

Asian Theology of Religious Pluralism

*Edmund Chia*¹

The Problem of Religious Pluralism

Some time ago an article appeared in a well-known newspaper of my country, Malaysia, which lambasted the theology of religious pluralism.² The Malaysian author took to task the propositions put forth by pluralist theologians, which he says John Hick represents, suggesting that they undermine the very existence of religions. He charged that the theology of religious pluralism negates and denigrates the absolute truth claims of the various religions as it relativizes them, thus challenging and questioning their uniqueness. He attributes this to the West's fear of truth derived from religions and surmised that the theology of religious pluralism is a consequence of western secular liberalism.

In my response to the article³ I pointed out that it is not so much the absolute truth claims that pluralist theologians are fearful about but how they can be misused and abused. Used within the context of their own faith community truth claims serve to enhance religious life by nurturing the faith experience of the believers. This is much like love claims within a family. Couples and family members need to proclaim their love in an exclusive fashion to one another and they ought to be doing that frequently too. These absolutist love claims serve to nurture the family relationships. But when such love-claims or truth-claims are used to pass judgments on others then they have become weapons of derision and division and serve only to condemn. It is in this way that absolute truth claims become problematic, especially when used as "the truth" by which all other religions are measured.

Unfortunately this is a characteristic not totally alien to adherents of religion but more especially (though not limited to) those who adhere to monotheistic religions. There seems to be a logic followed which suggests that the belief in one God leads to the belief in one truth and this leads to the conclusion that there can only be one true religion. Since the believer believes, in all honesty and sincerity, that it is his or her own religion which is that final, definitive, unsurpassable and absolute religion, other religions are perceived as at best

¹ **Edmund Chia** is Assistant Professor of Doctrinal Theology at the Chicago Theological Union, Chicago, IL, USA and was the Executive Secretary of the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. The article originally appeared in Spanish as "Teología asiática y pluralismo religioso," in: José María Vigil, Luiza E. Tomita, Marcelo Barros eds., *Por los muchos caminos de Dios - IV. Teología liberadora intercontinental del pluralismo religioso* (Quito: Abya Yala, 2006), 108-23.

² Dr Musa Mohd Nordin, "Pluralism 'disguised enmity' of religions," *Malaysiakini* (11 October, 2005), [<http://www.malaysiakini.com>].

³ Edmund Chia, "Religious Pluralism: My daddy's cool," *Malaysiakini* (21 October, 2005), [<http://www.malaysiakini.com>].

lesser versions of this absolute religion or at worse false or even demonic. To support such exclusivistic attitudes the Christian has recourse to Biblical verses such as “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations” (Mt. 28: 18-19), or “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6), or “There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given by the human race by which we are to be saved” (Acts 4:12).

When such convictions are paired with power (social, political, economic, etc.) the result is a dangerous mix which oftentimes become lethal. History is replete with more than enough examples of cases of violence perpetrated in the name of religious truth. Religiously minded people not only are willing to die for their religion but also to kill for it. This is not at all surprising since if I believe God to be on my side then I see it not only as my right but also my duty to convince, persuade, entice, coerce or even force you and everyone else to accept my religion. Or, I may see it as God’s will or command that I subtly or actively persecute you and everyone who does not share in my religion so that all may give up their heathen ways and be brought into the bosom of God’s love in order to attain eternal salvation (as interpreted by me and according to my own religious tradition, of course).

This is what pluralist theologians are concerned about. Religions have too often been used to endorse and justify the violence perpetrated against the religious “other.” These theologians seek, therefore, to “relativize” not so much God or Truth or the Ultimate Reality but only the *claims* to God, Truth or Ultimate Reality. It is not God whom they fight against, but claims which mortal human beings are making to having a monopoly over God or interpretations of Truth. Theirs is not so much to deconstruct truth claims for deconstruction sake but to preach against the “myth of religious superiority,”⁴ for the myth has already contributed way too much to the interreligious conflict and violence that is so pervasive around the world.

This paper takes as starting point this myth of religious superiority. It explores the issue of religious pluralism, with reference especially to its antecedents and development in the post-Vatican II [Roman Catholic] Church. The implications of a theology of pluralism and how it has worked out within the context of Asia, as articulated through the statements of the Asian bishops, will be spelt out. Special attention will be paid to how the other religions and revelations feature in God’s divine economy of salvation. Finally, the paper will point to the difficulties and challenges such a theology is posing and will end with a note of hope for the Asian Theology of Religious Pluralism.

