

The Asian Vision of Mission Today

A visão asiática da missão hodierna

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Abstract

Proclaiming the Good News of Jesus is the centrality of every Christian mission. This proclamation becomes dialogical through the integrating process of cosmic and metacosmic religions which facilitates the salvific divine-human encounter. The Church has come to realize this process only progressively. It is necessary to understand and to accept this process and this new vision, especially in the context of globalization, which has, increasingly, also a religious dimension. The Asian vision of mission seems relevant across the world as Hindu and Buddhist gurus make their ethical presence felt globally, particularly in Europe and North America. The ultimate goal of mission is the Kingdom of God and the Church as its symbol and servant. We recognize today that the Church is a co-pilgrim, together with other religions, who are fellow pilgrims towards this Kingdom. We are then called to dialogue and collaborate with people around the world. In this process, the Church is called to be in dialogue always with the poor, the cultures and the other religions.

Keywords

Vision.
Mission.
Dialogue.
Christianity.
Colaboration.

Resumo

Anunciar a Boa-Nova de Jesus é a centralidade de toda missão cristã. Este anúncio torna-se dialógico pelo processo de integração das religiões cósmicas e metacósmicas que facilita o encontro salvífico divino-humano. A Igreja percebeu esse processo apenas progressivamente. É necessário compreender e aceitar este processo e esta nova visão, especialmente no contexto da globalização, que tem, cada vez mais, também uma dimensão religiosa. A visão asiática de missão parece relevante no mundo global, à medida que gurus indianos, hindus e budistas, marcam sua presença ética globalmente, em modo especial na Europa e na América do Norte. O objetivo final da missão é o Reino de Deus e a Igreja como seu símbolo servidor. Reconhecemos hoje que a Igreja é uma peregrina, juntamente com outras religiões, que são companheiras de peregrinação para o Reino. Somos então chamados a dialogar e colaborar com pessoas de todo o mundo. Neste processo, a Igreja é chamada a dialogar sempre com os pobres, as culturas e as outras religiões.

Palavras-chave

Visão.
Missão.
Diálogo.
Cristianismo.
Colaboração.

Introduction

The goal of Christian mission in general is to proclaim the Good News of Jesus. But Asia is the continent that has given rise to other major world religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Islam, besides Christianity. The proclamation of the Good News in such a context has dimensions and challenges of its own. Anthropologists traditionally distinguish between cosmic and metacosmic religions. Cosmic religions seek to understand life in the world in terms of the cosmos, while metacosmic religions reach to realities beyond the cosmos to explain it. These often involve a revelation. While a metacosmic religion like Christianity seems to integrate easily with the cosmic religions it encounters, transforming them in the process, when it encounters another metacosmic religion such an easy integration does not seem possible, especially when that religion too is seen as facilitating salvific divine-human encounter. What happens then is rather dialogue between the religions leading to mutual influence. Proclamation then becomes dialogical. It is this process that characterizes mission in Asia today. But the Church has come to realize this process only progressively. To understand the contemporary vision of mission in Asia, it is necessary to become aware of this process. In this paper I shall try to outline this process and the new vision of mission to which it leads. I shall also show how the Church has progressively understood and accepted this new vision, especially in the context of globalization, which has, increasingly, also a religious dimension. The Asian vision of mission seems relevant across the world as Hindu and Buddhist gurus make their presence felt globally, particularly in Europe and North America.

Missionary outreach in Asia goes back to the beginnings of Christianity itself. There is a strong tradition that St. Thomas the Apostle proclaimed the Gospel in Syria and India. There were trade contacts between the Middle East and South India at that time and he could have gone there with the traders. Around the 8th century after Christ, Syrian Christian traders also reached out to north-western China, though Christianity did not take hold there as it did in India. The contacts between Syria and India continued over the centuries.

Then comes the Portuguese trade in the 16th century which reached out to India and Asia by the sea around Africa. Missionaries accompanying the Portuguese sought to spread the Church. They held on to two principles strongly: Jesus Christ is the only Saviour and the Church is necessary for salvation. So anyone who wants to be saved has to become Christian through Baptism and believe that Jesus Christ is his/her savior. But a clear distinction between religion and culture was not made so that the new converts also took on the cultures of the missionaries.

