

# FROM “AD GENTES” TO “ACTIVE INTEGRAL EVANGELIZATION”: THE RECEPTION OF VATICAN II’S MISSION THEOLOGY IN ASIA\*

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## ABSTRACT

Jonathan Y. Tan shows that, while FABC recognizes the contribution of the Vatican II documents *Ad Gentes* and *Nostra Aetate* to its own mission theology, it gives preference to the latter’s dialogical path. Asians of other faiths are partners and collaborators in mutual witness; thus the possibility of an extra-ecclesial means of salvation, which both FABC and Vatican II affirm, might soon gain a foothold. Asian bishops envision active integral evangelization as the way forward, building upon the tentative vision of Vatican II.

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The task of doing Christian mission is especially challenging in Asia. While Asia may be home to some two-thirds of the world's population, it remains nevertheless the continent with the smallest Christian population despite two millennia of Christian missionary activity, beginning with the Assyrian Christian missionaries who ventured to India and China in the first Christian millennium. At the beginning of the third Christian millennium, Christians account for anywhere between four and six percent of the total population of Asia. More significantly, Christians continue to represent only a small proportion of the residents of China and India, who collectively comprise about one third of the world's population.

While David Aikman makes the provocative claim that 20 to 30 percent of the Chinese population would be Christian by the 2030s,<sup>1</sup> the research director of the Beijing Center for Chinese Studies, Jean-Paul Wiest, cautions us against making such overoptimistic predictions. Specifically, Wiest points out that China is also in the midst of an impressive Buddhist, Daoist, and Chinese folk religions revival.<sup>2</sup> Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank share Wiest's sentiments, noting that China has the world's largest Buddhist population, a thriving Daoist community, and an expanding Muslim community that is larger than the total Christian population in China.<sup>3</sup> On the issue of Chinese Muslims, Wiest reminds us that the growing Chinese Muslim population in Gansu and Xinjiang is unlikely to yield up its Islamic faith to become Christians. This is because its Islamic faith is tightly wedded to its non-Han culture and ethnic pride.<sup>4</sup>

This essay analyzes the reception of Vatican II's theology of mission in Asia by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC).<sup>5</sup> First, it will

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1. See David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2003), 235.
  2. See Jean-Paul Wiest, "Chinese Youth and Religion Today," *Origins* 36, no. 33 (2007): 527–31, at 531.
  3. See Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 1.
  4. See Wiest, "Chinese Youth and Religion Today," 531.
  5. All of the important documents of the FABC have been collected and published in a convenient four-volume collection: *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Volume I: *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970–1991*, edited by Gaudencio B. Rosales and C. G. Arévalo (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992, hereinafter referred to as *FAPA* Vol. I); *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Volume II: *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996*, edited by Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City: Claretian, 1997, hereinafter referred to as *FAPA* Vol. II); *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Volume III: *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1997–2001*, edited by Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City:

examine how the Second Vatican Council was a watershed that would open the floodgates to a rethinking of mission. Second, it will analyze the principal aspects of the FABC's approach to the Christian mission in Asia. Third, it will explore how the FABC has gone beyond Vatican II's *plantatio ecclesiae* approach in the missionary decree, *Ad Gentes*, to articulate its own mission theology of "active integral evangelization," which is (i) rooted in the immense diversity and plurality of Asia, (ii) undergirded by a commitment and service to life, (iii) oriented towards a threefold dialogue with Asian cultures, religions, and the poor, and (iv) seeking to bring about the reign of God in Asia.<sup>6</sup> Finally, it will also discuss the significance and implications of the FABC's theology of "active integral evangelization" for the task of doing Christian mission in Asia.

## Vatican II and the Paradigm Shift in Catholic Mission Theology

On January 25, 1959, Pope John XXIII announced his intention to call an ecumenical council of more than 2,000 bishops from six continents, stating its objectives to be a new Pentecost, a means of spiritual and apostolic renewal, and an *aggiornamento* of the Catholic Church. After four sessions which produced sixteen documents, Vatican II can be said to have covered every facet of renewal, including the renewal of the Church's mission theology. This renewal was first introduced in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), and further developed in Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate* (October 28, 1965), the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), and the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes* (December 7, 1965).

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Claretian, 2002, hereinafter referred to as *FAPA* Vol. III); and *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Volume IV: *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 2002-2006*, edited by Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City: Claretian, 2007, hereinafter referred to as *FAPA* Vol. IV). Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the documents of the FABC are taken from this four-volume collection.

6. For a more in-depth and critical discussion of these topics, see my previously published essays on this topic: "A New Way of Being Church in Asia: The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) at the Service of Life in Pluralistic Asia," *Missiology* 33, no. 1 (2005): 71–94; "Missio Inter Gentes: Towards a New Paradigm in the Mission Theology of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)," *Mission Studies* 21, no. 1 (2004): 65–95; and "Theologizing at the Service of Life: The Contextual Theological Methodology of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)," *Gregorianum* 81, no. 3 (2000): 541–75.

## *Lumen Gentium*

The theological foundation of Vatican II's theology of mission was first enunciated in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, which links missiology and ecclesiology in its opening statement:

Christ is the light of all nations. Hence, this most sacred Synod, which has been gathered in the Holy Spirit, eagerly desires to shed on all men that radiance of His which brightens the countenance of the Church. This it will do by proclaiming the gospel to every creature (*LG*, 1).<sup>7</sup>

On the one hand, *Lumen Gentium* insists on an ecclesiocentric grounding of *missio ad gentes*, i.e., the Church is necessary for salvation (*Ecclesiam necessariam esse ad salutem*, *LG*, 14), explaining that the Church is “the universal sacrament of salvation” (*universale salutis sacramentum*) because the risen Christ is leading all peoples to the Church (*ut homines ad Ecclesiam perducatur*) and “through her joining them more closely to Himself” (*LG*, 48).<sup>8</sup> It also applies the classical Thomistic axiom *gratia non tollit naturam, sed perficit* (grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it) to the Church's missionary enterprise when it insists that:

the Church or People of God takes nothing away from the temporal welfare of any people. . . . Rather does she foster and take to herself, insofar as they are good, the ability, resources, and customs of each people. Taking them to herself she purifies, strengthens, and ennobles them (*LG*, 13).<sup>9</sup>

This is reiterated in *LG*, 17, which states:

Whatever good is in the minds and hearts of men, whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples, is not only saved from destruction but is also healed, ennobled, and perfected unto the glory of God, the confusion of the Devil, and the happiness of man.<sup>10</sup>

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7. Walter M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: America Press, 1966), 14–15.

8. *Ibid.*, 79.

9. *Ibid.*, 31.

10. *Ibid.*, 36. *LG*, 17 is also reaffirmed in *AG*, 2.

On the other hand, *Lumen Gentium* also presents the possibility of an extra-ecclesial way of salvation through God, i.e., salvation through a mysterious channel other than the Church and its sacraments:

Nor is God Himself far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and every other gift (cf. Acts 17:25–28), and who as Savior wills that all men be saved (cf. 1 Tim 2:4). Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to His grace. Whatsoever good or truth is found among them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the gospel. She regards such qualities as given by Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life (*LG*, 16).<sup>11</sup>

From the foregoing, it is clear that while *LG*, 16 recognizes the possibility of an extra-ecclesial means of salvation, it however lays down three strict conditions: (i) non-Christians must be people who, through no fault of their own (*sine culpa*), do not know the gospel of Christ or the Church; (ii) they must, with a sincere and open heart, seek God, the Creator whose existence they may know by reason, but whom they do not yet know as the God revealed in Christ; and (iii) they must try to do God's will as they know it through conscience, i.e., on the basis of natural law, striving to lead a good life and moved by grace (*sub gratiae influxu*). Therefore, "divine Providence" will not deny them the assistance necessary for salvation, although the mode by which this grace operates (*modus gratia*) is left open.

By being cautious and refusing to speculate on the mysterious workings of God's grace outside the Church, the Council Fathers left room for future dogmatic development of this principle. While accepting the possibility that salvation can be mediated extra-ecclesially, nevertheless *Lumen Gentium* does take pains to argue against any lessening of the urgency of mission. Thus, the Council Fathers held that by "promot[ing] the glory of God and procuring the salvation of all such men, and mindful of the command of the Lord, 'Preach the gospel to every creature' (Mk 16:16), the Church painstakingly fosters her missionary work" (*LG*, 16).<sup>12</sup>

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11. Ibid., 35.