⁴ This is the title of a recent book featuring pluralist theologians of six religious traditions, of whom the more prominent are John Hick and Paul Knitter. See Paul Knitter, ed., *The Myth of Religious Superiority* (NY: Orbis, 2005).

Religious Pluralism: A Western Concept?

Before proceeding further it is important that we first address the fact that religious pluralism has often been perceived as a Western concoction. Without doubting that Western scholars such as John Hick, Paul Knitter, Leonard Swidler, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith have indeed made significant contribution to the theology which goes by its name, I am not sure if we can attribute the phenomenon of religious pluralism to the West. It is kind of like saying that Jean-Paul Sartre was the inventor of nothingness just because he authored a book on the subject. Or, worse still is the suggestion that Asians are aping the West when they begin to talk about nothingness. Surely Buddhists throughout Asia have a much more cogent notion of the concept than does Sartre.⁵

The same can be said of religious pluralism. Asians are beginning to talk about it not because it is a Western agenda but because it resonates with their personal and lived experience. The context of religious pluralism, to be sure, is something which many of us in Asia have grown up in and are very much used to. It has become so much a part of us that we can even say it is already a constituent element of the Asian psyche. Just consider the religious landscape of India and China, two countries which together make up the greater part of Asia, both geographically and in population terms. For millennia the many religions have not only been allowed to coexist peacefully but the people have also been generally free to embrace and practice many of them all at once. There was not the need for any one religion to dominate or to regard itself as superior to the others. They each have roles and serve specific functions, much the same way the different languages and dialects serve different ethnic or national communities. Each religion has its own truth and faith claims, some of which are exclusive and absolutist, much the same way people in general perceive their own language as the best there is in the world. What underlies this is that the various religions, different as they are, all serve to enhance humankind and relationships and are aimed at promoting a better quality of life. They also complement one another in their independent efforts towards facilitating cosmic peace and integral harmony.

In short, the experience of religious pluralism is an existential reality for Asians, most of whom live in societies characterized by multiculturalism and multireligiosity. Religious pluralism, therefore, is by no means a Western concept. Addressing it explicitly, whether in the West or in the East, is an attempt to move societies from being merely multicultural and multireligious to becoming societies which are truly intercultural and interreligious.⁶ Where

⁵ See Felix Wilfred, "Towards a Better Understanding of Asian Theology: Some Basic Issues," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* No. 62 (December 1998): 890-915, at 904.

⁶ I am using the terms multicultural and multireligious here not in the same way Orlando Espin uses them. I refer to them the way Espin refers to the fact of cultural (or religious) diversity. In any case, Espin argues that it is impossible for people to assume more than one culture at any one time. Whereas Asian theologians take a different stance and speak not only of the possibility of

the former is satisfied with peaceful coexistence the latter strives towards enabling the different communities to be in active and wholesome interaction and relationship, not so much despite the differences across religious traditions but because there is much that each religion can learn from one another precisely because of these differences.

Having said that, I can also understand why some Asians seem to sense that the notion of religious pluralism is a Western import. While it is true that the experience of religious pluralism is very much ingrained within the Asian psyche it is also true that this has never been explicitly brought into conscious awareness until very recently. This stems from the reality that experiences deemed natural and ordinary often escapes the consciousness of people, much like a fish never knowing what water is. It is no surprise then that religious pluralism has never really featured in the discourse amongst Asians. And, if they did not talk about it, nobody would, since religious pluralism has never been a reality within the experience of peoples living in continents outside of Asia.

To be sure, it is only in the last half-century that the theme of religious pluralism is being addressed by theologians and scholars of religion, particularly those residing in the West. This has partly to do with the fact that the West was predominantly or almost exclusively Christian until that time. And since global hegemonic power has resided in the West for a long time now, if an issue does not feature in the agenda established by Western scholars then that absence has a way of being mainstreamed, thus contributing to the silence on the issue. But, with the advent of the global economy and communication, trans-continental travel and exchanges, and the influx of immigrants from the East to the West, Westerners are for the first time experiencing first-hand what Asians have been living with for centuries, i.e., the fact of religious pluralism. Thus, for the first time religious pluralism has become an issue and in many cases also a problem.