Mission in the 16th Century

Mission acquires a new dimension with Mateo Ricci (1552-1610) in China and Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656) in India. It may be significant that they were both Italians, not Portuguese. They suggested that the Christian converts need not become culturally Portuguese, but remain Chinese or Indian. Ricci himself lived like a Chinese nobleman and de Nobili as an Indian Brahmin sannyasi. After some initial difficulties this was accepted by the Church. While there was some effort at cultural adaptation with regard to the way of life, Church organization and worship remained Roman (Latin). The Catechism was translated into the local languages and people's religiosity - prayers and celebrations - was in the local language and culture. As a matter of fact Joseph Constantius Beschi (1680-1747), an Italian Jesuit, mastered the Tamil language of southeastern India so well that he wrote an epic in Tamil, based on the life of St. Joseph, but narrating the whole history of salvation. He also composed four minor poetical works in Tamil in praise of Mary. He built churches in honour of Mary and encouraged popular worship and celebrations according to local customs. Books were also written in the local languages. But the official theological discourse - e.g. teaching and learning in seminaries - remained in Latin till the Second Vatican Council.

Mission in India in the 19th Century

The Fathers of the Church like Justin¹ and Clement of Alexandria²

¹ Cf. 2 *Apol.* XIII, 2-6.

discerned the ‘seeds of the Word’ in the Greek philosophical tradition, seeing it as a ‘paedagogue’³ to Christ. In India, a positive view of other religions and cultures did not start with the Second Vatican Council. Already in the nineteenth century, some Hindus in India looked on Jesus as a guru who inspired them to reform their own religious tradition.⁴ One of them who became Christian, Brahmabandab Upadhyaya (1861-1907), thought that Hindu philosophy and religion will find their fulfilment in Jesus and the Gospel and, more specifically, in the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas.⁵ Some missionaries adopted a similar attitude. J.N. Farquahar wrote a book pointing to Christianity as the *Crown of Hinduism*.⁶ Pierre Johanns, a Belgian Jesuit missionary, wrote a series of essays under the general title: *To Christ through the Vedanta*, showing how various Hindu Vedantic philosophical traditions can find fulfilment in the Scholastic theology of Thomas Aquinas.⁷ Abbé Jules Monchanin and Dom Henri Le Saux from France had a great admiration for the mystic traditions of Hinduism and founded a Christian ashram, hoping that these mystic traditions will find their fulfilment in the mysticism of the Trinity.⁸

The Second Vatican Council

It is in this context that the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was celebrated. It makes two basic affirmations. In its document on *The Church in the Modern World*, it affirms that salvation is available to all through the action of the Spirit in ways unknown to us.

² Cf. Strom. VI, 8.

³ It is interesting that in speaking of such guides Clement refers to “the Indian gymnosophists. Of these there are two classes, some of them called Sarmanae, and others Brahmins... Some, too, of the Indians obey the precepts of Buddha.” (Strom I, 15)

⁴ Cf. Thomas, M. M. *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*. London: SCM Press, 1969.

⁵ Cf. ANIMANANDA, B. *The Blade: the Life and Work of Brahmababdab Upadhyaya*. Calcutta: Roy and Son, 1947; LIPNER, J. *Brahmobandab Upadhyay: The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁶ J.N.FARQUHAR, *The Crown of Hinduism*. London: Oxford University Press, 1913. For more information on the persons in this and the next two footnotes see R.H.S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*. Chennai (Madras): The Christian Literature Society, 1969.

⁷ P. JOHANNIS, *Vers le Christ par le Vedanta. 2 vols*. Louvain: Lessinaum, 1932-1933.

⁸ MONCHANIN, J.; LE SAUX, H. *A Benedictine Ashram*. Douglas: Times Press, 1964. MONCHANIN, J. *Mystique de l’Inde, mystère chrétien*. Paris: Fayard, 1974. LE SAUX, H. *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience*. Rev.Ed. Delhi: ISPCK, 1984.

Since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery.⁹

The document on *Religious Liberty* “declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom.”¹⁰ The Council also promotes, what we call today, interreligious dialogue in its document on *Non-Christian Religions*. “Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truth found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture.”¹¹ (NA 2)

The Federation of the Asian Bishops’ Conferences

In 1974, the Asian bishops came together for their first general assembly on the theme of evangelization as a preparation for their participation in the Synod of Bishops on Evangelization. They characterized evangelization as a three-fold dialogue of the Gospel with the local cultures, the many religions of Asia and the poor to whom the good news is preached (Lk 4:18) leading to the building up of local Churches.¹² Of this three-fold dialogue, the dialogue with religions seems more crucial for the development of a new theology of mission. So I shall focus on it first and treat of the cultures and the poor briefly later.

The Asian bishops affirm that salvation is available to everyone, countering the traditional affirmation that there is no salvation outside the Church.

In Asia especially this (evangelization) involves a dialogue with the great religious traditions of our peoples. In this dialogue we accept them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God’s design of salvation. In them we recognize and respect, profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. Over many centuries they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our

⁹ Cf. No. 22.