12. Ibid., 35, 13.

## *Nostra Aetate*

The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, marks a paradigm shift in the Church's understanding of other religions. It is the first official Church statement which recognizes other religions as entities that the Church should respect and enter into dialogue with, rather than merely tolerating them or working for their suppression. Eschewing the traditional terminology such as "pagan" (*paganus*), "idolatry" (*idolatria*) and "false religion" (*religio falsa*), the Council Fathers introduced a new atmosphere of recognition, respect, and dialogue, recognizing the plurality and diversity of religions. The most revolutionary aspect of this declaration is its apparent presumption that other religions contain at least some elements of truth, although this presumption does not lessen the dominical mandate to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims and must ever proclaim Christ, "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 1:6), in whom men find the fullness of religious life, and in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself (*NA*, 2).<sup>13</sup>

As is the case with *LG*, 16, here the Council Fathers were also somewhat ambivalent as to the amount of truth found in other religions. While *NA*, 2 unequivocally accepts that the manner of life and conduct, and precepts and doctrines, often contain gems of truth, it nevertheless insists that the "fullness of religious life" (*plenitudinem vitae religiosae*) is to be found solely in Christ. More importantly, the declaration goes on to lay the foundations for dialogue:

The Church therefore has this exhortation for her sons: prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their society and culture (*NA*, 2).<sup>14</sup>

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13. Ibid., 662. 14.

14. Ibid., 662–63.

By this statement, the Council Fathers lay in motion the path for subsequent efforts at interreligious dialogue, inspiring the initiatives that would later be taken by the FABC.

### *Gaudium et Spes*

In the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council officially acknowledged the diversity of cultures and the fact that the Christian gospel is not a communication of timeless truths, but rather God's intervention in human history:

There are many links between the message of salvation and human culture. For God, revealing Himself to His people to the extent of a full manifestation of Himself in His Incarnate Son, has spoken according to the culture proper to different ages. Living in various circumstances during the course of time, the Church, too has used in her preaching the discoveries of different cultures to spread and explain the message of Christ to all nations, to probe it and more deeply understand it, and to give it better expression in liturgical celebrations and in the life of the diversified community of the faithful (*GS*, 58).<sup>15</sup>

This new understanding of culture has profound implications for Christianity because the Church has accepted that much of what was perceived as essential expressions of the Christian faith are simply Eurocentric cultural expressions of the Christian faith. What is more important is the categorical statement of the Council that there is no one culturally normative way to be Christian. Instead, the relationship between the Christian gospel and culture is a mutually enriching dialogue:

The Church, sent to all peoples of every time and space, is not bound exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, nor to any particular way of life, or to any customary pattern of living, ancient or recent. Faithful to her own tradition and at the same time conscious of her universal mission, she can enter into communion with various cultural modes, to her own enrichment and theirs too. The good news of Christ continually renews the life and culture of fallen man. It combats and removes the errors and evils resulting from sinful allurements. . . . By riches coming from above, it makes fruitful

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15. Ibid., 264.

as it were from within, the spiritual qualities and gifts of every people and of every age. It strengthens, perfects, and restores them to Christ. Thus by the very fulfillment of her own mission the Church stimulates and advances human and civic culture. By her action, even in its liturgical form, she leads men toward interior liberty (*GS*, 58).<sup>16</sup>

More significantly, the pastoral constitution insists that the Holy Spirit offers to all, in a mysterious way known only to God, the possibility of being associated with the paschal mystery:

For since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery (*GS*, 22).<sup>17</sup>

## *Ad Gentes*

Vatican II also initiated a profound change in its fundamental understanding of the Church's task of mission, emphasizing the necessity of mission grounded within the Trinitarian *missiones* of the Son and the Spirit and stating the whole Church is missionary by its very nature:

The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature. For it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she takes her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father (*AG*, 2).<sup>18</sup>

More importantly, the task of *missio ad gentes* is not merely the province of professional missionaries sent to foreign lands, but rather, of the whole Church—"the whole Church is missionary." Michael Amaladoss has outlined the implications of this profound shift as follows:

The church's mission of evangelization has its roots in the mission of God. It starts with God's plan to communicate God's self to all human beings as an overflow of love. This movement starts from creation. The whole of history thus becomes a history of God's saving act—a history of salvation.

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16. Ibid., 264–65.

17. Ibid., 221–22.

18. Ibid., 585.



The mission of the Son is linked to the mission of God in creation. It is in the Word that the whole world is created. The Word becomes incarnate to bring this mission to its fulfillment. The mission of Jesus has to be understood in the context of the mission of God. Similarly, the mission of the Spirit, too, starts at creation as it hovers over the waters. The Spirit is immanent and creative in the world and in humanity. The church continues the mission of the Incarnate Word—Jesus. *But it does not monopolize or exhaust the continuing action of the Word and the Spirit in the world.* The mission of the Church is at the service of the mission of God.<sup>19</sup>

The missionary decree asserts that “the specific purpose of this missionary activity is evangelization and the planting of the Church among those people and groups [*plantatio ecclesiae*] where she has not yet taken root” (AG, 6).<sup>20</sup> In explaining the purpose of the Church’s *missio ad gentes*, AG opted for a fulfillment approach to the Christian mission:

This universal design of God for the salvation of the human race is not carried out exclusively in the soul of a man, with a kind of secrecy. Nor is it achieved merely through those multiple endeavors, including religious ones, by which men search for God, groping for Him that they may by chance find Him. . . . For these attempts need to be enlightened and purified, even though, through the kindly workings of Divine Providence, they may sometimes serve as a guidance course toward the true God, or as a preparation for the gospel (AG, 3).<sup>21</sup>

The decree explains that the source of this fulfillment is Christ:

Missionary activity is closely bound up too with human nature itself and its aspirations. By manifesting Christ, the Church reveals to men the real truth about their condition and their total vocation. For Christ is the source and model of that renewed humanity, penetrated with brotherly love, sincerity, and a peaceful spirit, to which all aspire (AG, 8).<sup>22</sup>

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19. Michael Amaladoss, “The Challenges of Mission Today,” in *Trends in Mission: Toward the Third Millennium*, edited by William Jenkinson and Helene O’Sullivan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 359–97, at 364, emphasis added.

20. Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II*, 591

21. *Ibid.*, 586.

22. *Ibid.*, 594.

The decree also insists on the necessity of preaching the gospel, notwithstanding the possibility that salvation may be available by other channels:

Therefore, though God in ways known to Himself can lead those inculpably ignorant of the gospel to that faith without which it is impossible to please Him (Heb 11:6), yet a necessity lies upon the Church (cf. 1 Cor 9:16), and at the same time a sacred duty, to preach the gospel. Hence missionary activity today as always retains its power and necessity (*AG*, 7).<sup>23</sup>

In a reversal of centuries of Eurocentrism, the Council held that the Church was not a huge and uniformly Eurocentric monolithic entity, but is a communion of local churches, each of which seeks to give life to the universal church in accordance with the native genius and traditions of its members:

Thus, in imitation of the plan of the Incarnation, the young Churches, rooted in Christ and built up on the foundation of the apostles, take to themselves in a wonderful exchange all the riches of the nations which were given to Christ as an inheritance (cf. Ps. 2:8). From the customs and traditions of their people, from their wisdom and their learning, from their arts and sciences, these Churches borrow all those things which can contribute to the glory of their Creator, the revelation of the Savior's grace, or the proper arrangement of Christian life. . . . Thus, it will be more clearly seen in what ways faith can seek for understanding in the philosophy and wisdom of these peoples. A better view will be gained of how their customs, outlook on life, and social order can be reconciled with the manner of living taught by divine revelation. As a result, avenues will be opened for a more profound adaptation in the whole area of Christian life. Thanks to such a procedure, every appearance of syncretism and of false particularism can be excluded, and the Christian life can be accommodated to the genius and the dispositions of each culture. Particular traditions, together with the individual patrimony of each family of nations, can be illumined by the light of the gospel, and then be taken up into Catholic unity. Finally, the individual young Churches, adorned with their own traditions, will have their own place in the ecclesiastical communion, without prejudice to the primacy of Peter's See, which presides over the entire assembly of charity (*AG*, 22).<sup>24</sup>

The foregoing extract from *AG*, 22 is also groundbreaking for its missiological paradigm of adaptation (*adaptatio*) which is based on the principle

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23. Ibid., 593.

