

# The Holy Spirit and Asia's Religiousness

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In May 1997, the [Roman Catholic] Asian Bishops issued a 95 page document titled *The Spirit at Work in Asia*, the fruit of a two-year study made by a select group of Asian Theologians.<sup>2</sup> The work is quite comprehensive. The *loci* in which the Spirit is at work in Asia today, according to this document, include all the major religions as well as the primal belief systems, various socio-political movements operating in the midst of conflicting ideologies, the achievements of science and technology carried out in the ambiguous context of globalization, the aspiration of the youth and, most particularly, the suffering masses in whom the Spirit acts as the Power of the Powerless. This extensive coverage is supplemented by a treatise on Christian Pneumatology derived from both the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures as well as from the documents of Vatican II and those of the FABC (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences). Finally, there is a section on how the Spirit works in the contemporary church. The conclusion is a neat summary of the document followed by a series of pastoral recommendations.

In this essay I neither repeat nor even summarize what has been said in that excellent treatise but highlight some of its *tacit implications* which have not been discussed there but need to be studied in depth. Hence, in presenting the following considerations I try to bring out some significant dimensions of Pneumatology which might otherwise escape us. In doing so, however, I am constrained to send the reader often to certain principles of Asian theology and facets of the Asian reality, which I have already established elsewhere in my writings. Despite the frequent references to my own previous works, for which I apologise to the reader, the present essay is a new synthesis albeit the focus is on one significant line of thought.

## 1. Asia's Non-Theistic *Spirit*-uality

### 1.1 Religious Non-Theism of Asian Cultures

Whoever agrees with the Asian Bishops that the Spirit of God is at work in the religions of Asia must face the question that the evangelicals are bound to raise: that most of these religions are *non-theistic* and if the Spirit of God is operative in them, then non-theism must also be a manifestation of the Spirit.

Now, Christian theism, *taken minimally*, is a recognition of One Personal

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<sup>2</sup> *FABC Papers, No. 81*, Hong Kong (no date).

Divine Absolute Who is also the Creator-Redeemer of all, and as such is also a belief shared by Islam (See Part 3), but absent in almost all the major religious traditions and in certain forms of popular religiosity. It is this *minimal* definition of theism that we invoke as the practical criterion for determining the character of these other belief systems. The examples are well known. The Brahman-Atman of Vedantic Hinduism, for instance, is a non-personal Absolute. The orthodox Buddhists regard the denial of a Divine Absolute as a fundamental teaching of their Founder. In the Buddha's discourses, Nirvana, the *summum bonum*, is regarded as 'liberation as such' and not as an Absolute Reality that liberates, though it is true that certain post-canonical schools of Buddhism have interpreted Nirvana as a Transphenomenal Reality, insisting, at the same time, that "It" is not a person but an *impersonal thing*.<sup>3</sup> Jainism is equally non-theistic, as is also Daoism, in the same way that Buddhism is.

On the other hand, many of these major religions postulate the existence of many 'gods'. Most Christians as well as many non-Asians tend to perceive these gods as members of a polytheistic pantheon. But strictly speaking, they are no more than *cosmic powers* or 'forces of Nature', which accommodate also the spirits of the departed. They are believed to be at the service of human beings that know how to appease them with rites and rituals. I suggest, therefore, that it is more accurate to study them under the rubric of *cosmology* rather than of *theology*. Hence neither 'idolatry' nor 'polytheism' would be appropriate to describe this phenomenon. (See Part 2.2).