¹⁰ Cf. No. 2

¹¹ Cf. No. 2.

¹² Cf. ROSALES, G. B.; AREVALO, C.G. (eds.). *For All the Peoples of Asia, I*. Manila: Claretian Publications, 1997, p. 14-16.

contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations. How then can we not give them reverence and honour? And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them?¹³

They were also positive to the prayer methods and traditions of Asian religions in their second general assembly in 1978 in Kolkata, India. They said:

Sustained and reflective dialogue with them in prayer (as shall be found possible, helpful and wise in different situations) will reveal to us what the Holy Spirit has taught others to express in a marvellous variety of ways. These are different perhaps from our own, but through them we too may hear His voice, calling us to lift our hearts to the Father.¹⁴

Here we see Christians and others praying together, though this was not envisaged when St. John Paul II invited the members of other religions in 1986 to come together to Assisi to pray for peace. They came together to pray, but not to pray together.

Towards the Kingdom of God

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

Its experience of the other religions has led the Church in Asia to this positive appreciation of their role in the divine economy of salvation. This appreciation is based on the fruits of the Spirit perceived in the lives of the other religions' believers: a sense of the sacred, a commitment to the pursuit of fullness, a thirst for self-realization, a taste for prayer and commitment, a desire for renunciation, a struggle for justice, an urge to basic human goodness, an involvement in service, a total surrender of the self to God, and an attachment to the

¹³ ROSALES; AREVALO, 1997, p.14.

¹⁴ ROSALES; AREVALO, 1997, p.35.

transcendent in their symbols, rituals and life itself, though human weakness and sin are not absent.

This positive appreciation is further rooted in the conviction of faith that God's plan of salvation for humanity is one and reaches out to all peoples: it is the kingdom of God through which he seeks to reconcile all things with himself in Jesus Christ. The Church is a sacrament of this mystery - a symbolic realization that is on mission towards its fulfilment.¹⁵ It is an integral part of this mission to discern the action of God in peoples in order to lead them to fulfilment. Dialogue is the only way in which this can be done, respectful both of God's presence and action and of the freedom of conscience of the believers of other religions.¹⁶

The Indonesian bishops view the people of other faiths as "bearers of the 'seeds of the Word' (who) try to live up to authentic religious values which lead them to the God's Reign. They are our fellow wayfarers to the same Reign of God, to whom we all have access in the Spirit through Jesus Christ."¹⁷ I would like to point out here, in passing, that the people of other faiths are seen as 'fellow wayfarers to the same Reign of God.' Asian theology will take up this perspective to assert that the goal of mission is no longer the Church, but the Reign of God, of which the Church is a symbol and servant, and that the Church as well as other religions are fellow pilgrims towards the Reign or the Kingdom of God.

The *Guidelines for Interreligious Dialogue* of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India's Commission for Dialogue and Ecumenism says:

The plurality of religions is a consequence of the richness of creation itself and of the manifold grace of God. Though coming from the same source, peoples have perceived the universe and articulated their awareness of the Divine Mystery in manifold ways, and God has surely been present in these historical undertakings of his children. Such pluralism

¹⁵ *Lumen Gentium* 1:5; cf. BIRA IV/2.

¹⁶ Cf. *Lumen Gentium* 10-12; *Ecclesiae Sanctae* 41-42; *Redemptor Hominis* 11-12. See GNANAPIRAGASAM, J.; WILFRED, F. (eds.). *Being Church in Asia*. Manila: Claretian Publications, 1994, p. 13.

¹⁷ Cf. PHAN, P. C. (ed.). *The Asian Synod. Texts and Commentaries*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002, p. 24.

therefore is in no way to be deplored but rather acknowledged as it is a divine gift.¹⁸

Other Religions in the Teaching and Practice of St. John Paul II

Asian theologians and bishops are happy to see that their positive approach to other religions has been encouraged by the Pope, St. John Paul II. When he invited the leaders of other religions to come together to Assisi in October 1986 to pray for peace in the world, many authoritative commentators suggested that this invitation legitimised other religions as facilitators of divine-human encounter. Marcello Zago, who organized the meeting, said:

At Assisi, the welcome given to the religious representatives and people being present at the prayer offered by various religions were in some way a recognition of these religions and of prayer in particular, a recognition that these religions and prayer not only have a social role but are also effective before God.¹⁹

But, it should be noted that the believers of different religions came together to Assisi to pray, not to pray together. However, in a speech to the Cardinals before Christmas that year, John Paul II insisted that all authentic prayer is from the Holy Spirit. The Spirit can obviously work through the symbols and rituals of other religions.

