

Towards a “Theology in Asia” : The Struggle for Indentity

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The following pages contain the expanded text of a Keynote Address delivered to those assembled for the Fourth Inter-Religio Conference in Jakarta in late summer of this year. Despite its length, it is reproduced here with only minor editing as a representative sample of the framework within which Christian theology is being conducted in Indonesia today as well as a compilation of many of the currently relevant bibliographical materials.

THE IDEA OF ASIAN THEOLOGY

Now, over two decades after Vatican II, the time has come for some sort of theological evaluation of contemporary trends of theologizing in our continent, its various perspectives, its major themes, its main concerns, and its methods.

What is going to be presented here is a rambling sort of panoramic view—for a number of reasons, far from comprehensive—of the numerous attempts of Asian and foreign theologians to orient their theological reflection to the service of the Asian churches in the context of the various religious and cultural traditions and contemporary ideologies.

In part one I shall try to present a preliminary outline of the major problem areas in this time of rapid and far-reaching change. Part two then considers some of the more traditional adaptive trends of theology in Asia. Finally, part three will offer points for reflection on some of the more radically innovative trends in the search for Asian theology.

PROBLEM AREAS IN A PERIOD OF TRANSITION

Already since the seventeenth century, reacting against the colonialist understanding of mission as a “conquering campaign,” theories of “adaptation” emerged promoting evangelization in indigenous forms without any intent to destroy, substitute, or absorb local cultural and religious values.¹ Moreover, side by side with a preaching of the

1 Consider for example Roberto de Nobili who lived as a Sannyasi, Beschi as a Tamil Pundit, and Matteo Ricci as a Christian Mandarin, with their high esteem for social and cultural patterns respectively of Indians and Chinese. See A. Balchand, *The Salvific Value of Non-Christian Religions according to Asian Christian Theologians writing in Asian-Published Theological Journals, 1965–1970*, East Asian Pastoral Institute, Manila 1973, p.51.

gospel in opposition to Asian religions and the then prevalent dialectical theology,² a kind of dialogical theology was given expression—for example, even during the heat of the Reformation by Cardinal de Lugo, and later by Cardinal J. H. Newman (1801–1890)³ Since that time, European Christianity with its centuries old tradition has grown considerably in openness to our peoples in Asia and their many cultures and religions. Early in this century Fr. Johannis together with Belgian Jesuits of Calcutta,⁴ J. N. Farquhar⁵ and others were exploring the idea of evolutionary fulfillment of other religions by Christianity that these religions spring from some real religious instinct and have a value of their own, even though Christ remains supreme over all, the consummation of religion.⁶ In a similar vein went the pronouncements of the 1930 Lambeth Conference and the writings of numerous Protestant scholars:⁷ that God is the Lord of History, a creative Spirit ever at work in the world, redeeming its present involvements and directing its course to the ultimate fulfillment of the divine purpose somehow at work in all religious revival.⁸

Since Vatican II's declaration *Nostra Aetate* (October 28, 1965), the first conciliar document specifically concerned with world religions phrased in attitudes of respect, sympathy, and understanding while at the same time asserting Christ's redemptive work as having a central role,⁹ theological reflection on the Church's life and mission has been developing in our countries. The 1970 meeting of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) in Manila gave fresh impetus to the Catholic church in this regard. The statements and recommendations of four FABC plenary assemblies and other documents issued by the various FABC offices, special Bishops Institutes, and other FABC sponsored meetings—predominantly pastoral in orientation—as well

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- 2 Cf. André Monastier, *Ecclesia*, Paris, May 1967, pp. 83–92; I. Hirudayam, "The Maturation of the Asian Church," *FABC Papers* 36, p. 9.
 - 3 Cf. I. Hirudayam, "The Maturation of the Asian Church," p. 9.
 - 4 *To Christ through the Vedanta*, referred to by Archbishop Angelo Fernandes, "Summons to Dialogue," *FABC Papers* 34, p. 13.
 - 5 J. N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism*, London 1913. The author "argued that though every religion contained some truth and provided guidance for its followers, only Christianity contained the integral truth and so could withstand the eventual shock of modernization." Quoted by John Chethimattam, "Development, Dialogue, and Evangelization," *Toward a New Age in Mission. International Congress on Mission* vol. 3., Position Papers (Manila, 1981), p. 103.
 - 6 J. N. Farquhar's position at a Conference in Oxford, 1909, quoted by I. Hirudayam, "Christian Attitudes to World Religions," *Delhi Seminar* (September 1973), p. 2.
 - 7 In "Summons to Dialogue," Fernandes mentions C. F. Andrews, Bishop Appasamy, M. M. Thomas, and S. J. Samartha. The relevant literature includes the following: M. M. Thomas, "Some trends in contemporary Indian Christian Theology," *Religion and Society* (December, 1977): 4–18; special issues on Christology of the *Indian Journal of Theology* (1974 and 1975); S. J. Samartha, "Introducing a discussion," *Living Faiths and Ultimate Goals: Salvation and World Religions*, (Maryknoll, New York, 1974; "The Lordship of Jesus Christ and Religious Pluralism," in G. H. Anderson and T. F. Stransky, eds., *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, (Maryknoll, New York 1981).
 - 8 P. Devanandan, *Christian Concern in Hinduism* (Bangalore, 1961), p. 82.
 - 9 See the two references in *Nostra Aetate* to John 14,6. Elsewhere other religions are alluded to as a "preparation for the Gospel" which "need to be enlightened and purified" but contain salvific values (*Ad Gentes*, 3); and as a "secret presence of Gods (*Ad Gentes*, 9); mention is also made of the mysterious ways of salvation (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22) which the missionary activity of the Church "restores to Christ its make?" (*Lumen Gentium*, 16). Cf. also A. Pieris, *The Church, the Kingdom and other Religions* (Colombo, 6 October 1968), P5

as the writings of Asian theologians,¹⁰ (we may particularly mention the FABC's Theological Advisory Commission¹¹), all testify to the growing interest in "doing theology with Asian resources" or "constructing local theologies."

At this point some mention may be made of the main problem areas and raise in general terms a few questions.

We may presuppose that if we are to theologize meaningfully in the present Asian situation, our framework will have to be the deeply-rooted *cosmic world vision* that is felt almost everywhere—at least as an undercurrent—in Asia, including among those professing "meta-cosmic" faiths such as Islam and Christianity.¹² According to that world view, reality is communion, harmony, and interdependence; and humanity itself is a part of this web of relationships within reality and forms an organic whole with it. Thus the well-being of humanity is intrinsically dependent on nature as the source of salvation¹³ and human life is a struggle towards liberation and wholeness.

Nowadays traditional values within that world vision are being challenged and at times heavily shaken by modernizing trends. The Asian Bishops identified various aspects of "the gradual disintegration of our traditional societies," among them:

the loss of a sense of belonging in community; . . . depersonalized relationships, disorientation, and loneliness; ... secularization ... with its worship of technology, narrow materialism, and secularism, its fever for consumerism, its ideological pluralism;.. the erosion of religious values, suffocation of the aspirations of the human spirit, the tendency to lose the sense of God, the sense of his presence and his providence.¹⁴

The encounter with technological modernity and the mingling of various ethnic groups (due to industrialization, urbanization, and so forth) "have caused a deep crisis of symbols and even conflicts of symbols with great repercussions on society."¹⁵ For many people religion has become marginal and irrelevant, a private affair, whereas public life (in its cultural, economic, social, and political dimensions) is increasingly regulated by secular ideals (like peace, happiness, order, efficiency) which easily degenerate into individual and collective selfishness.¹⁶ "Secular" people mostly have an underdeveloped sense of religiosity, unable to keep pace with technology and modernization, and therefore "fall an easy prey to simplistic new religious cults when they are faced with a crisis in life that they cannot handle."¹⁷

10 See for example the bibliographical references in A. Balchand, *The Salvific Value of Non-Christian Religions*, pp. 70–81.

11 The FABC's Theological Advisory Commission issued a document entitled *Dialogue with Other Religions. A Study Document of the Theological Advisory Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences*. The theme of the coming meeting of the Commission in Bangkok (April 12–19, 1988) is "Inculturation and the Local Church."

12 Well known in this context is A. Pieris's distinction between "cosmic" religions (namely, those related to the experience of the forces of nature and the spirits operating in the world) and "meta-cosmic" religions (those that lead to a salvation beyond the cosmic). See in F. Wilfred, "Sunset in the East? The Asian Realities Challenging the Church and its Laity Today," *FABC Papers* 45, p. 44.

13 F. Wilfred, "Dialogue Gasping for Breath? Towards New Frontiers in Interreligious Dialogue, a paper presented at the Joint Consultation of the FABC and CCA, Singapore, July 5–10, 1987, p.7

14 See the *Final Statement* of FABC II, Calcutta 1978, n. 8.

15 F. Wilfred, "Dialogue Gasping for Breath?", p. 18.

16 FABC, *Dialogue with Other Religions*, n. 1.2. See also Marcello de Carvalho Azevedo, *Inculturation and the Challenges of Modernity*, in the series *Inculturation* (Working Papers on Living Faith and Cultures), I, ed. by A. Crollius (Rome, 1982).