Such novel encounters can be life-changing and have certainly opened the eyes of many in the West, not only to the fact that Christianity is but one of many religions but also to the conviction that adherents of religions other than Christianity may indeed be attaining salvation (or whatever they regard as the religious end-point) not so much despite their religions but precisely in and through them. John Hick is a classic example of how these encounters have opened up new horizons and provided new meaning for theological reflection. For it was when he moved to Birmingham, a center of immigration during the 1960s, that Hick, for the first time, encountered persons of other religions in great numbers. These encounters were to “convert” him permanently from an

multiculturality and multireligiosity but also interculturality and interreligiosity. See Orlando Espin, “The Multicultural Church? Theological Reflections from Below,” in William Cenkner, ed., *The Multicultural church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 54-71, at 62.

evangelically oriented conservative Christian to become one of the most liberal scholars today advocating a radically pluralistic approach to the theology of religions.⁷

Christianity in Asia

As far as Christianity in Asia is concerned it was also only within the last fifty or sixty years that the issue of religious pluralism began appearing on its radar screen in a prominent way. This is because the 500-year history of Christianity in Asia was actually not so much a history of Asian Christianity but that of Western Christianity as played out on Asian soil. The issues of concern to Christians in Asia therefore were that of their mother-Church in Europe. To be sure, it held on to so much of the characteristics of its mother-Churches that local churches in Asia were like little English, Dutch, French, Portuguese, or Spanish churches. One could even say that churches in Asia were “colonies” of European churches. It comes as no surprise then that Asians in general looked upon Christianity as a foreign religion. In my own national Malay language Christianity is often described as the *agama orang putih* (literally: white man’s religion). This sentiment remains even until today since in most countries the vestiges of European Christianity lingers on. Note that this section is entitled “Christianity in Asia” and not “Asian Christianity” for Christianity hitherto could not yet be described by the adjective “Asian.”

Furthermore, it doesn’t help that Christianity was actually spread to Asia in concert with the colonial expansionist program.⁸ It is therefore inevitable that the Church is associated with the imperial powers who, in the eyes of Asians, came primarily for the conquest of their lands. The Cross of Christ came alongside the swords and guns as well as the looting barrels in what the Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris calls the “unholy alliance of the missionary, the military and the merchant.”⁹ Just as the imperialists’ aim was the plunder of the resources of Asia, Christianity was also viewed as coming to plunder the souls of the peoples of Asia. The late Indian theologian Stanley Samartha illustrates this situation appropriately by drawing an analogy to the arrival of a helicopter in Asia.¹⁰ When descending upon Asia -- from above, of course

⁷ See John Hick, “A Personal Note,” in *Disputed Questions in Theology and Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University, 1993), 139-145.

⁸ Except for some regions, for example, the Syriac or St. Thomas Christians of the Malabar coast in Kerala, India, who trace their origins back to St. Thomas, the Korean church which was basically imported by local Koreans from China, and other younger Churches, for example, the Church in Mongolia, which was established only in the last few decades, most of the other Churches across Asia were established in the European colonial era. See Georg Evers, *The Churches in Asia* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2005).

⁹ Aloysius Pieris, “Asia’s Non-Semitic Religions and the Mission of Local Churches,” in *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Quezon City: Claretians, 1988), 50.

¹⁰ Stanley Samartha, *One Christ - Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 115. See also Georg Evers, *op cit.*, xix-xxii.

-- the helicopter blew away all that was on the ground to pave the way for the European Church to land.

It didn't matter what the other religions stood for; they were to be wiped out. There was no way Christianity would tolerate these heathen and pagan religions, let alone respect or be nourished by them. Christianity had to be transplanted onto Asia, where it was expected to take roots and bear the same fruits as it did across the European continent. There was only one fate for the adherents of other religions in Asia; they were to be converted. In such an era Christian missionaries "often adopted the attitude that non-Christian religions were simply the work of Satan and the missionaries' task was to convert from error to knowledge of the truth."¹¹ This was basically the theology of other religions that Asian Christians were brought up to believe for most of the 500-year history of Christianity in Asia.

