressed his gratitude to each of the organizations represented for the work they were doing and for their efforts to come together in closer cooperation. At the same time, he apologized for the apparent neglect on the part of the Asian hierarchy toward their work, explaining that it was first necessary for the Bishops themselves to become aware of the promise of interreligious dialogue in order that they might promote it out of conviction at all levels of Church life. He went on to note that the seeds of the Word have been scattered throughout the great religions of the world and that only honest dialogue faithful to belief in that Word can help to recover them. This may begin with common concerns of social justice and human development, but from there it must go higher, and deeper, into facing common points and differences. This becomes more necessary in Asia because before the advent of Mao Tse-tung Asia was calculated to have been 9% Christian, while now the figure is closer to 3%. We need to find new ways to recover the ground we have lost, Archbishop Gaviola urged. "We do not question or condemn those who have grown at our expense, but should emulate them and take them as an example of real missionary work towards our common God and Father."

One of the assembly was quick to pick up the problem and its relevance to our discussions, noting that the failure of the Churches to support dialogue, at least the sort of dialogue we were talking about, might be traced back to a difference in motivation: namely, their goal of continued expansion for the Churches. The WCC and the Secretariat for Non-Christians are both convinced of the enormous importance of dialogue from a global perspective. But the CCA and local Bishops' Conferences have done little or nothing. As long as the goal is to "gird ourselves" for the clash with other no less aggressively

oriented missionary religions, there can be no dialogue in the full sense of the word. Whether it is history that is pushing us together, and whatever word or set of theoretical explanations one may use to speak of dialogue, looking at ourselves through the eyes of other religions can only be an enrichment in the long run. But this requires of us that we lay down our arms from the battle for size and numbers that has inspired most missionary work in Asia.

At this point one of the group observed that although support by the Churches is certainly welcome, those engaged in dialogue often cannot act as official representatives of their Churches. To do so would restrict dialogue to an exchange of information. But dialogue is a creative business and has rules of its own which include the freedom to experiment with new ways of thinking. From the side of the official Churches, those actually engaged in dialogue may be seen as instruments of Church policies and goals; but for those on the inside conscientiousness requires aims that extend beyond the concrete reality of the Churches, into areas where the Churches have yet to tread.

Two further questions were then posed for discussion:

5. *Given the wide variety of situations in Asia, is the need for dialogue perhaps felt more in some countries than in others? Perhaps the single greatest factor here seems to be the presence or absence of Muslims, with whom dialogue is the most difficult.*
6. *Dialogue, in spite of its high ideals, is by no means exempt from exploitation or manipulation by state or religious leaders for their own prestige or political aims. Might not the way we choose our partners for dialogue also be affected here? De facto it has been the most institutionally, economically, and theoretically established religious traditions that have attracted the attention of the Christian Churches.*

The fact that arises most immediately out of the information exchanged the previous day, it was noted, is that the choice of partners is severely limited by the facilities and structures set up for dialogue. Where the emphasis is on research, religions without a consciously developed thought structure are of interest only as objects of study. Or again, in a situation as difficult as that faced with the Muslims, one runs the risk of gathering about oneself "select dialogue friends" who have enough similar training and education to make discussion fruitful, while the overall effect would be to cut oneself

off from the reality of Islam. If we leave ourselves free to choose, we invariably choose our friends. The question then becomes whether in such dialogue—and this extends beyond the Muslim question—one has really come in touch with another religion or only confirmed one's own expectations. Those who join hands for common social aims are often, in this sense, closer to real dialogue even if differences of faith are allowed to rest between the brackets of tolerance.

One of the group suggested that the way around this dilemma is not to widen our base to include dialogue at an early stage with folk religions and popular religiosity, but to deepen the contacts we already have in preparation for such encounters at a later time. In this same vein it was also pointed out that in the same way that Christians engaged in dialogue feel the need to present a unified front to those of other religions who would only be confused by the seemingly minor differences that have separated us, too much emphasis on respecting the differences within Buddhism or Islam or Hinduism and so forth from one country to another or one sect to another may result in an unnecessary scattering of attention at too early a stage, and prevent anything of general significance from taking place.