24. Ibid., 612–13.

of *oeconomia incarnationis* (the economy of the incarnation). Indeed, *AG*, 22 speaks of a more profound adaptation (*adaptatio profundior*) in “imitation of the plan of the Incarnation” (*ad instar oeconomiae Incarnationis*). Commenting on this phrase, Anscar Chupungco explains:

The phrase *ad instar oeconomiae incarnationis* indicates that the conciliar decree sets Christ's incarnation as an exemplar to be copied faithfully. In imitation of Christ, who by virtue of the incarnation made himself one with the Jewish nation, the local Church should strive to identify itself with the people among whom it dwells. As Christ became a Jew in all things save sin, so the Church should become not merely a Church in but the Church of a particular locality. . . . “Incarnation,” both as a Christian mystery and a technical term, enriches our understanding of adaptation. As a mystery, it explains why the Church and its liturgy should adapt themselves to the culture and the traditions of the people. What took place when God became human and dwelt among us now takes place when the Church and its liturgy embody “the riches of the nations.” As a technical term, “incarnation” gives depth to adaptation, which is often simply understood as a work of external adjustment to or conformity with a situation.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, the Council also gives an expanded role to the Holy Spirit: “Doubtless, the Holy Spirit was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified” (*AG*, 4).<sup>26</sup> In an application of Justin Martyr's notion of *logoi spermatikoi*, the decree suggests that the Holy Spirit “calls all men to Christ by the seeds of the word and by the preaching of the gospel” (*AG*, 15).<sup>27</sup> It explains that these “seeds of the Word” (*semina Verbi*) lie hidden in the national and religious traditions of peoples (*AG*, 11).<sup>28</sup>

## Aftermath of Vatican II

In the aftermath of Vatican II, the Catholic Church's mission underwent radical changes as it grappled with a rapidly changing world. While it is true that *Ad Gentes* resulted in a renewed interest and enthusiasm in mission, the realities of new socio-political developments in former “mission lands” soon crept in.

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25. Anscar J. Chupungco, *Liturgical Inculturation: Sacramentals, Religiosity, and Catechesis* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 17–18.

26. Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II*, 587.

27. *Ibid.*, 601.

28. *Ibid.*, 597–8.

First, the Council Fathers had adopted an overly optimistic view of missionary success, expecting that Church growth would continue unabated. Jesuit theologian Felipe Gómez explains it well when he states:

On Nov 6, 1964, in the 116 General Congregation of Vatican II, after Paul VI had presented the “Schema” *On the Missions*, Card. Agagianian, Prefect of *Propaganda Fide* drew a bright view of the situation: in times of Vatican I, he said, the Church had 275 mission territories; today, we have 770. In 1870, there was not one autonomous bishop, today we see here 41 archbishops, 126 bishops and 4 cardinals. . . . The popes had assumed the effective protagonism which they intended with the erection of the *Propaganda* in 1622 by Gregory XV. The 20th century had seen the great encyclicals *Maximum illud* (1919), *Rerum Ecclesiae* (1926), *Evangelii praecones* (1951), *Fidei donum* (1957), which channelled the missionary zeal of the secular clergy into Africa; and in the eve of the council, *Princeps pastorum* (1959).<sup>29</sup>

Nobody paid much attention to the underlying tensions arising from nationalistic fervors that were spreading throughout Asia, and that would eventually influence many Asians to identify and equate the Church’s territorial expansion with European colonialism’s territorial expansion. Rightly or wrongly, in the eyes of many Asians, the missionaries and the Christian gospel were tainted by their association and collaboration with, and support of the European colonial powers.

Second, and more significantly, the Council Fathers failed to grasp the full implications of decolonization that was gathering momentum in the Two Thirds World in the aftermath of World War II, leading to the emergence of postcolonial Asia. Gómez puts it in blunt terms:

Vatican II has been accused of blindness to history, for having missed the import of decolonization, not having offered a critique of colonialism, etc. In fact, by 1965 the ancient colonies were practically all independent, only the Portuguese empire ended in 1975.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, while the alliance of Christian churches with European colonialism helped these churches in their growth in Asia during the heyday of colonial expansionism, this alliance became a problematic liability for Christian

29. Felipe Gómez, “The Missionary Activity Twenty Years after Vatican II,” *East Asian Pastoral Review* 23, no. 1 (1986): 26–57, at 29.

30. *Ibid.*, 53.

churches struggling to adapt to the rapidly changing socio-political situations throughout Asia.

Third, the two World Wars and the Jewish Holocaust or *Shoah* undermined the positive confidence of Christian leaders, theologians, and missionaries, who had expected that missionary endeavors, Church growth, scientific progress, and the dominance of European colonial powers would go on unchallenged. Indian theologian M. Thomas Thangaraj sums it up well when he states that these two wars not only “demonstrated that humans, while making progress in science, technology, and other fields, are nonetheless very capable of engaging in extreme forms of violence and cruelty,” but also deflated the optimistic naïveté that “human progress, though seen as a great ally to the missionary movement at the beginning of the century, was no longer a trusted ally in the task of evangelizing the whole world.”<sup>31</sup> In the eyes of millions of Asians, the two World Wars and the *Shoah* punctured the picture of superior might and invincibility that was carefully crafted by the European colonial authorities. No longer would these Asian masses acquiesce passively to the hegemony of European colonization of their lands. Indian Jesuit theologian Amaladoss explains the dilemma clearly:

In the former colonies, Church extension is associated in the popular mind with colonialism. They certainly coincided historically and at that time the new Churches were not really built up as authentic local Churches. A certain assertion of autonomy on the part of the local Churches is not without connection to this past. Hence anything foreign is suspected and resented not only by non-Christians, but even by some Christians.<sup>32</sup>

Fourth, many mission societies and individual missionaries underwent much gut-wrenching soul searching. There was much confusion and hesitation about the future of *missio ad gentes* in the Catholic Church. Some questioned the validity of the Church's missionary mandate, perceiving that *missio ad gentes* was in its death throes. The termination of the *ius commissionis* in 1966 and the resulting “loss” of territorial exclusivity called into question the *raison d'être* of many foreign mission societies, which had previously operated on a territorial or geographical concept of *missio ad gentes*. As a result, many missiologists and theologians began to question the *raison d'être* of *missio ad gentes*, leading to a

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31. M. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Common Task: A Theology of Christian Mission* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1999), 17.

32. Michael Amaladoss, “Foreign Missions Today,” *East Asian Pastoral Review* 25, no. 2 (1988): 104–18, at 113.

prolonged period of questioning and self-doubt on the efficacy of the traditional approaches to mission. The inability of the 1974 Synod of Bishops to arrive at a consensus on the Church's *missio ad gentes* is symptomatic of this development.

Fifth, and most significantly, for many Asian nations that gained independence from their colonial masters in the aftermath of the Second World War, independence and postcolonial consciousness have led to a discovery of national pride, and with it, a massive revival of traditional Asian religions. Notwithstanding Vatican II's hopeful aspirations, the world's great religions have continued to grow and thrive not only in Asia but also in North America and Europe, challenging the preeminent position of Christianity in many European countries. Indeed, since the 1960s world religions such as Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism have been rejuvenated and are now asserting themselves to the point of sending missionaries to Europe and North America and gaining new believers worldwide. Islam has been on the upsurge, especially in Asia and Africa, making it one of the fastest growing religions in the world.