The Buddhist Scriptures do not deny the existence of these gods or cosmic powers but treat them as species of beings that are inferior and subordinate to the humans who have attained Nirvana, such as the Buddha and the Arahans (Saints). Just as an elephant—that gigantic animal which can overpower a human being—would readily place its superior strength at the service of humans after it has been 'trained' (i.e., tamed or bribed with sugar canes and other inducements) to obey human commands, so also it is alleged that these *cosmic forces* known as 'gods' can be *ritually* subdued and co-opted to serve rather than harm humans. Hence, the missionaries who preached Buddhism in various Asian countries followed this scriptural lead by enthroning the Buddha above the local gods of every Asian nation which they had converted into their faith, analogical to the manner in which the Pauline school presented Christ as the one Lord and Mediator above all 'cosmic powers' (*stoicheia*), such as the *kyriotes* and *dynameis*, rather than deny their existence altogether.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, the primal religions (as well as of the popular forms

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<sup>3</sup> See A. Pieris, "The Pali Abhidhammika Discourse on the 'Existence' of Nibbana", *Buddhist Srudies (Bukyo Kenkyu)*, International Buddhist Association, Hamamatsu, Japan, Vol. XXII, March 2004, 15-54. See also A. Pieris, *Studies in the Philosophy and Literature of Pali Abhidhammika Buddhism* (Colombo: EISD, 2004), 186-221

<sup>4</sup> See *My Love Meets Wisdom, A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 129-30.

of the major religions mentioned above) revolve entirely around the cult of these cosmic forces or 'gods', who are called by various names in various Asian cultures.<sup>5</sup> This cultic system, therefore, deserves to be called a *cosmic religiosity* rather than 'animism' as some anthropologists refer to them pejoratively or repudiate as 'nature worship' or even idolatry. A clear affirmation of One Personal Divine Absolute as the sole Creator and Redeemer of all may not perhaps be explicitly affirmed in all cosmic religions. Yet, as a *non-theistic eco-spirituality*, this species of cosmic religiosity is a precious heritage of this vast continent because it consists of a *religious this-worldliness* associated with Asia's 'non-theism' in stark contrast with the *secular this-worldliness* of the contemporary West's 'atheism' (See Part 2.1). This is because the deities that are worshipped or appeased in Asia, as I had suggested already, point to a religious cosmology rather than to a theology proper.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, the *non-theism* of the metacosmic religions such as Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism, Vedantic Hinduism, no less than the non-theism of the cosmic religions of tribal and clannic people is *profoundly religious*. We are therefore dealing not only with a "religious this-worldliness" but also with a "*religious atheism*"!

Should then the Spirit of God who has been poured upon "all flesh" (Joel 2:2) be acknowledged also as the Spirit of this 'non-theistic religiousness', that is to say, the Spirit of the 'No-God' systems of beliefs and practices in vogue among the vast masses of Asians?

The Christian response to this question would be more than one. One might either re-interpret the 'religious non-theism' of so many Asians to fit into the traditional Pneumatology by reading some anonymous form of Christian *theism* into them; or rediscover new dimensions of the divine Spirit, which the Spirit Herself reveals in this Asian phenomenon. Or both.

## 1.2 The Non-Theism of Primal Religions

In the aforementioned FABC document, *The Spirit at Work in Asia*, the Asian bishops have not given thought to this question but have left some clues, which we would do well to pursue. After presenting a very positive evaluation of primal religions, at once comprehensive and extensive,<sup>7</sup> they severely criticise the "the past missionary practice" not only for regarding these religions as "being under the influence of the evil spirits rather than under the influence of the Holy Spirit" but also for presenting "the Christian message [...] as the liberating force, which, with the power of the Holy Spirit, brought light into the

<sup>5</sup> E.g., *deva* in India and Sri Lanka, *nath* in Burma, *phi* in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, *bon* in Tibet, *kami* in Japanese Shintoism, *ancestors* in Chinese Confucianism etc.

<sup>6</sup> This is the reason why we opt for the word "cosmic" (from *kosmos*, meaning 'world' in Greek) to describe this religiosity in contrast with the word "secular" (from *saeculum*, Latin word for 'world') which has been used in the West to connote an a-religious or desacralized universe.

<sup>7</sup> *FABC Papers, No. 81, 22-25.*

darkness and delivered these people from an age-old oppression and slavery to religiously false ideas which could only be called superstitious and idolatrous”<sup>8</sup>. This critique of the missionary praxis of the colonial era seems to imply that the Holy Spirit is not the monopoly of Christianity and that the liberation, which comes from the Holy Spirit, was already operative in the [non-theistic] religiosity of these people.