An investigation of this state of affairs must not begin from the “Western viewpoint of the “expanding secularization process and growing superculture,” which would be “an imposition of Western thought on non-Western situations.” We do better to ask: How do Asians (Japanese, Chinese, Filipinos, Indonesians, etc.) “react in their own culture to the world-wide phenomenon of technical civilization that is closely linked up with secularization in the West?”¹⁸ Now that this new civilization “leads to sharp questioning of the meaning of personal life and the significance of human community,” the experience and understanding of salvation is of paramount importance.¹⁹

On the other hand, the last Plenary Assembly of the FABC spoke of “the phenomenon of religious revivalism” with its tendencies “to religious dogmatism, fundamentalism and intolerance in precept and practice,” leading even to “violence and serious conflicts.”²⁰ Fundamentalism appears as “a defense-reaction which gives religious belief a socio-cultural, and even political role of cohesion in the face of ‘anomic’ that threatens one’s identity. Irrational religious emotions offer a simplistic force of unity and self-defense,”²¹ and thus become a source of conflict.²² Religious revivalism poses its challenge to us Christians towards a deeper renewal of faith.²³

Facing both excesses of secularism and fundamentalism, “religion has to preserve its unique inspirational and prophetic role even in public life” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 42–43)²⁴

Even in this era of modern developments many Asians still think and speak their own “language” different from that of technological epistemology. Stories of the East, Indian symbols and myths, Chinese paradoxes, Japanese aesthetic forms, traditionally appear to be the most favorite way of framing thoughts and feelings and of expressing truths. This whole world of deeply human expressions, closely intertwined with the religiosity of many people (popular religiosity manifested in ritual celebrations etcetera) “vividly expresses the divine, the human, and the cosmos, . . . the struggles of the people, their aspirations, their hopes, joys and sorrows.”²⁵

How is the Christian message to suit this world of symbols so that is really addresses the hearts of men? Will “adaptation” or “adjustment” suffice? And if so, “adaptation” in what sense? The adaptation of Christian faith to culture? Of culture to Christian faith? How can the soteriological idiom of Asian religions become an authentic expression of Christian faith?

In so many religions and religious traditions we meet with such a rich variety of approaches to what is meant by “salvation” and to the instrumentality of religious

17 M. A. Amaladoss, “The Local Churches in Asia: Problems and Prospects,” *Verbum SVD* 27/4 (1986): 332.

18 Ernest D. Piryns, “Contextual Theology The Japanese Case,” *Philippiniana Sacra* 14/40 (1979):152. The entire issue is devoted to an International Colloquium on Contextual Theology.

19 S. J. Samartha, “Introducing a Discussion,” p. vi.

20 *Final Statement of FABC IV* (Tokyo, 1986), n. 3.1.9; cf. 3.1.10.

21 M. A. Amaladoss, “The Local Churches in Asia: Problems and Prospects.’

22 FABC, *Dialogue with Other Religions*, n.1.2.

23 *Final Statement of FABC IV* (Tokyo, 1986).

24 FABC, *Dialogue with Other Religions*, n. 1.2.

25 Cf. F. Wilfred, “Faith Without ‘Faith’? Popular Religion, a Challenge to Elitist Theology and Liturgy,” *Popular Devotions*, ed. by Paul Puthanangady (Bangalore, 1986), pp. 584–613; K Panikkar, *Myth, Faith, and Hermeneutics* (New York, 1979).

communities in the process of salvation?²⁶ But which among them is the best way to preach the gospel in the light of Christian tradition? How are Vatican II's guidelines on inculturation—particularly those related to liturgy²⁷ to be put into practice? How should theological reflection meet the challenges of Asia's cultural and religious plurality? All this poses an unprecedented challenge to hermeneutics, of which in India a good deal of groundwork has been done?²⁸

Although contextual theologies have begun to emerge in several Asian countries²⁹ it is particularly in India that theology seems to have reached new heights of originality and relevance.³⁰ C. Arevalo identifies three types of contextual theology roughly corresponding to the three tasks assigned by the *Final Statement* of FABC I (Taipei 1974): (a) the endeavor to “indigenize” or inculturate theology; (b) the effort to take some significant areas of religious thought, and link these up and integrate them with biblical theology and the Christian tradition; (c) the attempt to contextualize theology by “immersing it within the Asian reality” in its broadest modern social, economic, political, and cultural context.³¹

M. Amaladoss proposes the following elements in theologizing which could very well apply in the Asian context in general:

(a) a critical and inspiring reflection born of praxis; (b) a creative reflection emerging from within the dialogue of faith with the life of a community in all its cultural and religious complexity; (c) a search for the significance of the experience within the context of God's salvific plan revealed in Christ; (d) the effort to understand the mystery of salvation in the context of the questions and problems raised by a relevant Christian life; (e) a dialectical method, the dialectic poles being human experience on the one hand, and the Christian perspective handed down in a living tradition on the other hand; (f) a reflection guiding interpretation and discernment in the process of inculturation.³²

Since the theme is too vast to be treated exhaustively, I propose to focus attention on theological trends particularly around two of the most burning issues within the Asian situation, namely Asian poverty and Asian religiosity, and to identify within these two areas of theology the main features for further reflection.

For the people of Asia—except for a few affluent islands like Japan, a largely poor continent burdened by internal and international structures of injustice and oppres-

26 S. J. Samartha gives a few examples, “Introducing a Discussion,” pp. x–xiii.

27 See for example *Sacrosanctum Concilium* on the Sacred Liturgy (December 4, 1963), “Norms for adapting the Liturgy to the Genius and Traditions of Peoples,” nn. 37–40.

28 “Indian Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Jeevadhara* 68 (1982); see also F. Wilfred, “Some Heuristic Propositions on the Relationship of Christianity to Non-Christian Religions and Cultures,” a paper presented at the second meeting of the Theological Advisory Commission of the FABC, Singapore, April 21–27, 1987.

29 F. Gómez, “The Uniqueness and Universality of Christ,” p. 82, note 32 mentions the following works: S. Takayanagi, “Towards a Japanese Christian Theology,” *Japanese Missionary Bulletin* 30 (1976): 577–82; 3. Swyngedouw, “The Image of Christ in the Eyes of the Japanese,” *ibid* 33 (1979): 21–28; G. L. Olson, “Christ's Image in Japan,” *Japanese Religions* (July 1982): 6–18. See also the articles in the special issue of *Philippiniana Sacra* referred to in note 18 above.

30 M. M. Thomas, “Some Trends in Contemporary Indian Christian Theology.”

31 C. Arevalo, “Prenotes to the Contextualization of Theology,” *Philippiniana Sacra* 14/40 (1979): 20–22. He offers a description of contextual theology on pp. 22–30 and its “ground rules” on pp. 30–35.

32 M. Amaladoss, “Theologizing in India Today,” *Vidyayoti* 43(1973): 213–25.

sion-economic and social justice linked to development remains an important concern.³³

The number of poor [75% of the poor of the world; millions of undernourished children and unemployed youth] despite all development programs and industrial-ization drives, has steadily increased; and the capacity of the people to buy the commodities essential for their livelihood has diminished in the past two or three decades. The Asian situation of poverty has to be understood as a situation of injustice consequent upon many factors: political, social, cultural, and at different levels, global, national and regional?³⁴

F. Wilfred considers this whole situation as “a tremendous challenge to the Church and an opportunity to unleash the inner potencies of its message.”³⁵

Of all the great religions (with “their own Scriptures, developed traditions of reflection and service structures like monasteries and ashrams, learned and holy men”) only Christianity has grown up elsewhere and come back to Asia as a “foreign religion.” It is faced not only by popular cosmic religions that it can easily dominate, but also by developed religions challenging it to dialogue.³⁶

We assume that by addressing Asian religiosity and poverty in our theological reflection the aspect of inculturation—mentioned by C. Arevalo as the first missionary task of Asian Churches—will be sufficiently accounted for.

The relevance of such a theological—and, hopefully, also concretely lived—response already is beyond question within the ambiguous role played by religions and cultures in Asia:

On the one hand, the religions have insisted on inner liberation without which even socialist movements will not succeed in their struggle for full humanity; on the other hand, religious and cultural systems have at least in the past played the role of legitimating feudal relationships and dampening any revolutionary struggle for liberation³⁷

It is worth noting here that in associating the Asian poor and the Asian religions with our prophetic mission, we are already in the middle of politics, and confronted with two political ideologies directly involved with the “liberation” of the poor and having their definite theories and attitudes towards the Asian religions.³⁸

A rethinking of theological orientations concerning both Asian poverty and Asian religiosity may be an important service that our Asian Churches can provide the universal Church?³⁹

33 M. A. Amaladoss, “The Local Churches in Asia,” p. 325.

34 F. Wilfred, “Sunset in the East?”, pp. 19–24 on “the challenge of justice and human rights.”

35 F. Wilfred, “Sunset in the East?”, p.1; on pp. 34–35 the author specifies certain areas of challenges: the question of power, the process of modernization, conflicting conceptions and ideologies, the situation of inequality, and the Asian religions.

36 People of other religions would even consider Christianity an inferior religion, being too structured and ritualistic, while they are “mystical.” See M. A. Amaladoss, “The Local Churches of Asia,” p. 325. On religion in the texture of Asian life, see F. Wilfred, “Sunset in the East?”, pp. 25–34.

37 Bishop Patrick D’Souza, “Church and Mission in Relation to the Kingdom of God especially in a Third World Context,” *Toward a New Age in Mission*, vol. 3, p. 27, referring to Samuel Rayan, “Asian Theological Conference. A Reflex of its Dynamics,” *Vidyayoti* (1979): 246–69.

38 A. Pieris, “The Non-Semitic Religions of Asia,” *Mission in Dialogue*. The SEDOS Research Seminar on the Future of Mission, March 8–19, 1981, Rome, ed. by Mary Motte and Joseph Lang (Maryknoll, New York, 1982), pp. 427–28.

39 On interreligious dialogue, see for example *Towards a Theology for Inter-Faith Dialogue*, Board for Mission and Unity of the General Synod of the Church of England (Leominster, 1984) Note here

When reflecting theologically and pastorally on the concrete role of religions and religious beliefs in Asian societies, particularly with regard to political life, three patterns of relationship are to be taken into consideration. Insofar as they are of course, not quite clearly distinct from one another, various kinds of mixture are possible.