Several examples were offered of the ways in which political manipulation of interreligious meetings can take place without one noticing what is going on, thus imperilling future efforts at dialogue. The main problem here was coming up with criteria. In the case of financing, for example, it was noted that there has been a rather lax attitude taken towards the help and protection of the major religions, whereas when a newer, theoretically weak, and perhaps cultish religious movement invites our participation something within us recoils and calls their money "bad." While it would be naive to suppose that financial help is value-free philanthropy, on the other hand those responsible for distributing funds and providing assistance are often possessed of information and standpoints worth careful attention.

Finally the chair turned to the question of the "institutes" for dialogue:

7. How important are teaching and research institutes for the overall aims of interreligious encounter? What should their role be?

To begin the discussion, it was observed that the group was composed of individuals connected with various forms of organizations, whereas actual academic institutes involving the joint efforts of those from different faiths are few. Clearly the plurality of models has to be counted as something positive, but since several of the organizations seemed clearly to be at a

point of making choices for a future direction, it would seem important to assess the possibilities open.

The example of the *Dansalan Research Center* was brought up as a model for a truly interreligiously structured institute, where not only the work but the actual administration was a shared venture. Movements in this direction were said to be taking place in Korea. One member of the group raised doubts about this form of co-sponsorship, favoring cooperation among organizations sponsored separately by the various religions or Churches. Returning to an earlier topic, the view was expressed that if one does not represent one tradition as an Institute or organization, dialogue cannot be expected to go anywhere. The opposite opinion was then expressed that although official statements of belief and policy are not unimportant, the standpoint from which they are made is not that of dialogue but of confession of one tradition. This does not mean however, as someone else was quick to point up, that one does not welcome the support of one's Church. "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child," he went on, "a long, long way from home."

The FABC's plan to train "animators for dialogue" was questioned at this point as something artificial precisely because it attempts to melt the standpoint of dialogue into Church policy. One learns dialogue, it was said, by *doing* it, not by *being trained* to do it. It takes years to become even mildly sensitive to the feelings of those from other religions, and this is the only real training that can produce results. Here again the question was raised: What if we train ourselves legions of young leaders for dialogue while the religions we hope to dialogue with do not undergo similar training? Does this not confirm the suspicions of a new aggressivity in the Churches? Nonetheless, the FABC aim to sensitize people in the Asian Churches can be seen as something imperative to the dialogue inasmuch as it serves to counter current attitudes, to help Church leaders unlearn models of being missionary that produce interreligious friction. The Bishops of Indonesia, it was noted, favor "exposure" or "training" at specifically Christian centers. Other examples of this were given, such as the Taizé brothers in Bangladesh who begin by living among the Muslims before they leave for more intensive training. Perhaps the most important thing here, one of the group summarized, was that any preparation for dialogue has to be wary of reducing the religion of one's partner to something that can be studied at second-hand without actually experiencing its vitality through firsthand discipleship.

Proposals

The final meetings were given to considering concrete ways in which the various organizations assembled and the common issues that concern them might suggest collaboration in the future. On the basis of the by now conventional late-night veranda discussion of the previous evening, several broad areas were presented to focus attention, and the following proposals were arrived at:

1. The World Council of Churches in cooperation with the Christian Council of Churches in Singapore has published a preliminary catalogue of inter-religious information for Asia, but it was felt that something more directly aimed at disseminating the information made available at the present conference was needed. The *OEIA* agreed to serve as a clearing house for the documentation and to publish it as one of the *FABC Papers*.
2. In addition, it was felt that a regular bulletin for the exchange of information might be inaugurated, to serve as a means of keeping contact with one another, to make new documentation available, and to solicit help for one another's programs. Since no single organization represented at the conference could be expected to take this upon itself in isolation, the group decided to form itself into a *Network of Christian Organizations for Interreligious Encounter in Eastern Asia* and to publish such a bulletin twice a year. [The title for the bulletin, decided subsequent to the conference, is to be *INTER-RELIGIO*, and its first number slated for Spring of 1982.] The *Nanzan Institute* agreed to assume the task for a period of three years, after which it would pass into the hands of one of the other member organizations. The bulletin is to be distributed to all interested parties, though it will remain primarily an organ of liaison for the *Network*.
3. The group agreed to begin exchanging journals and newsletters with one another and to keep everyone informed of new publications that could not be offered gratis. At the same time, those centers that have more experience with publishing expressed a willingness to be of help to the others. In particular, the *Nanzan Institute* offered to review material related to the dialogue between religions East and West for its English-language series of *Studies in Religion and Culture*. The *FABC Papers* were also announced as a possible outlet for information and ideas that might

be of interest not only to Asia but to the West as well.

4. In addition to information on educational programs to be gathered for publication by the *OEIA* and new information that would be reported in the bulletin of the *Network*, the group expressed general interest in supporting the ongoing attempts of the *OEIA* to organize seminars and conferences for interreligious encounter. A series of helpful and detailed proposals were circulated among the assembly by Rev. Poulet-Mathis with the request for cooperation in drawing up guidelines and serving as research consultants in the future.
5. The question of funding is admittedly a difficult one, but the group agreed in principle to aid one another in establishing contacts and providing the necessary recommendations.
6. Aware of the restricted area of Asia that the *Network* represents, it was proposed that thought be given to sponsoring another conference to expand membership and continue what was begun. No definite dates were set, but it was agreed that the party responsible for the bulletin serve as a coordinating center for concrete proposals on this and other matters related to the *Network*.

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The day's meetings adjourned to the chapel, as they had each day, this time for a Catholic service at which Rev. Thomas Immoos spoke on the theme of Transfiguration. At the very hour he was standing before us at the pulpit, someone was breaking into his house in Tokyo to scrounge about for whatever there was to steal. The return to the world we had left to come to Manila may not have been so great a shock for the rest of us, but perhaps it *should* have been. Basking in the sunshine and bright ideas of Taytay was, after all, pretty far removed from the future most of the world is dreaming about. In the military centers of the West plans are being discussed, and guidebooks prepared, for survival after an exchange of nuclear attacks. In great areas of Asia and Africa millions were wondering what they might do to feed themselves and their families for the morrow. In a few days an alignment of all 9 planets within a 96° area on the same side of the sun would occur and a respected Indian astrologer was predicting that Los Angeles would be swallowed up into the Pacific Ocean. Peruvian "cosmo-biologists" were an-

nouncing that hungry animals would stalk the earth and prey on humans. And about 60 kilometers to the south of where we were gathered, Casiano Nasaire, a 65 year old jeweler who had had a vision from God that the alignment would bring doom on the world, was helping some 4,000 people of his Ako sect, all fitted out with a medalion inscribed with the 9 planets, to barricade themselves against the boulders that would rain down on the earth and the snows that would cover the Philippines.

The contrast of all these future visions of horror, be they sophisticated (one can hardly say "civilized") or primitive, may be less important than their similarity. For whether the disaster be of divine intervention, astrological chance, consumer gluttony, or technological stupidity, the anticipated results are all pretty much the same. When looked at from that perspective, the effort and the time spent on juggling one's kaleidoscope of favorite ideas at a conference on religion looks pretty silly. The lessons that the great religions of the world ought to have taught humanity but could not begin to look so important now that it would almost seem as if we could do no better than to hand our every hope over to the most sensible ideology, and turn our efforts into barricading the race against its own destructive instincts. It would, indeed. If we did not believe in a Spirit whose rhythms transcend the winds of history, in a healing Word that speaks itself eternally in countless ways and waits only to be listened to.

J. W. Heisig