Furthermore, the bishops speak approvingly of the “new outlook” of the “Asian Christian theologians” who have taken off from the teaching of Vatican II; and presumably following these theologians, the bishops proceed to make an earnest appeal for a much needed “encounter between the core values of the indigenous peoples and the *Biblical faith*” [emphasis added by me], adverting to the fact that

the Christian church has grown and continues to grow especially among the indigenous peoples. Christians are not only called to evangelize the indigenous peoples but must be *evangelized by them* and learn from them new insights in [the three] areas such as *ecology, community life, and the celebration of life's joys and tragedies*.<sup>9</sup>

Here, the bishops have singled out *three specific areas*, in which this non-theistic religiosity can evangelize the church, and has invited the church to respond to them with a *biblical faith*. These precisely are the three areas, which our traditional Pneumatology has neglected, and which only a *biblical faith* can recover. This seems to be what the Asian bishops seem to say.

Here, let us allow Moltmann to guide us in our reflection. The theology as well as the devotion of the main-line churches, according to him, has tended to treat the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of *redemption* and left the area of *creation* untouched by Pneumatology. He finds even Congar’s great work on the Holy Spirit too churchy and concerned only with Christian faith. Also the charismatics, he complains, keep the Spirit completely out of the fields of ecology and secular politics. Furthermore, Moltmann sees “a continuing platonization of Christianity” which restricts ‘spirituality’ to inner experiences and makes it hostile to the world and specially to the body. He blames the decision in favour of *filioque* for separating the redemptive Spirit of Christ from the Father’s *ruah* of creation,<sup>10</sup> leading to the notion that

The soul is saved from this vale of tears and from this frail husk of the body, and is carried up to the heaven of the blessed spirits. But these notions of redemptions are not Christian. They are gnostic. It was in order to contravert them that the ancient church introduced ‘*the resurrection*

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 26 (emphases added).

<sup>10</sup> J. Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life, A Universal Affirmation* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 8.

*of the body*' into the article of the Apostles' Creed, and confessed the Spirit 'who spoke through the prophets' as the Nicene Creed put it. But if the redemption is the resurrection of the body and the new creation of all things, then the redeeming Spirit of Christ cannot be any Spirit other than Yahweh's creative *ruach*.<sup>11</sup>

In the light of these observations we see how the aforementioned three features of cosmic religions—sacredness of Nature, the communal living as well as the celebration of life's vicissitudes—are an invitation to recover our *biblical faith* in the Spirit who is redemptively active in the whole of *creation*, in human *communities* and in the celebration of *life* in its ups and downs. The more the Church is converted to their *sacred this-worldliness*, which these religions advocate, the more will it find refuge in the *biblical faith*, which does not postulate *another world* for us to enter in order to enjoy the fruits of redemption but points rather to *another age (aion)* which *this same* universe (*kosmos*) will be summoned into: a new creation, a new heaven and earth. For, the Creed of the church presents both the forgiveness of sins (redemption) and the resurrection of the body (new creation) as *extensions* of church's confession, *I believe in the Holy Spirit*.<sup>12</sup>

This observation calls for a warning: the fact that these indigenous people are fast embracing Christianity, as the Bishops have rightly noted with a sense of satisfaction, is no cause for Christian triumphalism, because sociology and history of the phenomenon of religious expansionism in Asia points to a natural tendency for cosmic religions to dovetail with *any* metacosmic religion on "a first come first served" basis, as I have demonstrated elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> The danger to be foreseen and avoided is that the traditional Pneumatology might deprive these people of what the church has itself missed in not adhering to a biblical faith. The Asian bishops' desire that the mutual evangelization of the two parties should mean an encounter of primal religions with *biblical faith* (presumably *not* with traditional theology) needs, therefore, to be underscored.