Firstly, there is the political model inspired by theocratic tendencies, ranging from religions ideology functioning as state ideology (as for example in Pakistan) to letting the policies of the state be strongly determined by an official religion (as in the Islamization of politics in Malaysia, and in the position of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and in Thailand),⁴⁰

The second model can be found in an avowedly secular state, where in unofficial and subtle ways the majority religion is supported by the government and its machinery, while the minority religions, or groups are somewhat discriminated against.⁴¹

The third and rather widespread pattern we find in countries where religion or religions is or are being instrumentalized and manipulated in order to obtain political gains.⁴²

Particularly with regard to the church itself we note that the section of *Gaudium et Spes* dealing with the "life of the political community" (2.4) was written largely against the background of European history. Should not, therefore, the particular situations in our Asian countries be taken into account when the question arises of applying those conciliar guidelines? Should not in this field Asian theology help elaborate a respectfully critical stand? M. Amaladoss proposes:

In all Asian countries we will have to evolve a political structure that is neither confessional, tolerating minority religious groups as more or less second class citizens, nor totally secular in the sense of being completely areligious. We should rather encourage a political structure that relates to all religions positively without identifying itself with any one of them.⁴³

Theological reflection must help the community achieve a consensus concerning basic values drawn from the religions present as a foundation for public life and its economic, social and political institutions, so that the plurireligious community can take the positive role of religion in private and public life seriously, without, on the one hand, privatizing religion and thus leading to an areligious, amoral society, and

that "the positive impact of the meta-cosmic religions on the Christian consciousness in Asia is leading to a rethinking of theological orientations in the area of interreligious dialogue, evangelization and the roots of a Christian identity." M. A. Amaladoss, "The Local Churches in Asia," p. 332.

40 Chandra Muzaffar, "Islam in Malaysia: Resurgence and Response," *Religion and Asian Politics: An Islamic Perspective* (Hong Kong, 1984), pp. 8-35; F.Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka* (Bangalore, 1974); Donald E.Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton, 1965); Heine Ecc-herth, "Buddhism and Mass Politics in Burma and Ceylon," *Religion and Political Modernization* (London, 1974), pp. 147ff.

41 Donald E. Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*. On the "socio-political context of interreligious dialogue," see F. Wilfred, "Dialogue Gasping for Breath?," pp. 3-6.

42 F.Wilfred, "Dialogue Gasping for Breath?"

43 M. A. Amaladoss, "The Local Churches in Asia," p. 329. Cf. FABC, *Dialogue with Other Religions*, Thesis 1 of which reads: the religions "should not become victims either of those who seek to keep them apolitical and private or of those who seek to instrumentalize them for political and communal ends."

without, on the other hand, making religion the principal factor holding a society together.⁴⁴

When questioning ourselves on the place of Christianity in pluricultural and plurireligious Asia, we are to keep in mind that what is often presented as “the universal essence of Christianity” is no more than a conditioned and particularized expression of Christian faith and experience. Christian tradition is “a complex of particular and local traditions resulting from the encounters of Christianity with a wide variety of peoples, cultures, philosophies and thought patterns.” At the same time, the Christian faith and message can only be articulated in a particular language and culture. It is important to be aware that its universality is affirmed “not by denying or transcending particularities, but by experiencing the universal and transcendent in the particular or in the *concretum* of a determined cultural context.”⁴⁵

Hence, it would be utopian for young Christian communities in the Third World to expect to receive Christian faith as it were devoid of all forms and cultural expressions. On the other hand, it would be a presumptuous for the older Churches to claim to transmit as “the universal essence of faith” what is in reality a faith conditioned by their own historical context and limitations.⁴⁶

Contextual theology in Asia has to develop by the painstaking efforts of many theologians deeply immersed in the daily lives of Christian communities at the grassroots level, in living contact with other members of the human community. It is not a matter of particular solutions to particular problems in the context of a mere *transplantatic ecclesiae*, nor is it mere patchwork.

In the light of the problem areas outlined above, does it not become problematic whether the fundamentally rather traditional, adaptive theological trends in the long run will prove adequate? Is it so surprising that we are sensing a growing dissatisfaction with mere “reflections,” or merely “political” and “mystical” viewpoints of theologians?⁴⁷ Can a theology that ignores for example mass poverty or underestimates the value of Asian religiosity be the right answer to our situation, when in fact both these features of the Asian reality combine to urge us to concrete critical action of communitarian cooperation for integral human development? Is it not understandable that Asian theologians search for profoundly new perspectives and new accents, and use new heuristic methods in order to arrive at a certain comprehensive and coherent theological insight in how the Spirit of God is present, guiding our brothers and sisters towards salvation through Jesus Christ in God’s Kingdom?

Should not we as Asians, from within our Asian worldview, rethink and critically examine the Christian idiom as employed in Asia,⁴⁸ in order to live and express the authentic Christian faith in an authentically Asian way? If, as generally recognized, the Judeo-Christian tradition represents a strong anthropocentric vision while all

44 FABC, *Dialogue with Other Religions*, n. 1.3; see also n. 5.5: “The community need not adopt an areligious or an anti-religious attitude. . . . Communion among religions, besides showing itself in common political activity, will have to find other public expressions.”

45 F. Wilfred, *Some Heuristic Propositions* n. 4-5, pp. 2-3.

46 F. Wilfred, *Some Heuristic Propositions*, n. 6, p.3.

47 See the section in F. Wilfred significantly entitled “A Deaf Ear to the Cry of the Poor?,” “Sunset in the East?,” pp. 42-44.

48 F. Wilfred, “Dialogue Gasping for Breath?,” p. 17.

other Asian religions represent a cosmic view,⁴⁹ how could the gospel message be served to strike deep roots in the hearts of people of religious traditions which are “the bearers of the organic and holistic vision of reality and have given birth to a culture of harmony?”⁵⁰

“THEOLOGY IN ASIA”: MORE TRADITIONAL ADAPTIVE TRENDS

At the very center of all theology as reflection in faith stands the person of Jesus Christ himself in his uniqueness as savior of mankind, as the Way who has led the peoples of Asia in their histories and traditions, as the Truth who has enlightened them in their worship, their beliefs, their philosophies, and as the Life who has made himself present in their lives, drawing them to himself from his cross.⁵¹ This uniqueness of Jesus of Nazareth⁵² will be fully and finally manifested in the fullness of the Cosmic Christ.⁵³

The arduous theme of reflection outlined in the above paragraph, fundamental as it is to Christian faith, “has become still more difficult in the context of factual pluralism,⁵⁴ worship of freedom and the awareness of the positive salvific value of other religions.”⁵⁵ It is not simply a question of Protestant-Catholic relations, nor has it anything to do with East-West or North-South polarities. “It affects Christianity as a whole, or perhaps we must say the totality of modern culture.”⁵⁶ Even in the midst of “the Christological explosion of our days” the basic Christological tenets can never be sacrificed “to any otherwise compelling urgency of cultural adaptation.”⁵⁷ Jesus Christ is “the absolute and eschatological expression and offer of God’s own self” (K. Rahner)⁵⁸ “The radical and decisive position of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ cannot be sacrificed” (E. Uzukwo)⁵⁹ “The Christian faith stands or falls on the Word becoming flesh, on God becoming a human person” (Choan-Seng Song).⁶⁰ Accord-

49 F. Wilfred, “Dialogue Gasping for Breath?”, p. 7. The reference is to Walter Strolz and Hans Waldenfels, eds., *Christliche Grundlage des Dialogs mit den Weltreligionen* (Freiburg, 1983).

50 F. Wilfred, “Dialogue Gasping for Breath?”, p. 8, referring to Thome H. Fang, *The Chinese View of Life: The Philosophy of Comprehensive Harmony* (Hong Kong, 1956); H. Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking: India-China-Japan* (Honolulu, 1964); Charles A. Moore, ed., *The Japanese Mind* (Honolulu, 1967); C. A. Moore, *The Chinese Mind* (Honolulu, 1967).

51 *Final Statement of FABC I*, n. 46.

52 F. Gómez, “The Uniqueness and Universality of Christ,” pp. 4–30, offers a panoramic view of the Christological problem. He refers (p. 6) to J. Dupuis, “The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the Early Christian Tradition,” *Jeevakhara* 8 (1978): 393–408; W. Kasper, ed., *Absolutheit des Christentums*, (Freiburg, 1977; J. Eckert, “The Gospel for Israel and the Nations: The Problem of the Absoluteness of Christianity in the New Testament, *Concilium* 135 (1980): 33–45; and Ch. Demke, *Die Einzigartigkeit Jesu* (Berlin, 1976).

53 Cf. *BIMA I* (Baguio City, 1978), “A Letter from the Participants to the Bishops of Asia,” *Toward a New Age in Mission*, vol. 3, p. 29.

54 G. H. Anderson and T. F. Stransky, eds., *Christ’s Lordship and Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, New York, 1981).