Things began to change, however, about fifty or sixty years ago. The year 1945 is often regarded as the watershed for this transition. With the end of the Second World War and the Pacific War in Asia and with the subsequent dismantling of colonialism the indigenous peoples of former colonies began to rise up not only against political oppression but also in search of their own indigenous identities. In the words of Samartha:

Deep down, it is a struggle for identity, a quest for spiritual resources in the fight against injustice. The rejection of religious pluralism, the refusal to recognize that neighbors of other faiths in the world live by their own cherished beliefs and values, is a more serious form of injustice than the merely economic.¹²

Thus began what was to become a search not only for indigenous identities but also for the resources which help give shape to these identities. The Asian religious traditions factor significantly among these resources. It is no coincidence that the expulsion of Christian missionaries alongside the imperial governors in many countries in Asia was followed by a revival in the Asian religions. This happened all across Asia, thus bringing the religions to the consciousness of the global communities. It was then that peoples in the West began to take notice of Buddhism in Sri Lanka or Thailand, Hinduism in India or Nepal, and Islam in Bangladesh or Indonesia. In some instances this resurgence swung the pendulum to the other extreme (as a form of catharsis against the many years of suppression during the colonial era), resulting in the more extremist forms of these religious traditions coming to the fore. This continues until today and it will be several decades more before the catharsis

¹¹ This quote is a footnote (No. 11) to an article from Vatican II's Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*. See Walter Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New Jersey: New Century, 1966), 662.

¹² Stanley Samartha, *op cit.*, 2.

simmers.

Advent of Asian Christianity

This movement of revivalism or resurgence in the religions did not go unnoticed by the local Christians in Asia. Influenced by the mood and spirit of the times, they, too, began the quest for their own identities, one which could be at once truly Christian as well as truly Asian. Among the more significant issues in this quest was Christianity's relation with other religions. This was by no means an abstract theological issue to be discussed but one which had dire and concrete consequences on the lives of Asian Christians. This is because most Christians in Asia have roots in these other religions or continue to have family members, for example, spouses, parents, and children, who continue to adhere to them. While in the past they were informed by a theology which speculated that all their loved ones were destined to hell unless they were baptized, the quest for a truly Asian Christianity opened up new horizons for a theology which was not only more respectful of the other religions but also enabled them to be perceived in a more positive light.

The one event which provided the greatest impetus to the development of Asian Christianity, like everything else in the Catholic Church, was no doubt the Second Vatican Council. It was so revolutionary that Church historian John O'Malley had this to say about it: "never before in the history of Catholicism have so many and such sudden changes been legislated and implemented which immediately touched the lives of the faithful, and never before had such a radical adjustment of viewpoint been required of them."¹³ One of the more succinct ways to summarize these changes and the vision of the Council is by reference to the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, issued by Pope Paul VI in 1964. In *Ecclesiam Suam* (its English title is "Paths of the Church"),¹⁴ Paul VI delineates ways in which the Church must carry out its mission in the contemporary world. The pope spells this out in all its aspects but they can all be captured by one word, namely, "dialogue." By dialogue, Paul VI refers to the four categories or levels of dialogue which the Church should be engaged in: dialogue with the world and cultures, dialogue with other religions, dialogue with other Christians, and dialogue within the Church.¹⁵

This spirit of dialogue saw its first major expression in Latin America through the Church's dialogue with the socio-political realities of its context, especially the cruel realities of authoritarian regimes and oppression, resulting in the

¹³ John O'Malley, *Tradition and Transition: Historical Perspectives on Vatican II* (Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1989), 17.

¹⁴ Pope Paul VI, *On the Ways in which the Church must Carry out its Mission in the Contemporary World*, (Vatican City, 6 August 1964), [http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam_en.html].

¹⁵ See Edmund Chia, ed., *Dialogue? Resource Manual for Catholics in Asia* (Bangkok: FABC-OEIA, 2001), xiv.

suffering and poverty which the common people were subjected to. Vatican II's document *Gaudium et Spes* provided the necessary starting point for the theological reflection: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ" (*GS*, 1). The concrete outcome of this dialogue is what has come to be known as Liberation Theology. We are all aware of the tremendous contributions made by Liberation Theology in the decades following Vatican II, including the challenges it posed to the Church's Center, as made manifest in the silencing of key theologians and the issuance of the 1984 document *Libertatis Nuntius*: "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation"¹⁶

This same spirit of dialogue took on another form in Asia and at a later phase. Its concerns, like Latin America, was with the reality of injustice and massive poverty, but unlike Latin America, was also with the fact of the many religions present in the Asian context. The dialogue on this latter concern resulted in what is today known as the Theology of Religious Pluralism. Asian theologians are quick to point out that they have generally been inspired by the theological methodology espoused by their colleagues in Latin America.¹⁷ The Theology of Religious Pluralism takes as starting point *Nostra Aetate*, the "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions." Though a very short document issued in 1965, with merely five articles, it has significantly transformed the manner in which the Church relates with people of other religions. In particular, the following article was revolutionary, at least by the ecclesial standards of the 1960s:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing 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 many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men (*NA*, 2).