### 1.3 The Spirit and the Non-Personal Absolute

With regard to the metacosmic religions of the *gnostic* tradition (that is, in those religions that subordinate the language of love to the language of knowledge in experiencing and expressing 'total liberation'), we must be bold enough to accept that what is *realized* in these religions as the Absolute cannot

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> For an extensive treatment of this idea, see A. Pieris, "I believe in the Holy Spirit: Ecumenism in the Churches and the Unfinished Agenda of the Holy Spirit", *Ishvani Documentaion and Mission Digest* (Pune), XXI/2, May-August 2003, 164-191; (in Spanish), *Misiones Etranjeras*, 202 (2004) 407-419; continued in 203 (2004) 537-547; abridged version *Spiritus*, USA, 3 (2003), 53-57.

<sup>13</sup> A. Pieris, "Is There a Place for Christ in Asia?", *Concilium* 1993/2, 33-47; reprint in *Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), Chapter 7.

be a Person; for, all these religions regard 'personhood' as a restrictive notion that cannot be applied to the Absolute. A 'Personal Absolute' is a contradiction in terms in their estimation. Only in the *bhakti* tradition, i.e., in the theopathic stream of popular Hinduism do we encounter a Personal Divine Saviour, so to say (*Isvara* or *saguna Brahman*). Popular Buddhism in some of its devotional forms also treats the Buddha as a kind of all loving personal redeemer (e.g., Amida).

On the other hand we must also acknowledge that the development of the notion of 'person' as a positive reality, (i.e., as a notion that could be compatible with the notion of the Absolute) has been made possible in the three biblical religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) thanks to the *agapeic* idiom they employ. Even the rich concept of the human person that has gained currency in contemporary Western theology, philosophy and psychology, according to Alois Grillmeier, was the fruit of Christianity's Trinitarian speculation.<sup>14</sup>

But the aforementioned gnostic religions of Asia, such as Vedantic Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and even Daoism, remind us of a great biblical revelation which we underestimate or even ignore at times. "Salvation' in the Bible means total freedom, absolute emancipation, and, therefore, whoever experiences it, has to be regarded as being redeemed. To us who live by a biblical faith, this "experience of liberation" and the "experience of God who liberates" are two *inseparable* aspects of the same phenomenon.<sup>15</sup> This is why Exodus remains Israel's and also our own supreme paradigm of salvation. Yahweh defines Himself as the power behind that event of liberation (Exodus 20:2-3). To experience liberation from every bondage is to be touched by God who reveals Himself as operative in that experience. By implication, the experience could be genuinely liberative even if, for some reason or other, the liberated person does not recognize or name the Liberative power behind that experience.

If, therefore, in a given culture, the naming of this liberation as a 'god' ( a mere cosmic power) or as an Absolute Personal Divinity ( a contradiction in terms) seems to negate the slavific character of that liberation, then whoever is formed by that culture should not postulate an external agent behind that experience. Let it just remain Freedom-experience. This is exactly what an Advaitin Mystic or a Buddhist Arahant would do and should do. By contrast, Yahweh in the First Testament is recognized and named in the process of their freedom-experience (Ex 20:3), just as in the Second Testament, the *freedom* found in Christ is seen to be almost identical with the Spirit, i.e., as something which is never present without the Spirit (II Cor 3:17). We know that Asian mystics even today bear the characteristics of that freedom, which Paul calls

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<sup>14</sup> Alois Grillmeier, *Jesus der Christus in Glauben der Kirche*, Band 2/1, *Das Concil von Chalcedon: Reception und Widerspruch (451-518)* (Freiburg: Herder, 1991), 9. See, however, Moltmann's observations in *The Spirit of Life*, 269.

<sup>15</sup> See Moltmann, *op. cit.*, 99 ff.

the *fruits of the Spirit* (Gal 5:2), and it is from these fruits that we are advised to recognize their authenticity (Mt 7:16-20). For the One who authenticates is the Spirit of Christ.

Those who are thus freed from bonds of selfishness and greed are not required to attach a name to that event as a condition for enjoying that freedom. Through these religions *God reveals to the Asian Christians* an extraordinary dimension of divine freedom! Our faith-inspired recognition of this freedom as the "Spirit of God" or the "Spirit of Christ" is not imposed by the God of Moses and Jesus on all people! Nor, therefore, should we encroach on God's 'freedom' which allows itself to be experienced by those who enjoy it and who are therefore saved without their being obliged to give it names. This namelessness is also the name of the same Spirit, who is made manifest to Christians in and through the life of these non-Christian mystics.