55 K. Reinhardt, “In What Way is Jesus Christ Unique?”, *Communio* 1 (1974): 343–64.

56 F. Gómez, “The Uniqueness and Universality of Christ.”

57 P. Lahad, “Pour une reinterprétation du Christianisme dans les jeunes églises,” *Telega* (1978/1): 39–

58 K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christianity* (New York, 1978), p. 304.

59 B. Uzukwo, “Notes on Methodology for an African Theology,” *AFER* 19 (1977): 159.

60 Choan-Seng Song, “New Frontiers of Theology in Asia,” *Ching Feng* 22(1979): 9.

ingly, the quest for the “uniqueness of Christ” has never been absent from Christian speculation (J. Dupuis).⁶¹

Felipe Gómes has warned against some of the “new Christologies,” “shearing Jesus Christ of his divine dimension, which is the heart of Christianity itself.”⁶² Some authors, he claims, take the encounter of Christianity with other religions as “a privileged starting point” from which “to relativize Jesus Christ.”⁶³ He gives as one of the reasons behind this relativizing trend “the awareness of all human perceptions being limited, and that Jesus’ identity depends on our understanding *somehow*; furthermore our faith, our Christian witness, is a constituent factor of Jesus’ significance for the present.”⁶⁴ He goes on to cite S. J. Samartha:

There is no reason to claim that the religion developed in the desert around Mount Sinai is superior to the religion developed on the banks of the river Ganga.⁶⁵

A. Piers explains how over the last four hundred years the church has changed its attitude towards other religions, considering them first as anti-Christian, then as non-Christian, and now as pre-Christian or *anonymously* Christian—resulting in conquest, adaptation, fulfillment, and sacramental theories respectively.⁶⁶

It is interesting to consider to what extent church-centeredness has been manifest in those developments. Particularly in its pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* and in its declaration *Nostra Aetate*, Vatican II appeared to reach out beyond ecclesio-centrism. Pope Paul VI explicitly confirmed a recognition of and respect for “the moral and spiritual values of the various non-Christian religions,” adding: “We desire to join with them in promoting common ideals of religious liberty, human brotherhood, good culture, social welfare and civil order.”⁶⁷ The Council, at the time still in session, opened the broadest perspectives by stressing God’s eschatological Kingdom as the ultimate goal.⁶⁸ But its constitution on the church and *Nostra Aetate* spoke only of “Muslims” without reference to Islam as a *religion* enshrining “moral and spiritual values.”⁶⁹ The role of the world religions as such in the history of salvation had slowly to emerge towards greater clarity from the church’s new self-understanding.

61 J. Dupuis, “The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the Early Christian Tradition”; W. Kasper, *Absolutheit des Christentums*.

62 G. Morel, *Questions d’homme: Jésus dans la théorie chrétienne* (Paris, 1977).

63 See for example E. Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions* (London, 1972); H. R. Burkler, “Jesus Christ and Religious Pluralism,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 16 (1979): 457–71; John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (New York, 1973).

64 See F. Gómes, “The Uniqueness and Universality of Christ.”

65 S. J. Samartha, “The Lordship of Jesus Christ and Religious Pluralism,” G. H. Anderson and T. F. Stransky, eds., *Christ’s Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, p. 32.

66 A. Piers, “The Church, the Kingdom, and the Other Religions,” *Dialogue* 22 (October 1970): 3–7.

67 Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, August 6, 1964, *AAS* 56 (1974): 655.

68 *Lumen Gentium* notes that the Church is “the initial budding forth of the Kingdom” (5). *Gaudium et Spes* states that Christ’s disciples are “journeying towards the Kingdom” (1, and see also 22, which speaks of the mysterious ways of salvation). *Ad Gentes* affirms that religions are a “secret presence of God,” which the missionary activity of the Church “restores to Christ its maker” (9); elsewhere the same document states that other religions are a “preparation for the Gospel,” and “need to be enlightened and purified,” but they contain salvific values (3). This perspective of God’s Kingdom to be realized in and through Christ is evident in Part 1 of *Gaudium et Spes*, the closing articles of the four chapters (22, 32, 39, 45)

69 See *Lumen Gentium*.16; *Nostra Aetate*.3.

It is in this light that one listens to the assertion of Pope John Paul II that the action of the Holy Spirit is operative in the lives of non-Christians not in spite of their religious adherence, but rather at its essence and foundation.⁷⁰

A. Balchand concludes his study on the salvific value of “non-Christian” religions according to Asian Christian theologians writing in Asian published theological journals between 1965 and 1970 with the following summary:

1. The authors are convinced of God’s and Christ’s presence in the religions (their rites, practices, ceremonies, scriptures, holy founders, and leaders), described as hidden, imperfect, comparable to Christ’s presence in the Old Testament.
2. In those religions God is revealing himself; through them God’s own inspirations and decrees are accepted in faith. Their revelation is considered preparatory, incomplete, fragmentary, and veiled in comparison to revelation in Christianity. They have elements of true revelation and are part of God’s cosmic and primitive divine revelation, in contrast to the unique historical revelation in Christianity and the “public” revelation of Jesus Christ.
3. The differences in concepts of faith are considered slight, and the similarities very close. The other religions bear traces of God’s grace. The mediation offered by grace in those religions differs in kind and not only in degree from that in Christianity.
4. Most theologians speak very highly of the role of those religions in the salvation of their adherents, and stress God’s universal salvific will intending to save people collectively, as a group, within their various historical, cultural, social and religious milieus. Religions are paths, means, channels, and instruments of salvation, an “anonymous (implicit) Christianity.” In evaluating the religions positively the authors speak of “hidden treasures,” “jewels,” “rays of the truth,” “seeds of the word,” “harvest of the Holy Spirit,” “shadows of the true reality,” and the like.
5. Some refer to other religions as pre-Christian in character and preparatory in role to the reception of the fullness in Christianity. Others consider Christianity, Christ, and the church as the fulfillment of other religions.
6. Not all are totally positive in their appraisal of the salvific value of those religions. Some point out their ambiguous character: they contain a combination of truth and error, holiness and sinfulness, traces of God’s activity and humanity’s sinfulness. While Christianity is their fulfillment in some aspects, it stands in opposition to them in other aspects.⁷¹

In line with Catholic doctrine’s positive acknowledgement of the world religions as containing truth and holiness,⁷² “the work of the Spirit of God,”⁷³ channels of grace for their followers, and shining with revelation through their scriptures and prophets,⁷⁴ the FABC documents frequently speak of religions and religious traditions as “significant and positive elements in the economy of God’s design of salvation,”⁷⁵ through which “God has drawn our peoples to himself”;⁷⁶ a positive attitude which certainly has resulted from experience of other believers rather than of religions in the abstract: Hindu and Buddhist methods of prayer (Yoga and Zen), spiritual nourishment in the scriptures of other religions, greater involvement in interreligious dialogue?⁷⁷ There is an emphasis on “a deeper awareness of god and the whole self in

70 Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, March 4, 1979, *AAS* 71 (1979): 275–76.

71 Paraphrased from A. Balchand, *The Salvific Value of Non-Christian Religions*, pp. 66–68; with regard to the conclusion on A. Pieris’s position, see part three of the present paper.

72 Cf. *Nostra Aetate*, 2.

73 *Redemptor Hominis*, 12.

74 D. S. Amalorpavadass, ed., *Statement on NonBiblical Scriptures* (Bangalore, 1974).

75 *Final Statement*, FABC I (Taipei, 1974), n. 14.

76 *Final Statement*, FABC I, n. 15.

77 M. A. Amaladoss, “The Local Churches in Asia,” p. 331.

recollection, silence and prayer, flowering in openness to others, in compassion, non violence, generosity.”⁷⁸ Religions contain “profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values,” and have been “the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors,” a source of “light and strength,” “the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer,”⁷⁹ and give “shape to the histories and cultures of our nations,”⁸⁰ and are “the expression and the reality of our peoples’ deepest selves.”⁸¹ Neighbors of other faiths and beliefs share with us “the task of total human development,”⁸² efforts “for the development of our peoples, for freedom, justice and peace,”⁸³ for “the promotion of integral human values.”⁸⁴

The fulfillment theory as described above, however, has provoked a number of questions worth reflecting on in our search for “theology with Asian resources.” It is clear that this theory departs from faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God become man, as the unique mediator of salvation.⁸⁵ This faith in “the uniqueness of Christ”⁸⁶ and in the universality of his redemptive work pertaining to the quintessence of our faith, should be preserved at all costs.

But perhaps the further question could be asked: Which idiom or language should be used—with due respect, of course, to the whole of the Christian tradition—in our Asian, particularly religious context, in order to pave the way for faithful recognition of Christ’s all decisive role in human history? If Asian theology wishes to explain in different ways, or to formulate in a manner presumably more appropriate for our people, that Jesus Christ “has a determinative effect on every person in settling the ultimate purpose of his life,”⁸⁷ no explanation or formulation may evacuate the content of faith.⁸⁸

For example, M. Zago has suggested a way to proclaim the Christian message using the Buddhist idiom.⁸⁹ In the search for a definitive liberation Christ could be presented as “the man perfectly cleansed of all passions, the perfectly awakened and liberated man,” “our guide by his example and teaching,” and so forth.⁹⁰ Questions fairly important, however, remain regarding how to explain Christ’s divinity, his

78 *Final Statement*, FABC II (Calcutta, 1978), n.35.

79 *Final Statement*, FABC I, n. 14.

80 *Final Statement*, FABC I, n. 14.

81 *Final Statement*, FABC I, n. 16.

82 *Final Statement*, (Asian Bishops’ Meeting, Manila, 1970), resolution 12.

83 *Final Statement*, (Asian Bishops’ Meeting, Manila, 1970), n. 25.

84 *BIMA* 111(1982), recommendation 3.

85 See note 11 above.

86 Since a great deal of misunderstanding is generated by a confused terminology, words like “uniqueness,” “absoluteness,” “finality,” and “universality” must be made precise; see *Absolutheit des Christentums*, especially K. Lehmann, pp. 13–38; see also H. Rzepkowski, “What is Meant by Christianity’s Claim to Absoluteness?,” *Verbum STD* 20 (1979): 67–75.

87 E. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York, 1979), p. 602; also L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ* (London, 1969), p. 115.