In the Indian subcontinent, Hinduism became emboldened, rejecting its secular tolerance and wielding the sword of religious nationalism against what its fundamentalist adherents believe to be other religious contenders for its preeminent position in contemporary Indian society. The observations of Indian theologian T. K. John in 1987 are especially prescient and still hold true today:

The [Hindu] critics see Christianity as an alien and complex power structure that threatens to eventually undermine India's culture, national integrity and its religions. They feel that a religion that is disappearing from its former stronghold is being dumped, like so many unwanted drugs, on the Third World where it has to be nourished, supported and propagated by foreign money, control and power, instead of drawing its strength from the soil. They conclude that even current efforts at inculturation (which meet with so much inside opposition) are subterfuge measures to win over hesitant or unwilling recruits to the Christian fold. They accuse the Christian missionaries of taking undue advantage of the poverty, the illiteracy and ignorance of the vast majority of the people, and for the proof of this they point to the fact that they have altogether withdrawn their "forces" from the more difficult areas like the caste Hindus, the educated and the economically well-off.<sup>33</sup>

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33. T. K. John, "The Pope's 'Pastoral Visit' to India: A Further Reflection," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 51 (1987): 59.

Today, India is witnessing the rise of the militant Hindutva religious movement and its political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), both of which reject secular tolerance in favor of wielding the sword of religious zealotry against what its fundamentalist adherents argue are religious traditions that are foreign and alien to Indian culture.

In East Asia, Buddhism has gained a new vitality as new Buddhist movements that first emerged in the early twentieth century blossomed in the decades after the Second World War. For example, the charismatic Daisaku Ikeda (b. 1928) has transformed the Soka Gakkai Buddhist movement from a small Japanese lay sect of Nichiren Buddhism into a rapidly growing global Buddhist organization with more than 12 million members in over 190 countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas.<sup>34</sup> Established in 1967 by the Taiwanese Buddhist Dharma Master, the Venerable Hsing Yun (b. 1927), the Fo Guang Shan monastic order is the largest Chinese Mahayana Buddhist organization in the world with temples, monasteries, schools, and universities in 173 countries across five continents. The Venerable Hsing Yun is one of the main proponents of Humanistic Buddhism, which seeks to integrate Buddhist spirituality with daily ethical living, as well as work for positive social change in this present world.<sup>35</sup> Mention must be made of the well known international Buddhist relief organization, the Tzu Chi Foundation that was established in 1966 by the Buddhist nun and dharma master, the Venerable Cheng Yen (b. 1937), who is often regarded as the Buddhist counterpart to Mother Teresa.<sup>36</sup>

Looking at this picture of revitalized world religions flourishing in Asia in the ensuing decades after Vatican II, one is reminded of the insights of missiologist David Bosch in his magnum opus, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Specifically, Bosch notes that with the collapse of Western colonialism, Christianity “lost its hegemony” everywhere and “today has to compete for allegiance on the open market of religions and ideologies,” such that “there are no longer oceans separating Christians from other religionists.” On this basis, he contends that “we have reached the point where there can be little doubt that the two largest unsolved problems for the Christian Church are its relationship (1) to *world views which offer this-worldly salvation*, and (2)

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34. See Richard Hughes Seager, *Encountering the Dharma: Daisaku Ikeda, Soka Gakkai, and the Globalization of Buddhist Humanism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

35. See Stuart Chandler, *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth: The Foguang Buddhist Perspective on Modernization and Globalization* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

36. See Yu-ing Ching, *Master of Love and Mercy: Cheng Yen* (Nevada City, CA: Blue Dolphin Publishing, 1995).



to *other faiths*.”<sup>37</sup> Bosch’s careful observations and comments are especially relevant to the difficult task of doing Christian mission in the diverse and pluralistic Asian world. As Vietnamese American theologian Peter C. Phan explains, “it is in Asia that the question of religious pluralism is literally a matter of life and death,” and more importantly, “the future of Asian Christianity hangs in balance depending on how religious pluralism is understood and lived out.”<sup>38</sup>

## The Mission Theology of the FABC

The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) is a transnational body comprising fifteen Asian Catholic Bishops’ Conferences as full members, viz., Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Korea, Laos-Cambodia, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam, as well as ten associate members, viz., Hong Kong, Kyrgyzstan, Macau, Mongolia, Nepal, Siberia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and East Timor.<sup>39</sup> The foundation for the FABC was laid at an historic meeting of 180 Asian Catholic Bishops in Manila during the visit of Pope Paul VI to the Philippines in November 1970. The FABC

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37. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 475–77.
  38. Peter C. Phan, *Review of Paul Knitter’s Introducing Theologies of Religion*, in *Horizons* 30 (2003): 117.
  39. For an excellent overview of the FABC, its history and theological perspectives, see Edmund Chia, *Thirty Years of FABC: History, Foundation, Context and Theology*, *FABC Papers No. 106* (Hong Kong: FABC, 2003). For a more popular presentation of the FABC’s early beginnings and significant accomplishments, see Thomas C. Fox, *Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002). See also Peter C. Phan, “Christian Mission in Asia: A New Way of Being Church,” in *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, edited by Peter C. Phan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 13–31; Felix Wilfred, et al., “Document: What the Spirit Says to the Churches. A Vademecum on the Pastoral and Theological Orientations of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC),” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 62 (1998): 124–33; Jacob Kavunkal, “Local Church in the FABC Statements,” *Jeevadhara* 27 (1997): 260–71; L. Stanislaus, “The Responses of the Church to Human Development: An Overview from FABC Documents,” *East Asian Pastoral Review* 31 (1994): 95–118; Petrus Maria Handoko, *Lay Ministries in the Mission and Ministry of the Church in Asia: A Critical Study of the FABC 1970–1991* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1993); Jacques Dupuis, “FABC Focus on the Church’s Evangelising Mission in Asia Today,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 56 (1992): 449–68; FABC Theological Advisory Commission, *Theses on the Local Church: A Theological Reflection in the Asian Context*, *FABC Papers No. 60* (Hong Kong: FABC, 1991); and Felix Wilfred, “Fifth Plenary Assembly of FABC: An Interpretation of Its Theological Orientation,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 54 (1990): 583–92.



convenes in Plenary Assembly, the highest body, with the participation of all presidents and delegates of member conferences once in every four years. To-date ten plenary assemblies have been held.<sup>40</sup> In addition to these plenary assemblies, the FABC has also sought to make a significant contribution to the development and growth of the spiritual and theological life of the Asian local churches through the many congresses, consultations, colloquia, conferences, and symposia that are organized by its various offices, i.e., the FABC Central Secretariat, Office of Theological Concerns,<sup>41</sup> Office of Human Development, Office of Social Communication, Office of Laity and Family, Office of Education and Faith Formation, Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, Office of Evangelization, Office of Clergy, and Office of Consecrated Life.

## The Challenges of Pluralism in the Asian Milieu

In its official documents, the FABC has proceeded on the basis that the Asian milieu, with its rich diversity and plurality of religions, cultures, and philosophical worldviews requires a *distinctively Asian approach* to the proclamation of the gospel that is *sensitive to such diversity and pluralism*. Thus, at its founding at the Asian Bishops' Meeting with Pope Paul VI in Manila (1970), the Asian bishops acknowledged that Asia is "a continent of ancient and diverse cultures, religions, histories and traditions, a region like Joseph's coat of many colors" (*ABM*, art. 7).<sup>42</sup> The First FABC Plenary Assembly recognized that the great religious traditions of Asia are:

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40. These are: FABC I: Evangelization in Modern Asia (Taipei, Taiwan, 1974); FABC II: Prayer—the Life of the Church in Asia (Calcutta, India, 1978); FABC III: The Church—A Community of Faith in Asia (Bangkok, Thailand, 1982); FABC IV: The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia (Tokyo, Japan, 1986); FABC V: Journeying Together toward the Third Millennium (Bandung, Indonesia, 1990); FABC VI: Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life (Manila, Philippines, 1995); FABC VII: A Renewed Church in Asia on a Mission of Love and Service (Samphran, Thailand, 2000); FABC VIII: The Asian Family towards a Culture of Integral Life (Daejeon, South Korea, 2004); FABC IX: Living the Eucharist in Asia (Manila, Philippines, 2009); and FABC X: FABC at Forty: Responding to the Challenges of Asia (Xuan Loc, Vietnam, 2012).