Furthermore, we must remember that the *Spirit-uality* of freedom advocated in these non-theistic religions is referred to as "detachment" (*alpecchata, vairagya* etc.) which is associated with joy (*santusti*), bliss (*ānanda*), recalling the theistically formulated "beatitudes" (i.e., forms of happiness) in the Second Testament, as I have demonstrated elsewhere in an inter-religious cross-scriptural study.<sup>16</sup> The very use of this negative formula to express the positive experience of freedom forebodes the impossibility of giving any positive content to it.

Here the Christians do well to meditate on Meister Eckhart's sermon "On Detachment", wherein, this extraordinary mystic and theologian of the Middle Ages practically sees God as "Detachment [which] stands upon pure nothingness". It is precisely in his sermon on the first beatitude (Blessed are the Poor in Spirit) that Eckhart speaks of being empty of God; and in the sermon *Qui audit me*, he advises us to "Let Go God for God's sake". Moltmann describes this spirituality of detachment from Eckhart's texts and sums it up with these words:

The love of God reaches perfection when it lets even God go for God's sake. We can call this 'mystical atheism'. But it is an atheism for God's sake.<sup>17</sup>

If then a Christian mystic such as Eckhart, who was saturated with the agapeic ethos of biblical revelation, could find his *Spirit-uality* culminate in "mystical atheism", we should not *a fortiori* be surprised when Asian sages, who employ the sapiential idiom, arrive at a similar form of non-theistic

<sup>16</sup> A. Pieris, "Cross Scripture Reading in Buddhist Christian-Dialogue: a Search for the Right Method", in : Ed. Philip L. Wickeri, *Scripture, Community and Mission: Essays in Honour of Preman Niles*, CCA Hong Kong and CWM, London, 2002, Second Printing, 2003, 246-253.

<sup>17</sup> Moltmann, *op. cit.*, 207.

mysticism.

Having thus dwelt on the problem of Asia's non-theistic religiosity, let us now move to the practical response we are obliged to seek in terms of a re-conception of our Pneumatology.

## 2. The Spirit vis-à-vis Atheism, Idolatry and Decide

We now present our response to this phenomenon in three steps. First we establish that Yahweh's nature is such that She not only permits but even fosters *non-theism* as part of His [*sic*] self-revelation; secondly that it is not atheism but *idolatry* that Yahweh repudiates; finally, that Yahweh risks being subjected to *decide* in His Suffering Servant in order to persuade us of the saving revelation contained in the first two propositions. Our bold proclamation of this three-fold message in Asia through life and liturgy, personal prayer and political praxis would not threaten Asian religions with proselytism but would foster an inter-religious commitment to the hastening of a New Heaven and a New Earth, namely, the Resurrection of the Body (see Part 3).

### 2.1 The Salutary Inevitability of Atheism

There are two species of atheism operating in Asia today. The first is the *secularist atheism* of Western provenance, which often accompanies technocratic development spreading in Asia today; it is, *inter alia*, the fruit of West's past reaction (perhaps not entirely illegitimate) to a theo-ideology which merged with an oppressively religious /ecclesiastical domination over all aspects of the temporal sphere including the State. Even today, the aggressive theism of Christian and Muslim fundamentalists could very well drive thinkers like Michael Onfrey to profess an 'atheology'.<sup>18</sup> Such species of atheism challenges the church to revise its God-belief in the light of the revelation of Yahweh confirmed in the Gospel of Jesus.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the church's 'theology of domination' (a species of fundamentalism), which the Asian countries have experienced since the sixteenth century, must cede ground to the 'Asian theologies of liberation' now emerging as a consequence of a *biblical faith* responding to the *Asian reality*.<sup>20</sup>

Asia's *religious atheism*, by contrast, is an oblique confirmation of the biblical theism that the Exodus of Israel and the Passover of Jesus have impressed upon human history. It represents the species of non-theism that Yahweh permits and fosters as an expression of Her *humility*, a prerogative of the True God. For, we hear the Hebrew psalmist praying unabashedly, "God, your self-abasing

<sup>18</sup> See Onfrey's dialogue with Alberto Melloni in *Adista*, 84 (Anno xxxix, supp. Al n.5846), 3 Dec. 2005, 8-12.