The Presence of the Spirit in Other Religions

In his encyclical *The Mission of the Redeemer*, St. John Paul II affirmed formally the presence and action of the Spirit in other religions and cultures.

The Spirit manifests himself in a special way in the Church and in her members. Nevertheless, his presence and activity are universal, limited neither by space nor time (DEV 53)...The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions...Thus

¹⁸ CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF INDIA'S COMMISSION FOR DIALOGUE AND ECUMENISM. *Guidelines for Interreligious Dialogue*. New Delhi: CBCI Centre, 1989, p. 29, n. 25.

¹⁹ See ZAGO, M. Day of Prayer for Peace. *Bulletin of the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions* 22, 1987, p.150.

the Spirit, who “blows where he wills” (cf. Jn 3:8), who “was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified” (AG 4), and who “has filled the world,...holds all things together (and) knows what is said (Wis 1:7), leads us to broaden our vision in order to ponder his activity in every time and place (DEV 53)...The Church’s relationship with other religions is dictated by a twofold respect: “Respect for man in his quest for answers to the deepest questions of his life, and respect for the action of the Spirit in man.”²⁰

St. John Paul II affirms strongly the unity of the divine plan of salvation that includes also other religions.

If the order of unity that goes back to creation and redemption is, therefore, in this sense, “divine,” such differences - and even religious differences - go back rather to a “human fact,” and must be overcome in progress towards the realization of the mighty plan of unity which dominates the creation...The entire human race, in the infinite complexity of its history, with its different cultures, is “called to form the new people of God” (LG 13) in which the blessed union of God with man and the unity of the human family are healed, consolidated, and raised up.²¹

In his encyclical, *The Mission of the Redeemer*, He affirms:

The Church serves the Kingdom by spreading throughout the world the “Gospel values” which are an expression of the Kingdom and which help people to accept God’s plan. It is true that the inchoate reality of the Kingdom can also be found beyond the confines of the Church among peoples everywhere, to the extent that they live “Gospel values” and are open to the working of the Spirit who breathes when and where he wills (cf. Jn 3:8)²²

Roots in the Bible

Such an open attitude to other religions finds its roots in the Bible. The God of the Wisdom books is an inclusive God (cf. Proverbs 8:24-32). This vision obviously goes back to creation when God made everything (Gen 1:1-31). Jesus, though he often says that his own mission is limited to the Jews,

²⁰ Nos. 28-29.

²¹ Talk to the Roman Curia, Dec. 22, 1986, No.6.

²² *Redemptoris Missio*, No. 20.

talks to and praises the Samaritan woman and tells her that soon people will be able to worship God who is Spirit “in spirit and truth”, beyond all limitations of religious symbol systems (Jn 4:23-24). He praises the faith of the Roman Centurion (Mt 8:10). He is pleasantly surprised at the strong, clinging faith of the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:28). After the death of Jesus, Peter is admonished not to consider any of God’s creation unclean (Acts 10:15). In the Acts, we have the story of Paul who heals a cripple in Lystra. He is in the company of Barnabas. The people believe that they are divine beings and want to offer sacrifice to them. As they are preparing for this, Paul tells them that they are not gods, but rather wish to call attention to “the living God, who made heaven, earth, sea and all that is in them...He has always given proof of himself by the good things he does: he gives you rain from heaven and crops at the right times; he gives you food and fills your hearts with happiness.” (Acts 14:16-17).

God’s concern reaches out to all peoples. Paul affirms this again in his letter to the Romans. “Ever since God created the world, his invisible qualities, both his eternal power and his divine nature, have been clearly seen. Men can perceive them in the things that God has made” (Rom 1:20). Some people of course choose to turn away from God and do evil. But “God will reward every person according to what he has done. Some men keep on doing good, and seek glory, honour and immortal life; to them God will give eternal life. Other men are selfish and reject what is right, to follow what is wrong; on them God will pour his wrath and anger. There will be suffering and pain for all men who do what is evil, for the Jews first and also for the Gentiles. But God will give glory, honour, and peace to all who do what is good, to the Jews first, and also to the Gentiles. God judges every one by the same standard.” (Rom 2:6-11). What matters is faith and faith is possible also for the Gentiles. In his prologue to his gospel John has a similar universal vision. “From the very beginning the Word was with God. Through him God made all things; not one thing in all creation was made without him. The Word was the source of life and this life brought light to all men.” (Jn 1:3-4).