Theology of Religious Pluralism

While it was Vatican II which officially "canonized" the exploration of the Church's relation with other religions, it was really the Asian [Catholic] Church and Asian theologians who were responsible for giving shape to the theology arising from it. The 1980s, in particular, saw this being developed

¹⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation*, (Vatican City, 6 August, 1984), [http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html].

¹⁷ See Jacob Kavunkal, "The Impact of Medellin and Puebla on Asian Theology," *SEDOS* (February 2000), [www.sedos.org]; and also Michael Amaladoss, "An Emerging Indian Theology: Some Exploratory Reflections," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* Vol. LVIII, No. 8 (August 1994): 473-84, at 475.

more incisively. A brief but good overview can be gleaned from the words of Jacques Dupuis in his ground-breaking book on the topic, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* :

“Going beyond the problematic of people’s salvation in and through their religious traditions, the new perspective seeks to penetrate more deeply into God’s plan for humankind. It asks about the significance of the plurality of religious traditions in that plan -- and consequently in the unfolding of the history of God’s dealings with humankind which we call the history of salvation.”¹⁸

Thus began in a more systematic manner what has come to be known as the Theology of Religious Pluralism. This theology is different in that it no longer asks about the possibility of salvation for persons of other religions; it presumes that. Instead, “it seeks more deeply, in the light of Christian faith, for the meaning in God’s design for humankind of the plurality of living faiths and religious traditions with which we are surrounded. Are all the religious traditions of the world destined, in God’s plan, to converge? Where, when, and how?” In other words, religious pluralism is considered not so much “as a matter of course and a fact of history (pluralism *de facto*) but as having a *raison d’être* in its own right (pluralism *de jure*).”¹⁹

While it was individual Asian theologians who made the most contribution to the development of the Theology of Religious Pluralism, the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) also played a significant role. In particular, at the very first FABC Plenary Assembly in 1974, in discussing the theme of “Evangelization in Modern Day Asia,” the bishops defined the task of evangelization in Asia as follows:

In Asia especially this 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 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).²⁰

¹⁸ Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

²⁰ First Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, *FABC I* (Taipei, 1974), “Evangelization in Modern Day Asia,” in *For All the People of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences*, Documents from 1970 to 1991, vol. 1, ed. Gaudencio Rosales and C. G. Arévalo (Que-

The Bishops then revealed their own position on this by asking, albeit rhetorically, “How then can we not give them reverence and honor? And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them?” (*FABC I*, art. 15).²¹ This 1974 Statement, together with the many subsequent statements of the FABC, provided the necessary endorsement by the magisterium of the Church in Asia to Asian theologians as they went about their reflections on the Theology of Religious Pluralism.

Other Religions/Revelations and God’s Salvation

It has to be pointed out from the outset that the FABC in general makes little mention of the theme of salvation when discussing the Church’s relations with other religions. More specifically, they do not compare these other religions with the Church nor pass any form of negative judgment upon them. At most, the FABC affirms the Christian faith in Jesus as the way, the truth and the life (cf. *FABC I*, art. 7).²² This is done without in any way suggesting that other religions or their “savior-figures” are less true or less perfect. Instead, the FABC is explicit in testifying that other religions are indeed “significant and positive elements in the economy of God’s design of salvation” (*FABC I*, art. 14).

Further elaboration on this can be found in a study commissioned by the FABC and executed by its Theological Advisory Commission (TAC).²³ In its publication *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue (TAC-Dialogue)*, the FABC theological study-team suggests that it is on account of the Asian bishops’ own personal experience with persons of other religions that they have a “positive appreciation of [the role of other religions] in the divine economy of salvation” (*TAC-Dialogue*, art. 2.2). This experience, in turn, relies upon the theological conviction that “God’s plan of salvation for humanity is one and reaches out to all peoples” (*TAC-Dialogue*, art. 2.3).²⁴ It is therefore inherent upon Christians to discern how God’s saving activity is in operation and made manifest in the other religions. Interreligious dialogue is the mode of this Christian duty.

zon City: Claretian, 1997), 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *FABC I*, in *For All the Peoples of Asia*, vol. 1, 13.