<sup>19</sup> See *Gaudium et Spes*, 12, 19, 21, etc.

<sup>20</sup> For a documentation, see A. Pieris, "Political Theologies of Asia", *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, eds. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Co. Ltd., 2004), 256-70.

gesture (*anwatka*) has made me great" (Ps 18:36, Masoretic text). It is God who seems to have revealed to the Psamist: I, your God must decrease so that you may increase! Some Western scholars claim that "lowly", "base" (in Hebrew *ani*, usually translated as *tapeinos* or *praus* in the Septuagint) has such a pejorative connotation that the First Testament never predicates it of God and that the above quoted Masoretic text is to be dismissed as an unreliable exception resting on a doubtful original.<sup>21</sup> But the fact is that the Hebrew faith has tenaciously and persistently continued to recite this same verse even unto our own times,<sup>22</sup> rather than using the Septuagint version which says "Your right hand has come to my help" (Septuagint, Ps 17:35). The Jews have always expressed their faith through this prayer. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. Prayer reflects faith.

Let us recall that Jesus confirmed his intimate possession of Yahweh's Spirit by acting like Yahweh, not only in forgiving sins, commanding cosmic forces to obey, raising his right hand to deliver downtrodden, in accordance with (Ps 17:35, Septuagint version.) but also by having emptied himself of his divine status (*ekenosen*) and having even abased himself socially (*etapeinosen*) to the level of the lowest social stratum of Roman society, dying the death reserved for the slaves (Philip. 2: 5-11), as if to say "By this you know that I AM". He revealed a God who does not suffer from an 'inferiority complex', which would have made him 'throw his weight about' or over-react to those who deny Her or ignore Her.

Thus, God in Jesus seems to welcome atheism as a manifestation of Her self-abasement. "Learn from me because I am meek (*praus*) and lowly (*tapeinos*) of heart (Mt 11:24). The Spirit of the true God is humility. Hence *two criteria* have been set up for the end-time judgement of the people of the Book (Israel both old and new) and the others ("nations"). Even though Yahweh of Moses (who is the Abba of Jesus) revealed Her true nature to the 'little ones' of Israel and of the Church (Mt 11:25), expecting from them the reciprocal duty of unashamedly and lovingly confessing His name before others (Mk 8:38; Lk 9:26), nevertheless, this same God seemed to have refused to impose on the gentiles (*ethne, goyim*) the obligation to acknowledge and worship him by name as the True God; rather they would be judged on *another criterion*, namely that of taking personal responsibility for the humbled ones (the hungry and the thirsty, the sick and the homeless, the naked and the imprisoned), because, according to the divine logic, these humbled ones are the true vicars of a self-abasing God (Mt 25:31-45). Theistic acknowledgement is not a condition of salvation for the 'nations' (*ethne*); authentic humanism is. What saves is love

<sup>21</sup> See F. Hauck & S. Schutz, s.v. *praus*, in G. Kittel & G. Friederich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), Vol VI. 647 and *ibid.*, note 13.

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance the popular Psalter used by the Jews today, *The ArtScroll Tehilim*, (Hebrew text with annotated English translation by Rabbi Hillel Denzinger, in the ArtScroll Mesorah Series edited by Rabbi N. Scherman & Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz), (Brooklyn NY, twelfth impression, 2002), 32.

lived out in life, and not necessarily the knowledge of Who that Love is. But for Christians, the love for one's neighbour is the sacred context of their witness to their faith in the true God.