The Church and the Kingdom of God

It is in this context that we must also explore the relationship between the Church and the Kingdom of God. The Second Vatican Council says: “The Church, endowed with the gifts of her founder and faithfully observing his precepts of charity, humility and self-denial, receives the mission of proclaiming and establishing among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God, and she is, on earth, the seed and the beginning of that kingdom. While she slowly grows into maturity, the Church longs for the completed kingdom and, with all her strength, hopes and desires to be united in glory with her king.” (*Lumen Gentium*, 5) St. John Paul II continues this teaching:

The Kingdom of God is meant for all mankind, and all people are called to become members of it²³...The Kingdom is the concern of everyone: individuals, society, and the world. Working for the Kingdom means acknowledging and promoting God’s activity, which is present in human history and transforms it. Building the Kingdom, it means working for liberation from evil in all its forms. In a word, the Kingdom of God is the manifestation and the realization of God’s plan of salvation in all its fullness.²⁴

While St. John Paul II is affirming an “indissoluble relationship” between the Church and the Kingdom, he also points to a distinction so that the Kingdom is also present, even in inchoative, outside the Church’s confines and the Church’s missionary activity also includes the promotion of Gospel values among people outside its confines.

The Kingdom of God in Asian Documents

The Church in Asia, in the context of its experience of the spiritual lives of the members of other religions, has underlined the outreach of the Kingdom of God, though always relating it to the Church. The Second Bishops’ Institute for Interreligious Affairs of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences says:

²³ *Redemptoris Missio*, 14.

²⁴ *Redemptoris Missio*, 15.

The Reign of God is the very reason for the being of the Church. The Church exists in and for the Kingdom. The Kingdom, God's gift and initiative, is already begun and is constantly being realized and made present through the Spirit. Where God is accepted, where the Gospel values are lived, where the human being is respected...there is the kingdom. It is far wider than the Church's boundaries. This already present reality is oriented towards the final manifestation and full perfection of the Reign of God.²⁵

The Theological Advisory Committee of the FABC, in its *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, has this to say:

The focus of the Church's mission of evangelization is building up the Kingdom of God and the building up of the Church to be at the service of the Kingdom. The Kingdom therefore is wider than the Church. The Church is the sacrament of the Kingdom, visibilizing it, ordained to it, promoting it, but not equating itself with it.²⁶

A theological consultation on "Evangelization in Asia" organized by the Office for Evangelization of the FABC says:

The Kingdom of God is therefore universally present and at work. Wherever men and women open themselves to the transcendent Divine Mystery which impinges upon them, and go out of themselves in love and service of fellow humans, there the Reign of God is at work... "Where God is accepted, where the Gospel values are lived, where the human being is respected...there is the Kingdom." In all such cases people respond to God's offer of grace through Christ in the Spirit and enter into the kingdom through an act of faith.²⁷

The Office of Theological Concerns of the FABC, in its document on *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, recognizes "in all sisters and brothers, of whatever faith-conviction and culture, fellow way-farers to God's Reign."²⁸ In their various responses to the *Lineamenta* of the Asian Synod the Asian Bishops speak in the same way. The Indian Bishops say:

²⁵ *For All the Peoples of Asia, Vol I*, p. 252.

²⁶ GNANAPIRAGASAM; WILFRED, 1994, p. 21.

²⁷ *For All the Peoples of Asia, Vol II*, p.200

²⁸ *For All the Peoples of Asia, Vol II*, p. 285.

It is an accepted principle that we cannot comprehend a mystery; before it, our attitude needs to be one of reverent acceptance and humble openness. God's dialogue with Asian peoples through their religious experiences is a great mystery. We as Church enter into this mystery by dialogue through sharing and listening to the Spirit in others. Dialogue, then, becomes an experience of God's Kingdom.²⁹

The Indonesian Bishops observe:

Since in all religions and traditional religious beliefs the values of God's Reign are found as fruits of the Spirit, to the extent that there is good will they all strive towards the coming of the Kingdom.³⁰

The Bishops from the Philippines assert:

The synod should correct or at least clarify what the *Lineamenta* seems to do - to equate the Church and the Kingdom of God... In the social context of the great majority of Asian peoples, even more use should be made of the model of the Church as servant, a co-pilgrim in the journey to the Kingdom of God where fullness of life is given as a gift.³¹ Many western theologians suppose such a perspective.³²

The Kingdom as a Dynamic Reality

The Kingdom of God is a dynamic reality. Without entering into the dispute regarding various opinions about eschatology, we can say that it has a dynamism of "already - not yet." Jesus announces the Kingdom as present: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mk 1:15). At the same time He teaches them to pray: "Your kingdom come." (Mt 6:10). His parables concerning the kingdom speak of a process and a history (cf. Mt 13:1-33). In his last discourse to the disciples in John's gospel he promises the Spirit and foretells persecutions (Jn

²⁹ PHAN, 2002, p. 20-21.