41. The FABC Office of Theological Concerns comprises bishop theologians who hold leadership positions, and lay theologians specifically appointed by bishops' conferences to collaborate with the bishop theologians to produce important studies, position statements, etc., for use by the wider FABC constituencies.

42. *FAPA* Vol. I, 4, cf. FABC II, art. 7, in *FAPA* Vol. I, 30.

significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design and 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 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 (*FABC I*, art. 14).<sup>43</sup>

One year after the conclusion of *FABC I*, Bishops' Institute for Social Action (*BISA*) II came out, among other things, with the following statement on pluralism which would undergird all subsequent discussions on pluralism in the various *FABC* Plenary Assemblies and Bishops' Institutes:

Pluralism is a necessity once we work through the mediation of secular analysis and worldviews. This pluralism should not be a threat to our Christian unity, but on the contrary, a positive and creative sign that our unity is deeper than whatever the concrete technical analysis or viewpoints might show: a genuine value that emphasizes unity in diversity (*BISA II*, art. 10).<sup>44</sup>

For the *FABC*, pluralism is not something negative, but a source of richness and strength:

Peace and harmony in Asian societies, composed as they are of many cultural, ethnic and linguistic groups, would require recognition of legitimate pluralism and respect for all the groups. Unity, peace and harmony are to be realized in diversity. Diversity is not something to be regretted and abolished, but to be rejoiced over and promoted, since it represents richness and strength. Harmony is not simply the absence of strife, described as "live and let live." The test of true harmony lies in the acceptance of diversity as richness (Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs [*BIRA*] IV/11, art. 15).<sup>45</sup>

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43. *FAPA* Vol. I, 14.

44. *Ibid.*, 204.

45. *Ibid.*, 321.

Elsewhere, the FABC has extended Vatican II's cautious statements in *GS*, 22<sup>46</sup> and *AG*, 4<sup>47</sup> when it states that "it is an inescapable truth that God's Spirit is at work in all religious traditions" (BIRA IV/12, art. 7)<sup>48</sup> because:

it has been recognized since the time of the apostolic Church, and stated clearly again by the Second Vatican Council, that the Spirit of Christ is active outside the bounds of the visible Church. God's saving grace is not limited to members of the Church, but is offered to every person. His grace may lead some to accept baptism and enter the Church, but it cannot be presumed that this must always be the case. His ways are mysterious and unfathomable, and no one can dictate the direction of His grace (BIRA II, art. 12).<sup>49</sup>

In other words, the FABC has taken the proposition that is made both in *GS*, 22 and *AG*, 4 to its logical conclusion when it perceives the religious traditions of Asia as "expressions of the presence of God's Word and of the universal action of his Spirit in them" (*Theological Consultation*, art. 43).<sup>50</sup> In particular, the "great religions of Asia with their respective creeds, cults and codes reveal to us diverse ways of responding to God whose Spirit is active in all peoples and cultures" (BIRA IV/7, art. 12).<sup>51</sup> For the FABC, it is "the same spirit, who has been active in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and in the Church, who was active among all peoples before the incarnation and is active among the nations, religions and peoples of Asia today" (BIRA IV/3, art. 6).<sup>52</sup>

More significantly, the Final Statement of the 1995 FABC Hindu-Christian Dialogue made it clear that the FABC viewed religious pluralism as constitutive of the Asian reality:

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46. *GS*, 22 §7 states: "For since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery." Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II*, 221–22.
47. *AG*, 4 states: "Doubtless, the Holy Spirit was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified." Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II*, 587.
48. *FAPA* Vol. I, 326.
49. *FAPA* Vol. I, 115, cf. BIRA IV/1, art. 10, in *FAPA* Vol. I, 249.
50. *FAPA* Vol. I, 344.
51. *Ibid.*, 310.
52. *Ibid.*, 259.

Beyond the extremes of inclusivism and exclusivism, pluralism is accepted in resonance with the constitutive plurality of reality. Religions, as they are manifested in history, are complementary perceptions of the ineffable divine mystery, the God-beyond-God. All religions are visions of the divine mystery. No particular religion can raise the claim of being the norm for all others. We religious believers are co-pilgrims, who share intimate spiritual experiences and reflections with one another with concern and compassion, with genuine openness to truth and the freedom of spiritual seekers (*sadhakas*). In this process we become increasingly sensitive to human suffering and collaborate in promoting justice, peace and ecological wholeness (BIRA V/3, art. 6).<sup>53</sup>

This rejection of any religious exclusivism echoes an earlier statement: “When various religious groups lay absolute claim to truth, aggressive militancy and divisive proselytism follow and, in their wake, bitter religious divisions” (BIRA IV/4, art. 4).<sup>54</sup> As a result, an Indian commentator is able to conclude that the Asian Bishops “consider religious pluralism as a grace and as a God-given call to be co-pilgrims along with the believers of other religions in search of Truth in love.”<sup>55</sup>

At the same time, the FABC has acknowledged that critics of religious pluralism often raise the specter of unbridled relativism or subjectivism. In response to these critics, the FABC Office of Theological Concerns explains in a document entitled *Methodology: Asian Christian Theology, Doing Theology in Asia Today* that, among other things, recognition of religious pluralism does not necessarily lead to an acceptance of subjectivism or relativism:

Pluralism need not always entail a radical subjectivism or relativism, in the sense of claiming that all points of view are equally valid. However, it is also true that the dawn of pluralistic, democratic, modern societies has paved the way to excessive individualism and subjectivism, and a consequent relativizing of all reality. Thus, today there are persons and groups who hold all reality to be relative. For such persons or groups, pluralism means relativism, in the sense that they claim all points of view are equally valid. *Such philosophical or theological positions are to be rejected; and, in fact, all the major Asian religions condemn such relativizing of reality, especially the relativizing of basic human values.* However, just because certain persons and groups are misled in their search for truth, and just because they tend to perceive pluralism

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53. *FAPA* Vol. II, 157–58.

54. *FAPA* Vol. I, 300.

55. Lorenzo Fernando, “CBCI and FABC on Religious Pluralism,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 64 (2000): 857–69, at 865.

as relativism, or just because they tend to relativize all reality, we cannot conclude that all pluralism leads to relativism.<sup>56</sup>

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that the Asian bishops are very much at home with the diversity and plurality of the Asian *Sitzen-im-Leben*, eschewing all forms of religious exclusivism, perceiving religious pluralism as an innate and unique aspect of the Asian socio-religious landscape,<sup>57</sup> and seeking consistently to work within the diverse pluralism of the Asian milieu with its manifold peoples, cultures, and religions. While others may consider the diversity and plurality of postmodern Europe and North America as challenges that the Church has to confront and overcome, for the Asian bishops, the question is rather how the Asian churches could be at home with such diversity and plurality.

## Dialogue with the Threefold Reality of Asian Religions, Cultures, and Poverty

From the very beginning, the FABC has always maintained that at the heart of the task of mission of the Asian local churches lies the dialogical encounter between the local churches and the Asian milieu with its triple reality of Asian religions, cultures, and poverty:

A church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the great religions—in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own seeks to share in whatever truly belongs to that people: its meanings and its values, its aspirations, its thoughts and its language, its songs and its artistry. Even its frailties and failings it assumes, so that they too may be healed. For so did God's Son assume the totality of our fallen human condition (save only for sin) so that He might make it truly His own, and redeem it in His paschal mystery (FABC I, art. 12).<sup>58</sup>

Looking back at the First FABC Plenary Assembly, Michael Amaladoss comments that the Asian Bishops saw mission as a dialogue with “the threefold realities of Asia,” viz., “its rich cultures, its ancient and great religions, and the

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56. *FAPA* Vol. III, 334, emphasis added.