Love is self-abasing and humble, for, it is not jealous, not boastful, not interested in oneself but endures all things (I Cor 13: 4-5) and *that* very Love is the Spirit poured into our hearts (II Cor 1:22 and Rom 5:5), the Spirit of the true God. Hence Asia's religious atheism confirms Yahweh's humble nature while the ethics of selflessness and detachment, which the Asian religions advocate, accord with God's loving Spirit, which is salvific Love.

## 2.2 "Greed which is idolatry" (Col 3:5)

The same humble Love that permits religious atheism is also that which motivates Yahweh to condemn and contest idolatry, because idolatry is our abject submission to gods that rob our God-given freedom. For, it is after claiming Himself [*sic*] to be the one God who liberates slaves from the house of bondage that Yahweh demands from Israel that they renounce all other gods (Ex 20:3). The harshest form of idolatry, which destroys humanity and inter-personal communion according to all Asian religions, is *greed*. For the Buddha, greed is the source of all evil (the second noble truth). It is also defined as *upadana*, a compulsive clinging to that which is contingent, an obsessive addiction to what can never satisfy, an irresistible subservience to a mere means that has eventually become one's master, in short, a servile surrender to an idol. Greed, therefore, is idolatry, as Paul rightly adverts (Col 3:5).

As a matter of fact the only sure basis of any inter-religious dialogue in Asia is not theism but the praxis of non-idolatrous (i.e. greedless) enjoyment of the joys and pleasures of creation; the spirituality of the beatitudes. The renouncement of attachments should not amount to self-mortification of any kind (*atta-kilamatha*), insists the Buddha, the founder of the most widespread gnostic religion in Asia, but a life that is lived in ease of mind and body (*phasu-vihara*). In biblical Christianity, non-addiction guarantees pleasurable enjoyment (*eden*) for which this world was created as a garden. For, the glutton cannot relish the delicacies of life. Happiness or the joy of living is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). Jesus has described this joyous freedom as living like the birds in the air or the lilies in the fields, trusting in God alone and *in none else*. This is the first commandment which epitomizes biblical spirituality, namely, evangelical obedience (God alone) and evangelical poverty (no other god) both in one. It is what we promise at Baptism, not mere vows of consecrated religious.<sup>23</sup> Hence, it is the second part of the commandment (no gods) that all non-theistic soteriologies of Asia teach their adherents. It is the *common ground* between biblical Christianity and non-Christian religions.

Today, "what the Spirit says to the churches" of Asia (Rev. 2: 7, 11, 17, 29;

<sup>23</sup> For a detailed discussion of this thesis see A. Pieris, *Fire and Water*, Chapters 16 and 18.

3:6, 13, 22) is that the struggle against idolatry or greed (i.e., the fascination with the Attractive Beast of the Apocalypse) requires that Christians stand on this *common platform* with all men and women of other faiths. For, idolatry is now an agenda of invisible principalities and powers. Greed socially organized is idolatry globalized as well as slavery institutionalized, i.e., the slavery of the world's plutocrats to Mammon (the Absolutized Capital) and the resultant slavery of the Asian masses to the dictates of these same Mammon-worshippers. The Money-power, which fuels and steers today's neo-colonialism in Asia is more ruthless than the military power of the former colonialists. In David Ranson's analysis, the 'driverless machine' of Economic Power does this by means of TNCs and Finance Houses (Banks)-its two arms, which can together weaken national governments or even bring down entire countries (e.g., Mexico in 1995) and immobilize the "Third World" under the weight of unbearable debts, and "even wipe off the smile from the face of the South East Asian Tigers".<sup>24</sup>

Unless the Church stands in solidarity with other Asians on the common platform of non-idolatrous resistance to this cultural invasion of Asia, it lends itself to be misinterpreted as an accomplice of this gigantic colonizer. Innumerable pronouncements by the Church, such as John Paul II's *Ecclesia in Asia* (EA n. 7), which are severely critical of this phenomenon, has not erased Mahatma Gandhi's complaint from the memory of Non-Christians that the Church does not practise the Sermon on the Mount and is not saturated with the Spirit of the Beatitudes; but rather, as Nadkarni complains, the church, except for Mother Teresa, relies on Money, more than on God, in establishing itself on the Asian soil, not ashamed to exploit both the *global power of the West* and the *growing poverty of the East* to bring about a euro-ecclesiastical invasion of the homelands and the backyards of these traditional religions and cultures.<sup>25</sup> Neo-fundamentalist sects funded by Western sources have now added fuel to the fire; their aggressive evangelism has provoked not only verbal criticism but anti-conversion agitation and even physical violence on Christians and their places of worship.<sup>26</sup>