³⁰ PHAN, 2002, p.26.

³¹ PHAN, 2002, p.39.

³² FUELLENBACH, J. *The Kingdom of God. The Message of Jesus Today*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002, p.152. He refers here to DUPUIS, J. *The Kingdom of God and World Religions. Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 51, 1987, p. 532-533; RAHNER, K. *Church and World*. In RAHNER, K. et al.(eds), *Sacramentum Mundi*, Vol.1. London: Burns and Oates, 1968, p. 348.

14-17). After the resurrection he sends them on mission into the world (Jn 20:21-23; Mk 16:15-18; Mt 28:18-20). Paul speaks of a cosmic process (Rom 8:18-25). He speaks of Christ as the “first fruits” (1Cor 15:20), gathering up all things and offering them to the Father “so that God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). The Christians await Jesus’ second coming: “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22:20) and hope for a new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21:1-5).

The dynamic nature of the Kingdom of God has been described well by George Soares-Prabhu:

When the revelation of God’s love (the Kingdom) meets its appropriate response in men’s trusting acceptance of this love (repentance), there begins a mighty movement of personal and societal liberation which sweeps through human history. The movement brings *freedom* inasmuch it liberates each individual from the inadequacies and obsessions that shackle him. It fosters *fellowship*, because it empowers free individuals to exercise their concern for each other in genuine community. And it leads onto *justice*, because it impels every true community to adopt the just societal structures which alone make freedom and fellowship possible...

The vision of Jesus is theological, not sociological. It spells out the values of the new society (freedom, fellowship, justice), not the concrete social structures through which these values are realized and protected. To elaborate these is our never-to-be-ended task - for no “perfect” society is possible in history. One cannot fully actualise the vision of Jesus: one can merely approach it asymptotically! Ultimately, then, the vision of Jesus indicates not the goal but the way. It does not present us with a static pre-fabricated model to be imitated, but invites us to a continual refashioning of societal structures in an attempt to realize as completely as possible in our times the values of the Kingdom. The vision of Jesus summons us, then, to a ceaseless struggle against the demonic structures of unfreedom (psychological and sociological) erected by mammon; and to a ceaseless creativity that will produce in every age new blueprints for a society ever more consonant with the Gospel vision of man. Lying on the horizons of human history and yet part of it, offered to us as a gift yet confronting us as a challenge, Jesus’ vision of a new

society stands before us as an unfinished task, summoning us to permanent revolution.³³

We can conclude, therefore, that the goal of mission is the Kingdom of God and the Church as its symbol and servant. The other religions are fellow pilgrims towards the Kingdom. We are then called to dialogue and collaborate with them. We have seen that, for the Asian bishops, the mission in Asia is a three-fold dialogue of the Gospel with its many poor, the rich cultures and the living religions. I have focused so far on the dialogue of the Gospel with the other religions, because this is the most significant theologically. Now I shall focus briefly on the other two dialogues of the Gospel with the cultures and the poor.

The Dialogue of the Gospel with Culture(s)

The Gospel was proclaimed by Jesus in Aramaic in the cultural area of the Jews in Palestine. As it spreads out beyond Palestine towards the West in the Greek speaking world it dialogues with the Greek cultural world. The books in the New Testament were written originally in Greek. Christianity also spread towards the East in the Syrian world. But as the head of the Church, the Pope, settled down in Rome, the Latin language and culture dominated the thinking and practice of the Roman Catholic Church, which spreads across Western Europe and also Asia, Africa and the Americas, thanks to European colonization.

At the Second Vatican Council, the Church became aware that the universal Church is a communion of local Churches in which the Gospel enters into dialogue with the local cultures. As a matter of fact this was happening at the level of popular religiosity. Enlightened missionaries like Mateo Ricci in China and Roberto de Nobili in India insisted that the Gospel must dialogue with local cultures. This evangelical dialogue would take two forms. On the one hand, the Gospel must find self-expression in the local cultures. On the other, the Gospel must prophetically challenge and transform them by infusing into them the values of the Gospel. This process was called

³³ SOARES-PRABHU, G. The Kingdom of God: Jesus' Vision of a New Society. In AMALORPAVADASS, D.S. (ed). *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society*. Bangalore: NBCLC, 1981, p. 600, 601, 607.

inculturation. Just as the Word of God became incarnate in the culture of the Jews, it must become incarnate in every culture it encounters. Today we are becoming aware that the Gospel becomes incarnate in a particular culture in order to transform it in tune with the values of the Gospel. This transformative dimension does not find expression in the term inculturation. So perhaps we can continue to speak of Gospel-culture encounter with its two phases of incarnation/inculturation and transformation.