57. See Fernando, “CBCI and FABC on Religious Pluralism,” 864–69.

58. *FAPA* Vol. I, 14.

poor” and accepted Asian religions as “significant and positive elements in the economy of God’s design of salvation” because they have “*a living experience of other religions*.”<sup>59</sup>

For the FABC, dialogue is “an integral part of evangelization” (Bishops’ Institute for Missionary Apostolate [BIMA] II, art. 14),<sup>60</sup> “intrinsic to the very life of the Church,” (BIRA I, art. 9),<sup>61</sup> an “essential mode of all evangelization” (Message of the 1979 International Congress on Mission, art. 19),<sup>62</sup> and “a true expression of the Church’s evangelizing action” (BIMA II, art. 14).<sup>63</sup> At the same time, the FABC has also explained that dialogue *does not preclude* the need for the proclamation of the Christian gospel: in fact there could be a moment when “we shall not be timid when God opens the door for us to *proclaim* explicitly the Lord Jesus Christ as the Savior and the answer to the fundamental questions of human existence” (FABC V, art. 4.3).<sup>64</sup> However, a distinctively Asian approach of proclamation which is sensitive to the Asian *Sitz-im-Leben* is needed:

Mission may find its greatest urgency in Asia; it also finds in our continent a distinctive mode. We affirm, together with others, that “the proclamation of Jesus Christ is the center and primary element of evangelization” (Statement of the FABC All-Asia Conference on Evangelization, Suwon, South Korea, August 24-31, 1988). But the proclamation of Jesus Christ in Asia means, first of all, the witness of Christians and of Christian communities to the values of the Kingdom of God, a *proclamation through Christlike deeds*. For Christians in Asia, to proclaim Christ means above all to live like him, in the midst of our neighbors of other faiths and persuasions, and to do his deeds by the power of his grace. Proclamation through dialogue and deeds—this is the first call to the Churches in Asia” (FABC V, art 4.1).<sup>65</sup>

On the basis of the foregoing, the Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly has equated the triple dialogue with the Christian mission imperative and concludes thus:

Mission includes: being with the people, responding to their needs, with sensitiveness to the presence of God in cultures and other religious traditions,

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59. Amaladoss, “The Challenges of Mission Today,” 362, emphasis added.

60. *FAPA* Vol. I, 100.

61. *Ibid.*, 111.

62. *Ibid.*, 131.

63. *Ibid.*, 101.

64. *Ibid.*, 282, emphasis in the original.

65. *Ibid.*, 281–82, emphasis in the original.

and witnessing to the values of God's Kingdom through presence, solidarity, sharing and word. *Mission will mean a dialogue with Asian's poor, with its local cultures, and with other religious traditions* (FABC V, art. 3.1.2).<sup>66</sup>

This identification of proclamation with the “witness of life” builds upon the earlier statement made by the Third Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate meeting in Changhua in 1982:

It is true that in many places [in Asia] Christ cannot yet be proclaimed openly by words. But He can, and should be, proclaimed through other ways, namely: through the witness of life of the Christian community and family, and their striving to know and live more fully the faith they possess; through their desire to live in peace and harmony with those who do not share our faith; through the appreciation by Christians of the human and religious values possessed by their non-Christian neighbors, and through these same Christians' willingness to collaborate in those activities which promote the human community (BIMA III, art. 10).<sup>67</sup>

Elsewhere, the FABC has reiterated that “dialogue aimed at ‘converting’ the other to one's own religious faith and tradition is dishonest and unethical; it is not the way of harmony” (BIRA V/3, art. 7).<sup>68</sup> As for the relationship between dialogue, proclamation, and conversion, the FABC has pointed out, rightfully, that “dialogue and proclamation are complementary. Sincere and authentic dialogue does not have for its objective the conversion of the other. For conversion depends solely on God's internal call and the person's free decision” (BIRA III, art. 4).<sup>69</sup> Moreover, as Indian theologian Felix Wilfred points out, “truth does not impose itself, but rather *attracts* everyone and everything to itself by its beauty, splendor and fascination.”<sup>70</sup>

## Building up the Kingdom of God

The FABC has taken a positive approach to such diversity and pluralism, acknowledging that the grace and presence of God permeate all of creation in a mysterious manner. The Asian bishops have given a place of reverence and

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66. Ibid., 280, emphasis added.

67. Ibid., 105.

68. *FAPA* Vol. II, 158.

69. *FAPA* Vol. I, 120.

70. Felix Wilfred, “Inculturation as a Hermeneutical Question,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 52 (1988): 422–36, at 427.

honor to the diverse Asian religious traditions and acknowledged that God has drawn the Asian peoples to Godself through these religious traditions (FABC I, art.15),<sup>71</sup> a position that has been reiterated in BIRA III, art. 2.<sup>72</sup> The FABC also pointed out that Christians believe that God's saving will is at work, in many different ways, in all religions: *the Spirit of Christ is active outside the bounds of the visible Church. God's saving grace is not limited to members of the Church, but is offered to every person.* By the grace of the Spirit, some may come to desire to belong to the Church, and thus accept baptism; others may not. The Spirit works in entirely "mysterious and unfathomable" ways (BIRA II, art. 12.).<sup>73</sup>

Such an understanding and appreciation of diversity and plurality has led the FABC to link the task of Christian mission with the kingdom of God. The 1988 FABC All-Asia Conference on Evangelization explained that the "ultimate goal of all evangelization is the ushering in and establishment of God's Kingdom, namely, God's rule in the hearts and minds of our people" (BIMA IV, art. 5).<sup>74</sup> At the same time, "the core of Christ's proclamation is the Kingdom of God" (BIRA IV/10, art. 6)<sup>75</sup> and the local church "is an instrument for the actualization of the Kingdom" (BIRA IV/2, art. 8.2).<sup>76</sup> The FABC has explained the relationship between the Church and the kingdom of God as follows:

*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 continually being realized, and made present through the Spirit. Where God is accepted, when the Gospel values are lived, where man 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 (BIRA IV/2, art. 8.1).<sup>77</sup>

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71. See *FAPA* Vol. I, 14.

72. *Ibid.*, 119.

73. *Ibid.*, 115, emphasis added.

74. *Ibid.*, 292.

75. *Ibid.*, 314.

76. *Ibid.*, 252.

77. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.



Similarly, article 30 of the 1991 Theological Consultation insists:

The Reign of God is a universal reality, extending far beyond the boundaries of the Church. It is the reality of salvation in Jesus Christ, in which Christians and others share together. It is the fundamental “mystery of unity” which unites us more deeply than differences in religious allegiance are able to keep us apart. Seen in this manner, a “regnocentric” approach to mission theology does not in any way threaten the Christo-centric perspective of our faith. On the contrary, “regno-centrism” calls for “christo-centrism,” and vice-versa, for it is in Jesus Christ and through the Christ-event that God has established his Kingdom upon the earth and in human history.<sup>78</sup>

The local church is perceived as “constantly [moving] forward in mission, as it accompanies all humankind in its pilgrimage to the Kingdom of the Father” (FABC III, art. 15).<sup>79</sup> In this respect, the FABC also pointed out that:

Christian communities in Asia must listen to the Spirit at work in the many communities of believers who live and experience their own faith, who share and celebrate it in their own social, cultural and religious history, and that they (as communities of the Gospel) must accompany these others “in a common pilgrimage toward the ultimate goal, in relentless quest for the Absolute,” and that thus they are to be “sensitively attuned to the work of the Spirit in the resounding symphony of Asian communion” (FABC III, art. 8.2).<sup>80</sup>

In addition, the 1991 FABC Theological Consultation concluded that “if the Church is the sacrament of the Kingdom, the reason is that she is the sacrament of Jesus Christ himself who is the mystery of salvation, to whom she is called to bear witness and whom she is called to announce. To be at the service of the Kingdom means for the Church to announce Jesus Christ” (*Theological Consultation*, art. 33).<sup>81</sup>

Moreover, far from being an excuse for putting aside the task of evangelization, the paradigm of the kingdom of God in Asia challenges the local churches of Asia to work “with the Christians of other Churches, together with our sisters and brothers of other faiths and with all people of goodwill, to make the Kingdom of God more visibly present in Asia” (FABC V, art.

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78. Ibid., 342.