²³ A word about the Theological Advisory Commission (TAC), which later changed its name to Office of Theological Concerns (OTC), is in order. Constituted in the year 1986, the topic of inter-religious dialogue was the first which the TAC attended to, the results of which were published in 1987. The significance of the TAC is that it is composed of a team of theologians officially appointed by each of the Episcopal Conferences, with some bishop-theologians heading it. Most of the studies undertaken are worked at and debated upon over an extended period and are by no means the result of rushed efforts. The teachings or statements of the TAC/OTC are thus very representative of the theological views of the FABC.

²⁴ Theological Advisory Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, “Theses on Interreligious Dialogue: An Essay in Pastoral Theological Reflection,” in *FABC Papers No. 48* (Hong Kong: FABC, 1987), 7. Also re-published in John Gnanapiragasam and Felix Wilfred, ed., *Being Church in Asia: Theological Advisory Commission* (Quezon City: Claretian, 1994), 7-32.

Quoting Pope John Paul II, the Theological Advisory Commission affirms that “by dialogue, we let God be present in our midst; for as we open ourselves in dialogue to one another, we also open ourselves to God” (*TAC-Dialogue*, art. 1.4).²⁵ Interreligious dialogue, therefore, is “a demand of the Church of its very life as mission” (*TAC-Dialogue*, art. 2.5).

As an integral dimension of the evangelizing mission of the Church, interreligious dialogue is aimed at the building of God’s Kingdom. Christians believe the Church is the sacrament of this Kingdom, “visibilizing it, ordained to it, promoting it, but not equating itself with it” (*TAC-Dialogue*, 6.3).²⁶ The Kingdom is certainly wider than the institutional Church. Nevertheless, the building up of the Church is still necessary as it is at the service of the Kingdom. By extension, the building up of the other religions is also as necessary. It can be surmised from here that FABC accepts the phenomenon of religious pluralism as not only *de facto* but also very much *de jure*. The plurality of religion is not only tolerated but accepted as part of God’s design of salvation of human beings: “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).²⁷

This does not in any way imply that the FABC tends towards relativism. To be sure, the issue was specifically addressed at another study-session of its Office of Theological Concerns, the results of which were published in 2000. In the document entitled *Methodology: Asian Christian Theology -- Doing Theology in Asia Today (OTC-Methodology)*,²⁸ the FABC-OTC points out that “any discussion of pluralism must reckon with the question of how we understand pluralism in theology in relation to the threat of relativism” (*OTC-Methodology*, art. 1.1).²⁹ While emphatically rejecting theological positions which claim that all religions are the same or of equal value, the Asian bishops also assert that “just because certain persons and groups are misled in their search for truth, and just because they tend to relativize all reality, we cannot conclude that all pluralism leads to relativism” (*Ibid.*). The document then quotes from the Eleventh Bishops’ Institute for Interreligious Affairs on the Theology of Dialogue which argues that “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,

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Seventh Bishops’ Institute for Interreligious Affairs on the Theology of Dialogue, *BIRA IV/7* (Tagaytay City, 1988), in *For All the Peoples of Asia*, vol. 1, 310.

²⁸ Office of Theological Concerns of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, “Methodology: Asian Christian Theology (Doing Theology in Asia Today),” in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences*, Document from 1997 to 2001, vol. 3, ed. Franz Eilers (Quezon City: Claretian, 2002), 329-419.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 333.

described as ‘live and let live’. The test of true harmony lies in the acceptance of diversity as richness” (*BIRA IV/11*, art. 15).³⁰ It is this quest for true harmony which continues to inspire the Asian bishops, as well as Asian theologians and all Christians in Asia, to be determined in their efforts to promote the praxis of interreligious dialogue and the concomitant Theology of Religious Pluralism.

Challenges Encountered by Asian Theology

That the Asian Theology of Religious Pluralism has already made in-roads into the global theological community is beyond doubt and is in fact something quite evident. Like Liberation Theology, not only has its contribution been significant, it has also encountered (or is still encountering) the challenges posed by the Church’s Center. My repeated association of Liberation Theology with the Theology of Religious Pluralism is not without reason. Both are prophetic movements from the peripheries of the Church calling into question not only issues of theological method but also ways of being Church. On these scores, they are seen as constituting a great “problem” to the guardians at the Center.