88 K. Reinhardt, “In What Way is Jesus Christ Unique?”

89 M. Zago, “The Proclamation of the Christian Message in a Buddhist Environment: An Essay in Contemporary Evangelization and Catechesis,” *FABC Papers* 5 (Hong Kong, 1974), particularly pp.13–22; cf. also by the same author, “Dialogue in a Buddhist Context,” *Toward a New Age*, vol. 3, pp. 83–100 (includes bibliography).

90 M. Zago, “The Proclamation of the Christian Message in a Buddhist environment,” pp. 16–17.

originality and oneness, Christ as the cause of salvation, his presence and continuing activity.⁹¹

When people of other faiths apply the fulfillment theory as Christians do, do we not then expect to hear from Hindus that Christ is “Avatara,”⁹² from Buddhists that Jesus is only a “bodhisattva”⁹³ or aspirant for enlightenment, while Gautama is *the* Buddha; from Muslims that “Isa al-Masih” is a prophet albeit a special one, while Muhammad remains *the* prophet?⁹⁴ Would not the assertion that Jesus is *the* Son, *the* Christ, *the* Lord, be just one rival claim among others,⁹⁵ and even “the greatest ‘stumbling block’ for our brethren”?⁹⁶

Various authors see various roots for such Christian “absolutism” or “exclusivism”: the semitic concept of God (Radhakrishnan), the product of an apocalyptic mentality (P. Knitter), “survival language” of a threatened community later on misinterpreted dogmatically (Gregory Baum), in other words, “just the ‘grammar’ of the particularity of Christ for Christians.”⁹⁷ Why, then, is Jesus precisely “unique”? Because, whereas “all great men are God’s special gifts to mankind, Christ is God’s Self-gift,”⁹⁸ “the Self-communication of the Father . . . the ‘Second Person’ of the Trinitarian plenitude of divine unity.”⁹⁹ BIMA I puts it this way:

The dialogue in terms of equality and in a common search for God is not to deny the uniqueness of Christ but rather to seek the fullness of Christ—the Cosmic Christ in whom the uniqueness of Jesus of Nazareth is fully and finally manifested.¹⁰⁰

The next question will be how to explain the particular position of the church as the sacrament of God’s salvific action throughout the whole of human history, which is a matter of capital importance as well in Christian faith. How can *the church* relate itself to other religions? Do they also have what *we* have: revelation, inspiration, salvation? What can Christianity assume, adapt, enrich itself with, from other religions?¹⁰¹ Questions like these are quite understandable from the background of the experience of centuries-long isolation of Christianity from other religions. Interfaith dialogue ought indeed be a way of enriching and correcting our theology, because they have so

91 M. Zago, “The Proclamation of the Christian Message in a Buddhist Environment,” p. 18.

92 On Radhakrishnan’s and Gandhi’s views on Christ, see M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of Indian Renaissance* (London, 1969), chapters 7 and 8.

93 See for example J. Swyngedouw, “The Image of Christ in the Eyes of the Japanese.”

94 M. Ayoub, “Towards an Islamic Christology: An Image of Jesus in Early Shi’i Literature,” *The Muslim World* 66 (1976): 163–88; Ali Mend, “Christ according to the Qur’an,” *Vidyajyoti* 39 (1981): 306–20.

95 A. Pieris, “Speaking of the Son of God in Non-Christian Cultures, e.g., in Asia,” *Concilium* 153 (1982): p. 65.

96 S. Vandana, “The ‘Johannine-Upanishadic’ Experience: An Indian Meditation on St. John’s Prologue,” *Indian Theological Studies* 16 (1979): 162.

97 Kodo Matsunami, “Why Do You Say: ‘We are right and you are wrong?’,” *Young East* 2/4 (1976): 22–25, taking Radhakrishnan’s idea uncritically for granted; P. Knitter, “A critique of Hans Kung’s On Being a Christian,” *Horizons* 5/2 (1978): 154; G. Baum, “Is There a Missionary Message?,” *Mission Trends* 1 (1974): 83–84.

98 F. Gómez, “The Uniqueness and Universality of Christ,” p. 22.

99 E. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, p. 667; see also his essay, “I believe in Jesus of Nazareth: the Christ, the Son of God, the Lord,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 17 (1980): 18–32.

100 See the Workshop Discussions of BIMA I, “Dialogue with Asian Religions,” *Toward a New Age*, vol. 3, p. 21; cf. “A Letter from the Participants,” n. 10, p. 29.

101 R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London, 1964/1981).

much to offer.¹⁰² And yet by posing those questions is not it true that our attention ultimately is centered on the church and on making it relevant? Can we still seriously enter into interreligious dialogue as long as our concerns are Christianity-centered or church-centered? Would this not mean that the spiritual, theological, and intellectual climate of dialogue is one of “the Western discussions on the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions?”¹⁰³ Do we duly appreciate other religions, when the fulfillment theory relegates them to a pre-Christian category of spirituality to be “fulfilled” or “baptized” through the church’s missionary endeavor?¹⁰⁴

At the same time, in “accepting the ‘radical surgery’ of rethinking Christianity to fit into the new dialogical mood,”¹⁰⁵ is not there the danger of succumbing to “the temptation of ‘peace at any price’” and simply giving up “that ugly ‘arrogance of the absolutes’?”¹⁰⁶

Now that peoples of various cultures and religions are being drawn ever more closely together, the question is shifting from “What is the relationship of Christianity to other cultures and religions?” to “What is the place of Christianity in a religiously and culturally pluralistic world?” This marks the move away from a Christianity centeredness.¹⁰⁷

Apart from the fact that the expression “non-Christian,” still wide-spread even after Vatican II,¹⁰⁸ is “an ideological residue of theological colonialism” lumping together such radically different traditions as those of Islam and Buddhism or Judaism and Hinduism, the term should be banished from our vocabulary as an offence to our neighbors of other faiths.¹⁰⁹ It “gives the impression of Christians arrogantly looking down on the other religions, considering them as inferior.”¹¹⁰ It betrays how the church-centered thinking and the mentality of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* is still present among many Christians, at least as a “subconscious” assumption in theologizing and church planning. Other terms such as “great religions,” “world religions,” “cosmic religions,” and “great religious traditions” sound much more positive.

We should not, however, leave out the immense world of religious beliefs and traditions which are less institutionalized but quite influentially pervade the day to day lives of the masses, and mostly fall within the term “popular religiosity.”

102A. Pieris, “Western Christianity and Asian Buddhism,” *Dialogue* 7 (1980): 49–85; “The Place of Non-Christian Religions and Cultures in the Evolution of Third World Theology,” *East Asian Pastoral Review* 19/2 (1982): 5–33.

103F. Wilfred, “Sunset in the East?”, p. 1.

104A. Pieris, “The Non-Semitic Religions of Asia,” p. 437.

1051g. Puthiadam, “Christian Faith and Life in a World of Religious Pluralism,” *Concilium* 135 (1980): 99–112.

106Th. Manickam, “Theologizing in India,” *Journal of Dharma* 5 (1980): 412.

107We refer to F. Wilfred, *Some Heuristic Propositions*, p. 1, and “Dialogue Gasping for Breath?”, pp. 1–2.

108Note the title of Vatican II’s declaration: *On the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christians*

109R. Panikkar, “The Church and the World Religions,” *Religion and Society* 14 (June 1967): 61.

110S.J. Samartha, “Introducing a Discussion,” p.x. (See note 7 above.)

The term “anonymous Christians,” coined by K. Rahner,¹¹¹ is perhaps not altogether free of church-centeredness. To say the least, to people of other faiths the term tends to sound unpleasant and triumphalistic.¹¹²

We do well to ask ourselves if such terms do not tacitly imply an analysis and judgment of other religions “from the outside,” namely, from the Christian viewpoint. Should we not rather try to empathize with their adherents and discern their various elements from “within”? What, then, is the proper role of Christian faith in this discernment, humble and respectful as it ought to be?

Furthermore, there may be in our attitudes something of the epistemology underlying much of “Western” theology, characterized by “a dichotomy of subject and object.” In a subtle way there may be at work an exaltation of the thinking subject, the knower, in contrast to the object, an attitude reinforcing “Western” discursive reasoning, logics and analysis, and fostering a tendency to judge too quickly between the true and the false, a “technological epistemology” leading at the religious level to “the loss of the sense of mystery of the sacred, reification of religions, namely reduction of religion to manageable and controllable formulae and conceptual molds.”¹¹³

At the same time, is not there at times a tendency “to overkill by criticism of alleged ‘Western’ absolutism, spiritual imperialism, aggressive intolerance, and other similar slogans, criticism which begins from a sincere will to dialogue but ends in a relativistic Christology and a ‘demissionizing’ Christianity”?¹¹⁴

The way in which Christ is presented must undoubtedly change, yet without sacrificing identity to relevance. The approach must be pastoral, granting pride of place to life, trusting the hand of the Spirit in those who search with sincerity even when the appearances are perplexing. But the rejection of doctrine is no solution, nor is it... the attitude of those who are too humble to be convinced of anything.¹¹⁵

F. Wilfred proposes the following thought for reflection: In the “Western” way of theologizing a dichotomy between creation (the fostering or promotion of life) and redemption (“saving or freeing life” identified with salvation history), based on the one hand on a static idea of creation, and on the other, on a narrowing down of God’s saving activity to a group of people, has resulted in “the subordination of creation to soteriology,” a “soteriologism,” “centered on the past with emphasis on the saving events of God rather than on the truth that God is the Saviour.” The expression of

111K. Rahner’s view influenced, among others, P. De Letter, “The Faith of Anonymous Christians,” *The Clergy Monthly* 34 (June/July 1970): 229–40, and “Revelation in Non-Christian Religions,” *The Clergy Monthly* 29 (December 1965): 466–67; J. Spae, “The Salvation of Non-Christians in Japanese Perspective,” *The Japan Missionary Bulletin* 20(1966): 57–59. See also A. Balchand, *The Salvific Value of Non-Christian Religions*, pp. 38-40.