79. Ibid., 60.

80. Ibid. 57.

81. Ibid., 342.

2.3.9).<sup>82</sup> Elsewhere in the same document, the FABC pointed out that the ultimate goal of mission in Asia is “to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God: to promote the values of the Kingdom such as justice, peace, love, compassion, equality and brotherhood in these Asian realities. In short, it is to make the Kingdom of God a reality” (FABC V, art. 1.7).<sup>83</sup> The inclusivity of the kingdom of God holds great appeal to the FABC, which “acknowledge[s] the Kingdom at work in sociopolitical situations and in cultural and religious traditions of Asia” (Theological Consultation, art. 39).<sup>84</sup> For the Asian Catholic bishops, the inclusive nature of the kingdom of God is able to encompass those people who are followers of Jesus Christ, his life and his teachings and those who continue to remain Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists or Muslims, and who are otherwise excluded from the dialectical set-up of present ecclesial structures.<sup>85</sup> In a similar vein, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India’s Response to the *Lineamenta* for the 1998 Synod for Asia states that “in union with the Father and the Spirit, Christ is indeed the source and cause of salvation for all peoples, but this fact does not exclude the possibility of God mysteriously employing other cooperating channels” (art. 5.1).<sup>86</sup>

## Toward “Active Integral Evangelization”

The relationship between interreligious harmony, mission, and dialogue was elaborated by the Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly as follows:

Mission in Asia will also seek through *dialogue* to serve the cause of unity of the peoples of Asia marked by such a diversity of beliefs, cultures and socio-political structures. In an Asia marked by diversity and torn by conflicts, the Church must in a special way be a sacrament—a visible sign and instrument of unity and harmony (FABC V, art. 4.2.).<sup>87</sup>

This call is especially prophetic and poignant today, in view of the occurrence of religious strife in many parts of Asia, e.g., the Hindu-Christian conflict in India and the Muslim-Christian conflict in Indonesia. The Fifth

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82. Ibid., 279.

83. Ibid., 275.

84. Ibid., 344.

85. See Wilfred, “Inculturation as a Hermeneutical Question,” 429.

86. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India, “Responses to the *Lineamenta*,” *East Asian Pastoral Review* 35, no. 2 (1998): 112–29, at 121.

87. *FAPA* Vol. I, 282, emphasis in the original.

FABC Plenary Assembly also held that the local churches have “to discern, in dialogue with Asian peoples and Asian realities, what deeds the Lord wills to be done so that all humankind may be gathered together in harmony as his family” (FABC V, art. 6. 3).<sup>88</sup> This is because it is “the local churches and communities which can discern and work (in dialogue with each other and with other persons of goodwill) the way the Gospel is best proclaimed, the Church set up, the values of God’s Kingdom realized in their own place and time. In fact, it is by responding to and serving the needs of the peoples of Asia that the different Christian communities become truly local Churches” (FABC V, art. 3.3.1).<sup>89</sup>

Building on the foregoing, the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the FABC coined a new term, “active integral evangelization,”<sup>90</sup> to describe a distinctively Asian approach to Christian mission that integrates commitment and service to life, witness, and dialogue:

For thirty years, as we have tried to reformulate our Christian identity in Asia, we have addressed different issues, one after another: evangelization, inculturation, dialogue, the Asian-ness of the Church, justice, the option for the poor, etc. Today, after three decades, we no longer speak of such distinct issues. We are addressing present needs that are massive and increasingly complex. *These issues are not separate topics to be discussed, but aspects of an integrated approach to our Mission of Love and Service. We need to feel and act “integrally.” As we face the needs of the 21st century, we do so with Asian hearts, in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, in union with all our Christian brothers and sisters, and by joining hands with all men and women of Asia of many different faiths. Inculturation, dialogue, justice and the option for the poor are aspects of whatever we do.*<sup>91</sup>

In this important document, the FABC reiterates what it stated five years earlier in its 1995 Manila Plenary Statement—it is committed to the “emergence of the Asianness of the Church in Asia,” with the assertion that “the Church has to be an embodiment of the Asian vision and values of life, especially interiority, harmony, a holistic and inclusive approach to every area of life.”<sup>92</sup> More significantly, the FABC is convinced that this Asianness of the Church is “a special gift the world is awaiting,” and explains that “the whole

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88. Ibid., 283.

89. Ibid., 281

90. Ibid., 3.

91. Ibid., 8, emphasis added.

92. Ibid., 8.

world is in need of a holistic paradigm for meeting the challenges of life,” and “together with all Asians, the Church, a tiny minority in this vast continent, has a singular contribution to make, and this contribution is the task of the whole Church in Asia.”<sup>93</sup> In addition, the FABC reiterates that the “most effective means of evangelization and service in the name of Christ has always been and continues to be the *witness of life*,”<sup>94</sup> and it is only through such witnessing that “Asian people will recognize the gospel that we announce when they see in our life the transparency of the message of Jesus and the inspiring and healing figure of men and women immersed in God.”<sup>95</sup>

I would like to suggest that this witness of life that flows from active integral evangelization is needed more than ever in response to the challenges posed by religious fundamentalists and exclusivists in many parts of Asia. For example, the communal violence against Christians by Hindutva fundamentalists in Orissa, India raises questions of whether Christians should turn the other cheek when faced with agitations and violence. Beginning with the cold-blooded murder of the Australian Evangelical missionary Graham Staines and his two young sons Philip and Timothy, who were burnt alive in their station wagon in 1999, and culminating in the violence and mayhem against Dalit Christians in Orissa by Hindutva agitators in the aftermath of the assassination of the Hindu fundamentalist Swami Laxmananada Saraswati by Maoist insurgents on August 24, 2008, it is legitimate to ask whether the Asian bishops’ approach to mission smacks of naïveté in the face of vitriol, hate, and exclusivism that are being spewed by right wing Hindutva militant groups, e.g., the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Sangh Parivar, and Bajrang Dal.

The Statement of the Executive Body of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India (CBCI) in response to the Orissa violence against Indian Christians is unequivocal that a tit-for-tat response will only worsen things. One cannot fight religious exclusivism with religious exclusivism. One disarms religious exclusivism with Christian love. “No matter how great the threat that may confront us, we cannot renounce the heritage of love and justice that Jesus left us,” because “when Jesus went about healing the sick, associating

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93. Ibid. 9.

94. Ibid., 12.

95. Ibid., 12–13.

with outcasts and assisting the poor, those works were not allurements but the concrete realization of God's plan for humankind: to build a society founded on love, justice and social harmony."<sup>96</sup>

In a similar vein, the Catholic Archbishop of Delhi, Vincent Concessao, states that inflammatory missionary tracts that disparage and denigrate Hinduism are counter-productive because "they give fanatics a battering ram to crush Indian Christianity at large."<sup>97</sup> Commenting on the increasing tension between Hindus and Christians in his paper entitled "The Quest for Identity and the Call for Dialogue: Prophetic Imperatives of the Mission of the Church in India," Indian theologian Sebastian Madathummuriyil puts forward the case for the Indian Church to "re-examine the Church's imperialistic objectives of mission that reflects exclusivist and totalitarian tendencies," as well as to rediscover its identity, "paying heed to the challenges posed by religious, cultural, ideological, and linguistic pluralism."<sup>98</sup> In particular, Madathummuriyil thinks that as a minority community in India, the Indian Church is well positioned to be a prophetic voice for peace and harmony among Hindus, Muslims, and Christians in India against the backdrop of the Hindutva ideology of homogeneity of religion, culture, and language. As he explains:

To be a prophetic Church in the Indian context, then, would imply, on the one hand, forfeiting traditional strategies of mission and, on the other hand, enhancing measures for regaining trust and confidence of both Hindus and Muslims through dialogue in an age of widespread anti-Christian sentiments.<sup>99</sup>

## Conclusion

One thing in common between the FABC and Vatican II is that they both unequivocally agree upon the *necessity of mission* in the Asian milieu. Without any doubt, the FABC agrees with the Council Fathers at Vatican II that the Church is missionary in nature. The FABC also wholeheartedly

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96. Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI), "Violence against Christians: Statement of the Executive Body of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 72 (2008): 814–17, at 816.

97. Cited in Francis Gonsalves, "Carrying in Our Bodies the Marks of His Passion," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 72 (2008): 801–7, at 806.

98. Gerald M. Boodoo, "Catholicity and Mission," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 65 (2010): 117–18, at 118.