To illustrate this, it suffices to look at an address by the then Cardinal Ratzinger to the presidents of the Doctrinal Commission of CELAM held in Mexico in May 1996.³¹ Ratzinger begins his speech by saying that “in the ‘80s, the theology of liberation in its radical forms seemed to be the most urgent challenge for the faith of the church.” He then went on to assert that the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe “turned out to be a kind of twilight of the gods for that theology of redeeming political praxis.” He then continued his remarks, as if shifting the focus from Latin America to the Asian continent, and said: “relativism has thus become the central problem for the faith at the present time.” Elaborating further, Ratzinger said: “the so-called pluralist theology of religion has been developing progressively since the ‘50s. Nonetheless, only now has it come to the center of the Christian conscience.” He continues: “On the one hand, relativism is a typical offshoot of the Western world and its forms of philosophical thought,... on the other it is connected with the philosophical and religious institutions of Asia especially, and surprisingly, with those of the Indian subcontinent.”

Actually, hints of the Center’s interest in the Theology of Religious Pluralism was already there prior to this 1996 speech. Among the first came in a statement made by Cardinal Josef Tomko, the then Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. In a 1991 address to his fellow cardinals Tomko

³⁰ Eleventh Bishops’ Institute for Interreligious Affairs on the Theology of Dialogue (Sukabumi, 1988), in *For All the Peoples of Asia*, vol. 1, 321.

³¹ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith Today,” *Address delivered during the meeting of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith with the presidents of the Doctrinal Commissions of the Bishops’ Conferences of Latin America* (Guadalajara, Mexico, May 1996), [<http://www.ewtn.com/library>].

hinted that interreligious dialogue seemed to be leading towards “doctrinal confusion” and that “although India is the epicenter to this tendency and Asia is its principal camp... these ideas already circulate in Oceania, in some African countries and in Europe.”³² The focus on India as the “epicenter” was subsequently repeated by other curial officials. Cardinal Ratzinger himself, in an address to the presidents of the FABC member-conferences and episcopal chairpersons of doctrinal commissions, also explicitly mentions India: “The problem which arises in India, but also elsewhere, comes to expression in [Raimon] Panikkar’s famous phrase: ‘Jesus is Christ, but Christ is not (only) Jesus.’”³³

But perhaps the clearest challenge posed to the Asian Theology of Religious Pluralism came in the form of the Vatican Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the year 2000.³⁴ It actually followed a series of censures upon Asian theologians for their works on religious pluralism. The cases of Tissa Balasuriya, Anthony de Mello and Jacques Dupuis come to mind, but also a number of other Asian theologians though their cases were not as publicized.³⁵ Of these cases, it was Dupuis’ which had the most direct bearing on *Dominus Iesus* and thus on the Asian Theology of Religious Pluralism.

A Belgian who went to India in 1948 to join the Jesuit scholasticate, Jacques Dupuis was to remain in India until 1984, during which time he taught theology in various universities and seminaries. In 1984 Dupuis returned to Europe where he was assigned to teach at the Gregorian University in Rome. It was there that he researched on and wrote the book *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, which saw its first publication in September 1997. Within months, in June 1998, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) initiated a process against the book.

What precisely were the CDF’s concerns about Dupuis’ works? In Dupuis’

³² Josef Tomko, “Proclaiming Christ the World’s Only Savior,” *L’Osservatore Romano* (5 April 1991): 4.

³³ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures* (Hong Kong, 2-5 March 1993), [http://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/ratzzhong.htm].

³⁴ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000). The text is also available at [http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html].

³⁵ See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Notification Concerning the Text ‘Mary and Human Liberation’ by Fr. Tissa Balasuriya, O.M.I.* (Vatican City, 27 December 1996), [http://www.ewtn.com], [http://www.cin.org/vatcong/tissabal.html]; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Notification: Concerning the Writings of Father Anthony De Mello, sj* (Vatican City, 24 June 1998), [http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19980624_demello_en.html]; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Notification on the book Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York 1997) by Father Jacques Dupuis, S.J.* (Vatican City, 24 January 2001), [http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20010124_dupuis_en.html].

own words, the first *Notification* specifically mentioned “serious errors against essential elements of Divine and Catholic faith” especially in the areas of “the doctrines on Incarnation, Trinity, Revelation.”³⁶ This was later amended to “ambiguities and difficulties” concerning the “interpretation of the sole and universal salvific mediation of Christ, the unicity and completeness of Christ’s revelation, the universal salvific action of the Holy Spirit, the orientation of all people to the Church, and the value and significance of the salvific function of other religions.”³⁷ More importantly, Dupuis, who is identified very much as an Asian theologian, suspects that in his investigation the CDF’s concerns were much more general. He senses that it is the Asian theologians in general who are the primary concern and his investigation was but a message that they should “stop spreading such ideas that salvation is possible through other religions, or that the other religions can also be recipients of revelation, etc.”³⁸