112Note that Karl Rahner has been called an “anonymous Buddhist.” Similar ideas had been expressed by Saivites and Vaishnavites centuries ago; see I.Hirudayam, “The Maturation of the Asian Church.” p. 12.

113F. Wilfred, “Dialogue Gasping for Breath?”, p. 12.

114A. F. Glasser, “A Paradigm Shift? Evangelicals and Interreligious Dialogue,” *Missiology* 9 (1981): 393–408.

115F. Gómez, “The Uniqueness and Universality of Christ,” p. 30.

this tendency is to read the entire bible under the leitmotif of salvation history,¹¹⁶ whereas

the bible with its complex and variegated nature defies any casting of its content into a single mold of a linear salvation-history, as this does not respect the didactical narrative, wisdom materials and themes with which it is interwoven.¹¹⁷

The whole human race has, indeed, the same origin and the same destiny.

For all peoples comprise a single community, and have a single origin, since God made the whole race of men dwell over the entire face of the earth (Acts 17:26). One also is their final goal: God¹¹⁸(*Nostra Aetate*, 1).

The deepest bond of unity based on creation cannot be unmade by sinful divisions. The various peoples with their cultures and religions should encounter one another today in order to reinforce that unity, for “his [God’s] providence, his manifestations of goodness and his saving designs extend to all men” (*Nostra Aetate*, 1).

The question is whether “soteriologism” does full justice to the meaning of the total cosmic reality as the work of God’s hands, to the meaning of human life within this concrete world. If not, will not this trend meet with some difficulty in an in-depth encounter with Asians with their view on the cosmos as the source of salvation, a cosmic view closer to Israel’s mentality, for whom “creation and the ordering of the world by God is the most fundamental element of faith,” and “historical experience and events of salvation are the concretization or realization of the creative power of God.”¹¹⁸

MORE RADICALLY INNOVATIVE TRENDS

Developments in theological reflection need not necessarily proceed in a straight, unbroken line. They may also involve significant turning points.¹¹⁹ Traditional theological frameworks may well prove to be inadequate for integrating the new experiences of Asian churches, for responding properly to new questions and problems that keep emerging from actual life situations.

In the final statement of the Dar-es-Salaam Conference of Third World theologians (August 5–12, 1976) one notes a clear reaction against “the theologies from Europe and North America” which “are dominant today in our churches, and represent one form of cultural domination.”¹²⁰ Dissatisfied with the more traditional adaptive trends, some Asian theologians are searching for a more radically new theological approach to the meaning of Christianity’s presence and of the church’s evangelizing mission in our continent. Parmananda Divarkar writes:

116K. G. Steck, *Die Idee der Heilsgeschichte*. Hoffmann–Schlatter–Cullmann (Zurich, 1959); F. Wilfred, “A Matter of Theological Education. Some Critical Reflections on the Suitability of ‘Salvation History’ as Theological Model for India,” *Vidyajyoti* 48 (1984): 538–556; see also his “Dialogue Gasping for Breath?,” p. 10.

117F. Wilfred, “Dialogue Gasping for Breath?,” p. 10.

118Claus Westermann, *Creation* (Philadelphia, 1974); “Biblical Reflection on Creator-Creation,” *Creation in the Old Testament*, ed. by B. W. Anderson (Philadelphia, 1984), pp. 90–101; in the same collection, see also the essays by H. H. Schmid, “Creation, Righteousness, and Salvation. ‘Creation Theology’ as the Broad Horizon of Biblical Theology?,” pp. 102–17, and G. M. Landes, “Creation and Liberation,” pp. 135–51.

119F. Wilfred, “Dialogue Gasping for Breath?,” p. 1.

120*Final Statement*, n. 31, *IDOC Bulletin* 46 (1976): 8.

We are a prefabricated structure; we have not grown according to the normal laws of life, starting from a cell and gradually developing into a complex organism. At first sight, it might seem an advantage, a saving of time, to skip the slow stages that lead to maturity and to find oneself catapulted into adulthood, with all the trappings of a full-blown church. But a living being cannot take shortcuts except at the expense of vitality and eventual fertility.. We are not a young church, except in the sense that we have never really grown up.¹²¹

Many agree on starting with experience in the given situation as the bedrock for theology.¹²² C. H. Abesamis, for example, proposes to “bracket off the Western Greek tradition” because it hinders indigenous theologizing;¹²³ according to Choan-Seng Son the process of theologizing should be a “a theological leap from Israel to Asia”;¹²⁴ M. Amaladoss notes with regard to liturgy:

In an atmosphere where there is no freedom to experiment and every little step has to be explained and justified to someone who does not understand your culture or language and who is committed to defend “unity” at all costs, creativity is a difficult, if not an impossible task Inculturation is spoken of today not only as incarnational, involving a self-emptying, but also as pascal, involving a dying and rising. Is the church ready to die? What is the principle of identity that perdures through the paschal process? What is the role of tradition and its rootedness in a particular history ... Is there a space for freedom and creativity that may go beyond re-expression?¹²⁵

The author outlines the following method of theologizing on the local church: (a) analysis of the Asian situation, (b) exploration of the challenges of the local churches, (c) reflection on the kind of church people have to be in order to adequately meet those challenges.¹²⁶ The corresponding church model suited for Asia would be:

(a) a church prepared to stand on the side of the poor and to part with any false securities (money, power, influence, etc.); (b) a church not “foreign,” but rooted in the country and committed to the people’s effort to build up a new humanity of freedom, fellowship, and justice; (c) a church of the people, with the laity taking up their proper responsibilities seriously, at the same time carefully specifying the role of the pastoral leadership.¹²⁷

Many FABC Documents give rather detailed accounts of the “Asian” situation and the numerous challenges arising from it, often supposing that we are (particularly in this era of modernization) familiar with the reality, that conditions vary greatly from country to country, culturally, socially, economically, and politically. Although modernization has a considerable impact on the people’s ways of life, it could be a mistake “to think that, because of the rapid spread of technology, we are moving to

121 Parmananda Divarkar, commenting on the visit of Pope John Paul II to India, February 1986, *America*, March 22, 1986, p. 220.

122 Charles R. Taber, “The Limit of Indigenization in Theology,” *Missiology* 6 (1978): 53–79

123 C. H. Abesamis, in A. B. Lambino et al., *Towards “Doing Theology” in the Philippine Contest* (Quezon City Loyola School of Theology, 1977), pp. 92–112.

124 Choan-Seng Son, in G. H. Anderson and T. F. Stransky (eds), *Mission Trends 3: Third World Theologies* (New York, 1976), pp. 211–22.

125 M. A. Amaladoss, “The Local Churches in Asia,” p. 324.

126 Amaladoss, “The Local Churches in Asia,” pp. 337–38.

127 Amaladoes, “The Local Churches in Asia,” pp. 328–29.

wards a global culture. Tools do not make culture; but the symbolic worlds that people have created do.”¹²⁸

Quite a few Third World theologians agree that this concrete historical “context”—or does it belong to the “text” itself?—should be the point of departure of “Asian” theology.¹²⁹ The place of Christianity, its commitment to serving human society, should then be spelled out from *within* that plurireligious and pluricultural situation. S. J. Samartha enumerates some factors of the Asian context as follows:

The renaissance of religions, along with their politicization in many countries of Asia, the desperate search for political structures within which religions and ideologies can make their contributions to the larger life of the nation, the struggle of the poor and marginalized people for a fuller life, and the need to hold together the purpose of humanity and the concerns of Nature.¹³⁰

Particularly from the viewpoint of inter religious dialogue, the *Study Document* of the FABC Theological Advisory Commission in its Singapore meeting of April, 1987, presents the following description:

While the increasing facility and rapidity of communications and the growing economic and political interdependence favor mutual relations and fellowship, the symbolic systems that structure human life, like language, culture and religion combined with the human desire for domination seem to be causes of conflict and division. But their *desire for peace and fellowship* urges people to a dialogue based on their common destiny and on mutual acceptance of and respect for each one’s dignity and freedom. The religions are called to provide a *special role of leadership* in the process, oriented as they are to the ultimate and therefore capable of transcending the limiting and divisive factors in human history.¹³¹

If theological reflection is to develop then from within such an immense variety of local or regional situations, would not these give rise to a marked plurality of trends in theologizing, in other words, would not they justify the development of various Asian theologies with a variety of accents and approaches?

According to the Asian bishops, evangelization in Asia involves a threefold dialogue: with the poor, with the cultures, and with the religions of Asia.¹³² Hence the concern for integral human development, the growth of authentic faith from within the cultures, and interreligious dialogue are three major ingredients in Asian theologies.

While mentioning the conflict between “the inculturationists’ Christ-of-religions theology” and “the liberationists’ Christ-against-religions theology,” which took place until as late as at the Asian Conference of Third World Theologians, Wennapuwa, Sri Lanka, from 7 to 20 January 1979, A. Pieris wishes Asian theology to set off from “religiosity and poverty,” which “in their coalescence provide both the cultural context and the liberationist thrust required in any Asian Christology,” because religiosity

128 Amaladoss, “The Local Churches in Asia,” p.336.

129 L. Mercado, “Contextual Theology in the Philippines: A Preliminary Report,” *Philippiniana Sacra* 14/40(1979): 37.

130 S. J. Samartha, “Christians and Neighbors of Other Faiths in Asia. A Search for New Relationships,” a paper presented at the Joint Consultation of FABC-CCA, Singapore, July 5–10, 1987, mimeographed, p. 10.