99. Ibid.

concurs with Vatican II on the possibility of an extra-ecclesial means of salvation (*LG*, 16), the respect of elements that are true and holy in other religions (*NA*, 2), as well as the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit in the plan of salvation (*GS*, 22 and *AG*, 4). In the missionary decree, *Ad Gentes*, the Council Fathers focused on the *why*, *what*, and *for whom* of mission, trying to justify the need for mission, the contents of mission, and the outcome of mission. This is not surprising, as *Ad Gentes* seeks to articulate a mission theology from the perspective of the missionaries from Europe seeking to bring Christ to the unbaptized (*AG*, 8) and “planting of the Church among those people and groups where she has not yet taken root” (*AG*, 6).<sup>100</sup> By contrast, the FABC takes for granted the question of *why*, *what*, and *for whom*, focusing rather on the *how* of mission, i.e., *how* to do Christian mission in the context of immense diversity and plurality of religions and cultures, as well as in solidarity with the poor and marginalized in Asia.

The tension between *dialogue* (*Nostra Aetate*) and proclamation (*Ad Gentes*) is evident at Vatican II and the Council Fathers did not resolve the situation one way or the other, emphasizing both the necessity of the Church and proclamation in *Ad Gentes* while discussing the possibility of truth and holiness in other religions (*Nostra Aetate*), the role of the Holy Spirit outside the Church (*Gaudium et Spes* and *Ad Gentes*), and the possibility of salvation outside the Church (*Lumen Gentium*). Faced with this unresolved tension, the FABC bishops have chosen to contextualize their mission theology with the specificities of the Asian context, including the challenges and opportunities afforded by the diversity and plurality of religions and cultures, as well as the call to respond to the pervasive poverty and marginalization that many Asians experience in their daily lives.

In practical terms, while the Asian Catholic bishops accept the necessity of the task of mission in the Asian milieu, they also realize that this does *not* mean that they are called to conquer the postcolonial Asian world in the name of a triumphant Christ, or build a triumphalistic Christendom on Asian soil. Recognizing the challenges of religious pluralism and religious exclusivism in Asia in a manner that was not discussed or even understood by the Council Fathers at Vatican II, except for brief indirect allusions in *Gaudium et Spes*, *Nostra Aetate*, and *Ad Gentes*, the Asian Catholic bishops have pointed out that Asian Christians are called to mission by giving of themselves and bringing the life and hope of the Good News of Jesus Christ to a world beset with challenges

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100. Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II*, 591.

and problems. In a continent that is being torn apart by violence and conflicts in the name of exclusivist religious fanaticism, Asian Christians are challenged to go beyond the superficiality of quantitative Church growth in favor of a qualitative *prophetic* approach that seeks to critique, transform, and heal the brokenness in Asian cultures and Asian realities. What is clear is that the FABC accepts that the Asian Church will always be a “little flock” in the sea of diverse Asian religions and cultures in pluralistic Asia and, hence, has chosen to focus on prophetically critiquing, transforming, and healing the brokenness in Asian realities in the name of bringing about the kingdom of God in the Asian milieu.

Moreover, it is also important to note that the FABC has consistently emphasized its preferential option for the *dialogical* path of *Nostra Aetate* (see *NA*, 2) in its own mission theology. In his keynote address at BIRA IV/12 in February 1991,<sup>101</sup> the late Angelo Fernandes, Archbishop Emeritus of Delhi, asserted that Asians of other faiths were not to be regarded as “objects of Christian mission,” but as “partners in the Asian community, where there must be mutual witness.”<sup>102</sup> Archbishop Fernandes’ insistence on Asians of other faiths as partners and collaborators in a mutual witness captures succinctly the FABC’s theology and practice of mission in Asia.

From its inception, the FABC has consistently sought to make the Christian gospel and local churches truly part of the Asian *Sitz-im-Leben*. Unlike foreign missionaries who came bearing the gospel and planting churches in Asia, the Asian Catholic bishops are very much at home in the pluralistic Asian milieu, having been born into, and lived amidst, such rich diversity and plurality. They recognize that many Christians (laity, clergy, and even bishops) come from a “mixed” religious background. They have relatives, friends, and neighbors with a variety of religious backgrounds. Growing up immersed and steeped in such diversity and plurality, they also have firsthand experiences of communalists, nationalists, fanatics, and fundamentalists who not only reject pluralism and diversity, but also seek to eradicate pluralism and impose their vision as normative through coercion and violence. The forced conversions of Christians in many parts of Asia, the simmering Christian-Muslim conflicts in many parts of Indonesia, and heavy restrictions placed on Christians and their freedom of association are imprinted in the consciousness of these Asian bishops.

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101. See Angelo Fernandes, “Dialogue in the Context of Asian Realities,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 55 (1991): 545–60.

102. See *ibid.*, 548.



Ironically, without pluralism and diversity, there is no room for the Christian gospel in Asia, a continent dominated by the world's principal religions. Hence, the FABC bishops recognize cultural diversity and religious pluralism lying at the heart of what it means to be Asian. To be truly Asian and at home in the Asian milieu, the Asian local churches are called to embrace this cultural diversity and religious pluralism. Indeed, as far as the FABC is concerned, diversity and plurality is not to be gotten rid of, but "rejoiced over and promoted" (BIRA IV/11, art. 15).<sup>103</sup>

Clearly, the Asian bishops have been interested, not just in a Christian presence in Asia that is over and against Asian religions and cultures, but rather, a presence that is relational and dialogical. Moreover, the FABC points out that Christian communities in Asia must not only "listen to the Spirit at work in the many communities of believers who live and experience their own faith, who share and celebrate it in their own social, cultural and religious history," but also "(as communities of the gospel) must accompany these others 'in a common pilgrimage toward the ultimate goal, in relentless quest for the Absolute'; in doing so, they become 'sensitively attuned to the work of the Spirit in the resounding symphony of Asian communion' (FABC III, art. 8.2).<sup>104</sup> The FABC's call to Asian local churches to walk in "a common pilgrimage" with, as well as discern the Spirit at work in, Asian peoples with their ancient, diverse cultures and religions, exemplifies its vision of active integral evangelization as the way forward, building upon the tentative conciliar vision of *GS*, 22 and *AG*, 4.

Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the Asian Catholic bishops perceive the Church as being called to work for the redemption of humanity in Asia not by pouring oil on the fires of religious conflict and violence and engaging in competitive proselytism and one-upmanship against the practitioners of other religions. Rather, they witness to the redemptive power of the gospel by the example of their daily living in companionship and solidarity with their neighbors, working, struggling, and suffering as fellow humans on a common quest for the meaning of life. Hence, both life witness and dialogue are the two sides of the coin that define the relationship between the Christian gospel and other religious traditions in the Asian landscape of religious diversity and pluralism, enabling Asian Christians to share the Good News with their fellow Asians. Moreover, Asian Christians acknowledge and rejoice in

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103. *FAPA* Vol. I, 321.

104. *Ibid.*, 57.



the diversity and plurality of religions that lies at the heart of what it means to be Asian and Christian. In the final analysis, to be truly Asian and at home in the Asian milieu, Asian Christians are challenged to embrace the religious diversity and plurality of postcolonial Asia, while at the same time prophetically challenging and purifying its oppressive and life-denying elements in the name of the Christian gospel. It must also be pointed out that while the sapiential "Asian" vision of the FABC does not neglect the importance of proclamation, it also values friendship and trust, relationality and relationship-building, dialogue and solidarity as constitutive elements of the task of Christian mission in Asia.

More importantly, implicit in such a missiology is the acknowledgment and acceptance of a fundamental ontological, soteriological, and existential relationship between the Christian gospel and the Asian peoples with their rich religious and cultural traditions, as well as their daily socio-economic challenges. Such a deep and profound missiology enables the local church to move away from the *plantatio ecclesiae* mentality, i.e., away from "an institution planted in Asia" towards "an evangelizing community of Asia" (Theological Consultation, art. 15).<sup>105</sup> Clearly, the FABC has great hopes that the local church is able to be deeply inculturated in the Asian soil to the extent that it becomes not simply a church in Asia, but truly an Asian church (BIRA IV/12, art. 50).<sup>106</sup>

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105. Ibid., 338.

106. Ibid., 333.

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