Sign of Hope for Asian Theology

One of the most critical and at the same time hopeful response to *Dominus Iesus* came from Aloysius Pieris. One of Asia’s foremost thinkers, Pieris spoke on *Dominus Iesus* when presenting a talk at the Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue in Colombo on 30 September 2000.³⁹ Instead of discussing the Vatican *Declaration*, he chose to discuss the background to how the Church operates and why a document such as *Dominus Iesus* was promulgated. Specifically, Pieris looked at the Vatican *Declaration* in the context of the renewal of the Second Vatican Council and the concomitant “ecclesiastical politics” surrounding the Council which, he asserts, continues even until today.

Pieris begins by observing that the “dynamics of the movement and counter-movements” within the Church today has its roots in the Second Vatican Council. He then reminds that Vatican II was a “renewal” Council and not so much a “reform” Council. A reform, Pieris suggests, is a “controlled and graduated process of change that keeps the institutional set-up of the church intact.”⁴⁰ Reform is a “top-down” process, or change evoked from the “Center” moving out towards the “Periphery.” The Center issues decrees or procedures and the local churches, or Periphery, implements them. Change is smooth, predictable and well-managed in reform Councils. The First Vatican Council and the Council of Trent were reform Councils. Renewal, on the other hand,

³⁶ “Justice Denied, Delayed, Truth Exposed: The inside story of the unfair dealings with J. Dupuis, in a free-wheeling interview exclusively given to ICAN,” *Indian Currents Associate News* (15 April 2001): 10-16, at 11.

³⁷ “Notification on Dupuis,” *preface*.

³⁸ Interview with Dupuis, *op cit.*, 15.

³⁹ Aloysius Pieris, “The Roman Catholic Perception of Other Churches and Other Religions after the Vatican’s *Dominus Iesus*,” *East Asian Pastoral Review* 38/3 (2001): 207-230.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 215.

is a movement in the opposite direction. "It irrupts from below and works its way up to the top volcanically." Renewals are initiated mainly by those at the peripheries "where fresh and new ideas flow in more freely than in the Center of the establishment." Pieris elaborates:

Renewalist currents that begin to whirl in the margin of the church surge into centripetal waves that dash on the fortified ecclesiastical structures. The resistance at the Center is inevitable. Yet, there is a gradual transformation to which the Center has to yield.⁴¹

It is in the context of this Center-Periphery conflict that Pieris suggests he was more or less expecting a document such as *Dominus Iesus*. The Vatican *Declaration*, according to his theory, is but the Center's response to the various "irruptions" happening at the peripheries. Irruptions are by no means gentle, pleasant, or welcome. If anything, they are chaotic, abrasive and unsettling. Fear, worry and trembling amidst irruptions are anticipated and understandable responses. *Dominus Iesus* seems to reveal these latter responses, much the same way *Libertatis Nuntius* was a response to the irruption which went by the name of Liberation Theology in Latin America two decades earlier. *Dominus Iesus* betrays a sense that the authors are fearful of the irruption which goes by the name of religious pluralism. Where the irruptions are intense, the Center's response is adamant, firm and unyielding. That *Dominus Iesus* used such strong language -- "to be firmly believed," "definitive and complete," "contrary to the Church's faith," "required to profess," "full submission," etc. -- seems to suggest that the irruptions from the Periphery must have been very strong.

One could even suggest that *Dominus Iesus* is but a verification of the irruptions coming from Asia, especially in its exploration of the Theology of Religious Pluralism. The Vatican *Declaration* is, therefore, an expression of the inevitable resistance to the renewalist currents coming from Asia. This, of course, is nothing more than an articulation of the dialectics of change. The fresh and new ideas whirling in from Asia are evoking a proportionate reaction from the Roman Center. According to Pieris' theory the process will continue for a while until such a time the Center is ready to yield. Viewed from this perspective, *Dominus Iesus* is a document which engenders hope: hope that the Vatican II renewal in the area of the Church's relation with other religions is slowly but surely being effected through the Asian Theology of Religious Pluralism.⁴²

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² See Edmund Chia, "D*ominus Iesus* and Asian Theologies," *Horizons* 29 (Fall, 2002): 278-289.