131 FABC, *Dialogue with Other Religions*, n. 1.

132 *Final Statement* of FABC I, nn. 25–28.

and poverty are “the two perspectives along which Jesus himself revealed his divine Sonship to his first Asian followers.”¹³³

Christ could make sense in our cultures only to the extent that we use the *soteriological* idiom of “non-Christian” religions . . . the door which was once closed to Jesus in Asia is the only door that can take him in today, namely, the soteriological nucleus or the liberative core of various religions that have given shape and stability to our cultures.¹³⁴

Practical “immersion” and concrete involvement particularly in Asian religiosity and poverty, according to the author, should be a main and essential feature in Asian theology. In this we should follow Jesus himself who evolved his self-revelation by his “baptismal immersion” into the Asian reality.

It was when he stepped into the Jordan to identify himself with the religious poor of the countryside and sought initiation under this great Asian guru [John the Baptizer] that he manifested his own salvific role to the people: the Lamb/Servant of God, the beloved Son, the Word to be heard, the Giver of the spirit . . . It was by entering into the soteriological nucleus of his culture that He revealed his salvific mission.¹³⁵

But there can be no authentic religiosity without a painful participation in the conflicts of poverty brought about by the conspiracy of “the money-polluted religiosity” with “the foreign colonial power.” Jordan was only the beginning of Calvary.

If the revelatory and mediatory dimension of the salvation-mystery., should manifest itself unambiguously in the human event of Jesus, then that event is pre-eminently the trajectory which, *today* links the *Jordan of Asian religiosity* with the *Calvary of Asian poverty*.¹³⁶

Jesus’ twofold “baptism”¹³⁷ of Jordan and Calvary was at the same time a prophetic gesture amidst Asian reality, revealing the richness of Asian religiosity and the spiritual value of Asian voluntary poverty which draws us to be one with the poor in their struggle for a more human (or less inhuman) life.

A. Pieris, however, sums up the “Asian dilemma” as follows: “the theologians are not (yet) poor, and the poor are not (yet) theologians.” Therefore the theologians are to be awakened into the liberative dimension of “poverty,” and the poor are to be conscientized into the liberative potentialities of their “religiosity.”¹³⁸

Approaching the problem of inculturation pneumatologically, I. B. Banawiratma speaks of “spiritual poverty,” and considers the solidarity of the church with the poor as an encounter with Jesus “who identified himself with the needy (Mt.25:31–46). Hence inculturation is “a process of ‘mystical’ experience, the union with Christ and of ‘political’ commitment, solidarity with the poor.”¹³⁹ The author quotes Pope John Paul II: the commitment of the church to the workers is “a proof of her fidelity to

133The documents of the Wennapuwa Conference are found in *Asia’s Struggle for Full Humanity*, ed. by V. Fabella (New York, 1980); cf. A. Pieris, “Speaking of the Son of God,” p. 67; “Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation,” *Vidyajyoti* 49 (1979):261–84.

134A. Piers, “Speaking of the Son of God,” p. 65. See also M. Zago’s efforts in catechesis in a Buddhist milieu, note 89.

135A. Pieris, “Speaking of the Son of God,” p. 68.

136A. Piers, “Speaking of the Son of God,” p. 68

137On the term “baptism,” see Mt. 3:3–15; Mk.10:35; Lk. 12:50.

138A. Pieris, “The Non-Semitic Religions of Asia,” p. 432.

139J. B. Banawiratma, “A Pneumatological Approach to Inculturation,” *Inculturation VII: Building the Church in Pluricultural Asia* (Rome, 1986), p. 94.

Christ, so that she can truly be ‘the church of the poor.’¹⁴⁰ Thus examples have been given of how to “educate” Asian theology (particularly Christology) from within the soteriological depths of our cultures and from the soteriological premises of Asian religions.¹⁴¹

At this point questions may arise about such ways of interpreting the bible. To what extent is it legitimate to seek new meanings by viewing the gospel from a certain angle? How should Jesus assume the context of every people as the Lord of all, transcendent over cultures, so that He “become the center and norm of man’s decisions, value judgments, pursuit of interests and philosophy of life?”¹⁴²

Not only is there a need to “renew” Christology within Asian realities. The life and mission of our churches in Asia need enlightening by a “renewed” pneumatology as well. Vatican II reaffirms the traditional doctrine that “the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with his [Christ’s] paschal mystery” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22). The Spirit of Christ is active “outside the bounds of the visible church.”¹⁴³ In the Holy Spirit sent to bear witness to Jesus (Jn. 15:26, 16:14) Christ illumines all people, graces all sinners, accepts all goodness, fulfills all religions. That is why Jesus’ universality is better explained in the light of a pneumatic Christology.¹⁴⁴ “The Spirit of the Lord calls each people and each culture to its own fresh and creative response to the gospel,” it was said at the International Mission Congress held in Manila in December of 1979.¹⁴⁵ The activity of the Spirit explains the relative universality of the church, as the Body of Christ and the general sacrament of the salvation and unity of mankind (*Lumen Gentium*, 1). And our peoples

have responded in various ways to the workings of the Spirit among them, and have then emerged as communities of faith, living, experiencing, sharing and celebrating this faith in their social, cultural and religious history¹⁴⁶

A. M. Lourdasamy notes, referring to our neighbors of other faiths, that when they

surrender to God’s grace, word or plan, they are drawn into the mystery of Christ . . . The Hindu may experience the Absolute and sojourn towards the Absolute as epiphanized in Lord Siva or Lord Krishna. The Buddhist may recognize the reality of the Other, the eternal one, who transcends and saves, in the figure of the Buddha.¹⁴⁷

In such life experiences of contact with the Divine it is the Spirit of Christ who operates and saves.

140J. B. Banawiratma, “A Pneumatological Approach to Inculturation,” p. 95.

141A. Pieris, “Speaking of the Son of God,” p.69.

142B. Puthur, “The Relevance of Evangelization,” *Jeevadhara* 10 (1980): 178.

143Statement of BIRA II, 1979, n. 12; Statement of FABC Consultation on Christian Presence among Muslims in Asia, Varanasi, November 26–December 4, 1983 (“Message of the Participants”) touches on “a theology which acknowledges the universal activity of God’s Spirit,” n. 4, *FABC Papers* 3~ p. 52.

144Y. Congar, “Pour une christologie pneumatologique. Note bibliographique,” *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 63 (1979): 435–42; P. J. Rosato, “Spirit Christology Ambiguity and Promise,” *Theological Studies* 38(1977): 423–49.

145International Mission Congress, Manila 1979, *For All the Peoples of Asia* (Manila, 1984), p. 215.

146Statement of FABC III, Sampran 1982, n. 1.

147A. M. Lourdasamy, “Theology of Interfaith Dialogue,” *Japan Missionary Bulletin* 30 (1976): 161.

Freeing ourselves from narrow church-centeredness, we will be helped to become ever more sensitive and discern more easily the fruits of the spirit among people of other faiths, namely:

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.¹⁴⁸

We have already mentioned that in the past God's saving activity had been narrowed down to a group of people, a factor that resulted in a dichotomy between creation and redemption in the sense that creation became subordinated to soteriology.¹⁴⁹

According to some theologians, for theology to be genuinely Asian a new soteriological paradigm is needed, a new way of looking at the whole of human reality in search of God's Kingdom, and at the interrelationship of the various elements within that totality. But what is so new about that paradigm?

Whereas in a traditional view salvation history has been conceived as "a narrowing of the plan and action of God progressively from the nations to the Jews and then to Jesus, to open out again to the world through the church and its mission,¹⁵⁰ the new vision God's plan of creation and salvation is one and reaches out to all peoples.¹⁵¹ M. Amaladoss writes:

... the focus of evangelization is no longer the church as the visible community, but the Kingdom. The church is the Kingdom's visibility and servant. This distinction-in-unity lends a new dynamism to the process of history, since the ultimate realization of the Kingdom is eschatological. It also gives a new freedom and amplitude to the task of evangelization. It adds a new depth to the mystery of the action of the word and the Spirit in history, whose humble servants we are, not masters.¹⁵²

The basis of the World Council of Churches, namely, that "Jesus Christ is God and Saviour," has been felt by many Catholic and Orthodox theologians, including Asian theologians, as far too narrowly "Christo-monistic," since it does not provide any theological space for new relationships with neighbours of other faiths. A more full-fledged trinitarian elaboration is needed.¹⁵³

Perhaps a theo-centric understanding of the Christian faith might provide more theological space for new relationships than an exclusive "Christomonism." A recognition of the onto-logical priority of the Father and a more open acceptance of the guidance of the Spirit leading us to what may be as yet unfamiliar areas of truth, might both deepen and enlarge our commitment to Christ.¹⁵⁴

Perhaps this Kingdom-oriented soteriological paradigm is more easily seen as the response of Christian faith to the cosmic worldview of Asians. In any case we will have to deepen our theological insight in the mystery of Christ's uniqueness (without

148 *Final Statement* of FABC II, n. 35.

149 See note 17.

150 FABC, *Dialogue with Other Religions*, n. 3.2.

151 FABC, *Dialogue with Other Religions*, refers to Eph. 1:3-6, 9-10; Col. 1:14-16, 19-20; Eph. 2:17-18.

152 M. A. Amaladoas, "The Local Churches in Asia," p. 333.

153 S. J. Samartha, *Christians and Neighbors*, p. 4.

154 S. J. Samartha, *Christians and Neighbors*, p. 12.

falling into “Christo-monism”) and in that of the cosmic all-pervasive action of the Holy Spirit throughout the entire human history within this new paradigm.