At the level of inculturation, the Scriptures have been translated in most languages. Most languages also have Catechisms. At the level of the liturgy, the main structure and the official texts remain Roman and Latin, though the texts can be translated into the local languages. Some gestures like squatting and prostrations are possible, local music is permitted, the shawl can be used as a vestment, some dancing steps during processions are allowed. Beyond these no creative changes in keeping with local ways of acting and celebrating is permitted even in sacramental celebrations, which concern the lives of the people. At the level of popular religiosity the people are freer to adopt local customs. This balances in a way the rigidity at the official level.³⁴

Theological reflection in terms of local languages and cultures in the context of local socio-political situations has started after the Second Vatican Council. I think that the Asian theologians owe very much to the Latin Americans with regard to the methods of theologizing, namely the pastoral theological cycle: Experience, Questioning and analysis seeking to understand the experienced reality with the use of the human and social sciences, Dialogue with the Gospel seeking for answers to our questions, Reflection with reference to what we can do in view of transformation and Discernment in view of possible action. This is contextual theology.³⁵ In the process of reflection it is also possible to dialogue with other religious perspectives with

³⁴ Cf. AMALADOSS, M. *Beyond Inculturation. Can the Many be One?* Delhi: VIEWS/ISPCK, 1998; AMALADOSS, M. *El evangelio al encuentro de las culturas. Pluralidad y Communi3n de las Iglesias*. Bilbao: Mensajero, 1998; AMALADOSS, M. *Miss3o e incultura3o*. S3o Paulo: Loyola, 2000.

³⁵ Cf. AMALADOSS, M. *Quest for God. Doing Theology in India*. Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 2013; BOYD, R.H.S. *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*. Madras/Chennai: The Christian Literature Society, 1969.

the help of other religious believers. There is also the possibility of dialoguing with and learning from other Asian traditions. That is why we can speak of an Asian, besides an Indian theology. Buddhism also is a link, I think. In this context, I can refer to one of my books, *The Asian Jesus*, which presents Jesus as the Sage, the Way, the Guru, the Satyagrahi, the Avatar, the Servant, the Compassionate, the Dancer and the Pilgrim.³⁶

Another dimension of Gospel-Culture encounter leads to the transformation of culture. Taking India, for instance, there is a pluralism of languages, sub-cultures and religions. This would be true of most Asian countries. So an ongoing dialogue is called for if we want bring about any national transformation. Besides every culture has social and cultural elements that need change. India, for instance, is afflicted by the unequal hierarchical caste system. About 18% of the people are considered so low as to be out of the system. They are mostly poor, mostly landless, labourers. So there is also an element of economic exploitation. Normally there is no inter-marrying. In the course of history, many of the lowers caste people have embraced Buddhism, Islam or Christianity to escape from this unjust social structure. But this does not make any difference in practice. Unfortunately, a change of religion does not really help to get out of the social system. Christianity has not succeeded in abolishing it within its own communities. Intermarrying is not usually possible. The so-called lower castes are given many benefits by the government in order to bring them up socially.³⁷ The Christian schools have certainly made a contribution to the uplift of the 'so-called' lower castes, since the castes are often linked to certain kind of jobs. But it has not helped to change the system. I think that promoting inter-caste marriages is one sure way of freeing ourselves from the caste system, since the case is inherited by birth. Similarly the women are not really considered equal in society. They have to undergo many kinds of exploitations. Today the mass and social media is another area which influences what people think and do.

³⁶ See AMALADOSS, M. *The Asian Jesus*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2006; AMALADOSS, M. *Jesús asiático*. Bilbao: Mensajero, 2007.

³⁷ Cf. AMALADOSS, M. *A Call to Community*. The Caste System and Christian Responsibility. Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1994.

The Dialogue of the Gospel with the Poor

The dialogue of the Gospel with the Poor is the third dialogue which the Asian bishops refer to in their project of mission. In a sense, this is not new. The older missionaries like Ricci or De Nobili do not speak much about the poor. But the 19th century saw the emergence of many Religious Congregations in Europe which were committed to care for the poor, the elderly and the sick. They looked after these people when they came to the missions too. As a matter of fact, the poor and the helpless in the ‘mission countries’ may have attracted them. They launched hospitals and social and development projects. There were also many Congregations who were focused on education. Though ‘religious conversion’ may have been an underlying motive, helping the poor and instilling moral and religious values among the people were seen as sufficient reasons for their work.

Besides these, there were formal liberation theologies, partly inspired by Latin American liberation theologies. The difference between caring for the poor and talking about liberation is that the poor are seen as exploited and oppressed unjustly by people who profit by their labour. While it is good to help the poor and satisfy their needs, it is even better to struggle with them against those who exploit and oppress them and liberate them from the oppressive structures. While there were liberation movements a little everywhere across Asia we focus here on three liberation movements based on Christian principles.

The Dalits in India were not merely economically poor, but also socially oppressed by the caste system. They are the lowest group in the hierarchical caste system. The term ‘Dalit’ itself means someone stepped on and ground down. They look back to God in the Bible as their liberator. As a matter of fact they see in Jesus on the cross an oppressed ‘Dalit’ God who will liberate them.³⁸ The *Minjung* (or people) of Korea are the workers who are oppressed. Jesus identifies himself with the oppressed *Minjung* and frees

³⁸ Cf. PRABHAKAR, M.E. (ed). *Towards a Dalit Theology*. Delhi: ISPCK, 1989; MASSEY, J. *Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*. Delhi: ISPCK, 1994.

them from their oppression.³⁹ The poor peasants of the Philippines were exploited by the rich land lords, supported by the dictator Ferdinand Marcos. They were animated both by Marxist social analysis and the struggle of Jesus in the Gospels, spelt out as a 'Theology of Struggle'.⁴⁰ They succeeded in liberating themselves through a non-violent popular movement that drives Marcos into exile. The women in Asia also have their own liberation movement.⁴¹ Writing a book on liberation theologies in Asia I discovered not only Christians, but also Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian and Muslim groups engaged in liberation struggles, inspired by their own faith.⁴² In such a context, liberation in Asia can become an interreligious project.

Final considerations

Concluding this short paper, I can make a few affirmations and distinctions. The goal of the creative action of God in the world is the building up of the Kingdom of God. The Church is the symbol and servant of this Kingdom. The ultimate goal of mission is also the Kingdom of God. We recognize today that the Church is a co-pilgrim, together with other religions, towards this Kingdom. In this process, the Church is called to be in dialogue with poor, the cultures and the other religions. Mission is therefore this threefold dialogue leading us to the Kingdom. Jesus Christ proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom and inaugurated it. The Kingdom is being built by the Spirit, who is present in us, in the world, in the Church and also in other religions - in us as well as in other believers. One of the reasons for our confusion is that our focus is limited to Jesus Christ and to the Church. Jesus Christ must lead us to the Spirit and to God. A Jesus-centrism that ignores God, the Word and the Spirit is not helpful. The Church must point to the Kingdom of God. An ecclesio-centrism that does not consider also the

³⁹ See COMMISSION ON THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS OF THE CHRISTIAN CONFERENCE OF ASIA (ed). *Minjung Theology: Peoples as Subjects of History*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983.

⁴⁰ Cf. BATTUNG, M. R. et al. (eds). *Religion and Society: Towards a Theology of Struggle*. Manila: Fides, 1988.

⁴¹ ASIA PARTNERSHIP FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT. *Awake: Asian Women and the Struggle for Justice*. Sydney, 1985.

⁴² See AMALADOSS, M. *Life in Freedom: Liberation Theologies from Asia*. Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis, 1997. AMALADOSS, M. *Vivir en libertad*. Estella: Verbo Divino, 2000. Also PIERIS, A. *An Asian Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988.

presence and action of the Spirit in the world/creation and in other religions can be misleading.

In the document on *Human Fraternity*, Pope Francis signed in Abu-Dhabi jointly with the Grand Imam of Egypt, they say:

Freedom is a right of every person: each individual enjoys the freedom of belief, thought, expression and action. The pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings. This divine wisdom is the source from which the right to freedom of belief and the freedom to be different derives. Therefore, the fact that people are forced to adhere to a certain religion or culture must be rejected, as too the imposition of a cultural way of life that others do not accept.

Dialogue, understanding and the widespread promotion of a culture of tolerance, acceptance of others and of living together peacefully would contribute significantly to reducing many economic, social, political and environmental problems that weigh so heavily on a large part of humanity; Dialogue among believers means coming together in the vast space of spiritual, human and shared social values and, from here, transmitting the highest moral virtues that religions aim for. It also means avoiding unproductive discussions.⁴³

Based on these principles the Pope Francis is calling us, in his encyclical *Sisters and Brothers All*,⁴⁴ “for the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard” (285). Asians will be happy to follow this direction as the goal of their mission.

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⁴³ Cf. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html

⁴⁴ Cf. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html

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