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 mystery¹⁵⁵—a symbolic realization that is on mission towards its fulfillment (*Lumen Gentium*, 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 fulfillment.¹⁵⁶

Vatican II emphasizes that the perception among diverse peoples of the “hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human life” and the recognition of “a Supreme Divinity and of a Supreme Father too” “instill the lives of these peoples with a profound religious sense” (*Nostra Aetate*, 2). The unity of God’s plan for humanity and the church’s mission was emphasized by Pope John Paul II as going back to creation and redemption, and therefore, in this sense, “divine”; even religious divergences as something “human” must be overcome “in progress towards the realization of the mighty plan of unity which dominates the creation.”¹⁵⁷

Within that new paradigm a new ecclesiology is called for. Whereas Pieris speaks of an “ecclesiological revolution,”¹⁵⁸ Amaladoss stresses “the need for a new awareness,” for local churches “deeply rooted in discipleship to the Word and the Spirit and at the same time committed to and involved in the world where it is on a mission,” accepting positively its minority position in most countries and committing itself “to the witness and service of the Kingdom rather than be self-centered and defensive,” engaging itself in “dialogue with culture, with the poor, with authentic believers,” “collaborating with everyone in the common promotion of human and spiritual values,” and implementing “a task of mediation that would facilitate such collaboration among others too.”¹⁵⁹

S. J. Emmanuel speaks of Vatican II’s radicality “more in spirit than in its published word,” of a “realistic and existential view” combined with a “holistic approach,” a “Copernican revolution by which we moved from a church-centered ecclesiology to a world-centered one, and from a hierarchy-centered laity to a laity-centered hierarchy.”¹⁶⁰

The church in mission has to face hard realities, not just to play its prophetic role placidly, but also to get involved in people’s movements. The effective promotion of justice requires it “to move beyond development-oriented to liberation-oriented programs involving conscientization and organization of the people and aiming at a change of structures that might involve a struggle, violent or non-violent.”¹⁶¹

According to C. Abesamis’s preparatory commission for the Wennapuwa Conference, the essential elements of theological reflection are: (a) the contemporary life

155FABC, *Dialogue with Other Religions*, n. 6.3: the Church is “visibilizing it [the Kingdom, ordained to it, promoting it.]”

156FABC, *Dialogue with Other Religions*, n. 2.3.

157Pope John Paul II, Talk to the Roman Curia, December 22, 1986, a. 6, quoted in FABC, *Dialogue with Other Religions*, n.2A.

158A. Pieris, “Speaking of the Son of God,” p.68.

159M. A. Amaladoss, “The Local Churches in Asia,” pp. 340–41.

160S. J. Emmanuel, “Contemporary Catholic Thought on the Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World,” position paper prepared for the Fourth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Tokyo, September 16-25, 1986, *FABC Papers* 44, p. 37.

161M. A. Amaladoss, “The Local Churches in Asia,” p. 326 on Human Development (FABC-OHD) 7/1 (1980): 9–12.

situation and history of the people as the source of theology; (b) a serious social analysis by the poor of their lives and society; (c) the necessity of the faith dimension, and the use of the bible in their reflection; (d) the use of native wisdom and religion in their reflections; (e) reflection leading to transforming action; (t) the poor themselves should be the authors of theology.¹⁶²

Consistent with his Christology,¹⁶³ A. Piers strongly suggests that the church “be given time to step into the baptismal waters of Asian religiosity and to pass through the passion and death on the cross of Asian poverty.”¹⁶⁴ But the paschal mystery affects also Asian society with its poverty and religiosity, where in all efforts of contextualizing theology in general, even in the search for a new theological paradigm, Asian world views must “die and rise” purified in Christ’s death and resurrection.¹⁶⁵ Given the fact that symbols used in expressing those World views are part of the respective cultural and religious systems, when F. Wilfred speaks of the need for a “cross-cultural hermeneutics” engaging itself in the discovery of “homeomorphic symbols or concepts” (those playing an equivalent role and function in other religious or cultural systems),¹⁶⁶ this certainly leaves intact the need for Asian cultures to go through the often painful experience of dying and rising with Christ.

In the matter of the church’s concrete involvement in human development and particularly in the promotion of justice, it is by no means easy to answer the question, how far can and should we go. Attempts to immerse theology in the Asian reality and to express the Christian and ecclesial responsibility for human development and for historical (personal as well as social) liberation from situations of dependence, oppression, poverty and injustice, have been made by writers like T. Balasuriya,¹⁶⁷ S. Kappen,¹⁶⁸ and C. Abesamis.¹⁶⁹

In the Dar-es-Salaam Conference of Third World Theologians (5 to 12 August, 1976), differences appeared between the perspectives of theologians of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Some of the Asians and Africans raised their opinion, that for a Third World theology

the liberation problematic cannot be the exclusive one, and the marxian analysis is partial and a forced fit when applied to our own realities, and thus needs serious revision and relativizing, lest the ideological construct prime and shackle the theology—as can, and as perhaps has already happened in some theological work.¹⁷⁰

The Wennapuwa Conference of Third World Theologians held in 1979 agreed that “the substance of theology is to be sought from among people who struggle for

162 *Information on Human Development* (FABC–OHD) 7/1 (1980): 9–12.

163 See note 19 above.

164 A. Piers, “The Local Churches in Asia,” pp. 68–69.

165 F. Gómez, “The Universality and Uniqueness of Christ,” p. 9.

166 F. Wilfred, *Some Heuristic Propositions*, p.9.

167 See Tissa Balasuriya, “Secular Society and the Kingdom of God,” *Mission in Dialogue*, pp. 113–19.

168 S. Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom* (Maryknoll, New York, 1977).

169 See the articles by C. H. Abesamis, “Reflection on the Task of the Asian Theologians,” *Philippine Priests’ Forum* 1/3 (1969): 44–47; “Salvation Today,” 5/4 (1973): 21–32; “Footnotes on Contemporary Theology in the Third World,” 6/3 (1974), pp. 45–57; “Total Salvation: Key to Understanding the Mission of the Church in Asia Today,” *Boletin Eclesidstico de las Filipinos* 49 (1975): 137–43.

170 C. Arevalo, “Prenotes to the Contextualization of Theology,” p. 28; D. S. Amalorpavadass in his report on the Dar-es-Salaam meeting of Third World Theologians, August 5–12, 1976

their rightful fullness of humanity.” But the participants “could not frame a joint statement before the meeting’s end, because some insisted on accepting liberation theology as it is now, as more or less adequate for Asia; while others, seeking more acknowledgement of Asian cultural values, were not ready to agree.” A statement was eventually completed and published.¹⁷¹

The Roman Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples through its theological commission severely criticized the Sri Lanka Conference as presenting a Theology (and a theological methodology) which “does not come any more from God or from revelation, but springs from social conditions and from historical problems”; a theology lacking in revealed value and subject to “deep relativism,” because rooted solely in an understanding of Asian political and social conditions; a theology moving the authentic interpretation of revelation from the bishops to the oppressed poor; a theology using the bible selectively, forgetting the need of conversion and solely recalling God’s presence in the struggle of the people; a theology bypassing the church and concentrating its attacks on capitalism using Marxist categories.¹⁷²

As organizer of the conference, T. Balasuriya replied that the Roman commission made “many errors of judgment—not to say misrepresentations.” More specifically, an unbiased reading makes it clear (a) that the Wennapuwa Declaration often mentions God and Jesus; (b) that it considers the people as one source for theology, not as the only source; (c) that it does not mention bishops does not mean a denial of their role; (d) that regarding the use of Marxist categories to attack capitalism, the declaration says nothing that Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI have not said many times; and (e) that the declaration itself is an invitation to personal and collective conversion to the values of the gospel.¹⁷³

Perhaps, it was suggested, the Western background of the commission members was the cause of misunderstandings. What has Christian and Roman theology to say to a centuries lasting “distortion of the gospel in favor of the exploitative Western colonial presence in Asia”? What has it to say to the contempt of Asian values, culture and religions, and to the attempt to destroy them?¹⁷⁴

EPILOGUE

This panoramic view—although far from comprehensive and properly detailed—is meant to highlight at least some of the major aspects of the development of “theology in Asia” moving in the direction of an “Asian theology,” and to single out from among the numerous efforts of our theologians at least the main trends of theologizing. It is by no means an easy matter to draw clear distinctions between so many currents of thought, or perhaps we might say such a variety of “models of theologizing.” In fact, “theology, in its questions, its method, and its language, is extremely dependent on conceptual resources that belong to the human culture of

171 Julio Xavier Labayen, “Preaching the Gospel in the Asian Social Context,” *Toward a New Age*, vol. 3, pp. 131–32. The statement has been published in pamphlet form as *Asia’s Struggle .11,7 Full Humanity: Towards a Relevant Theology* (Manila, 1979).

172 FABC Newsletter 31 (February 1980): 3; Information on Human Development (FABC-OHD) 7/1 (January 1980): 7–8.

173 FABC Newsletter. 31(1980): 3.

174 *Information on Human Development*, p.8.

theologians,”¹⁷⁵ and, we may certainly add, on their personal experiences within the Christian communities in the context of human society with its many problems.

That there is among theologians a struggle for “theological identity,” and at times a painful one, is beyond doubt. It reflects, or is part of, the struggle of our Christian communities themselves: a search for their right place in pluricultural and plurireligious Asia, a search for the right way to be involved in the quest of our peoples for their liberation and development, a search for the right way to present and renew ourselves as church, the sacrament or sign of salvation for all—and we know how painful “conversion” is in the mind of FABC II, Calcutta 1978:

We foresee eventual changes in structure and mentality for the church as a whole, precisely in order that she may be faithful to Christ and promote the plan of God to bring all things together in Christ.

Hopefully, by living our theology as a Spirit-given charism, the service we render to the Asian churches will be blessed by the good God and bear many fruits of deepening Christian faith and ever fuller commitment to Christian mission.

¹⁷⁵Charles Taber, “Is There More Than One Way to Do Theology?” *Gospel in Context* 1 (1978): 4–10.