Hence, a church animated by a *biblical faith*, as the Asian Bishops have suggested, that is, a church that reflects the Spirit of the non-triumphalist and self-humbling God of Moses and Jesus, must emerge from the remains of the euro-ecclesiastical expansionism of the past. This is already happening in *basic human communities* and other *fringe movements* in which the Christian

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in the *World Guide: An Alternative Reference to the Countries of Our Planet, 2001/2002*, (Oxford: New Internationalist Publications Limited, 2001), 27.

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, M.V.Nadkarni, "Ethics and Relevance of Conversion: A Critical Assessment of Religious and Social Dimensions in Gandhian Perspective", *Economic and Political Weekly*, XXXVIII/ 3, January 18-24, 2003, 227-241.

<sup>26</sup> See L. Stanislaus, SVD, "A Christian Response to Hindutva", *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 68 (2004), specially 764-767.

members play an active role in the non-domineering and self-effacing manner of their Master.

### 2.3 Deicide and the Hour of the Spirit

Yahweh would not speak the Word without breathing out His breath; indeed, the Spirit and Word act in unison. As the final Word expressing the completion of Christ's mission was uttered ("It is accomplished"), the Spirit too was delivered once and for all (Jn 19:30). Indeed, God so loved the World that, in Christ His Son, He submitted to the deicial designs of idolators in order to enliven the world with the presence of Her [*sic*] life-giving Spirit. God so humbly identified Godself with the victims of Mammon-worshippers, that his last and lasting message to the world delivered from the Cross reverberates even unto this day for those who have ears to hear: "It is Me your God whom you kill each time you rob My people of their life."

Idolatry is not merely a slavish allegiance to false gods (as all religions teach) but is also a murderous attempt on the true God's life; and *this* is a revelation unique to our Christian faith. It is therefore not enough for the Asian churches to be a paragon of the beatitudinal living (already a difficult undertaking, indispensable for winning the credibility of others who share the same spirituality); it must also take the next bold step which the self-effacing God had taken in the life and death of Christ; it must pitch its tent among the victims of globalized idolatry. True to the Spirit of God who had been breathed into the dust which we are (Gen 2:7), we must not be ashamed of our humble origin and nature, which Christ Jesus himself had assumed when, as a "Spirit-bearing pot of clay" (*pneumatophor*) he broke into bits, spilling out the Water of Life on all the world. Our mission is not so much to preach biblical theism in Asia as to behave like this God who was revealed in Christ. Only a humble church that is ready to die and disappear with the millions of Asia's poor proves its divine origin.

This is not empty rhetoric. The Asian church is blessed with an increasing list Spirit-bearing vessels of clay that have clashed headlong against the deicial powers that manufacture poverty and injustice, and have let the Spirit flow from their broken bodies. Those working among the tribal people and the backward castes (*dalits*) in India are the most recent well-known examples of death-defying love that has poured out the life-giving Spirit. There is no Pentecost without death and resurrection.

One final remark. The masses of Asian poor (numerically the largest concentration of human misery in the world) are mostly non-Christians, who nevertheless constitute the "Me" of the End-time Judge ("you did it to me") and are, consequently, the *non-Christian Body of Christ*. Which means, the more the Asian Church identifies itself with them, the more it will become what it claims to be: the Body animated by the Spirit of Christ, that is to say, a Body

with living waters gushing from its pierced side (Jn 19:34).

### 3. The Spirit and the Body: The Muslim Factor

Asia's major gnostic religions, which we have been trying comprehend within a Pneumatological perspective, are sometimes known to students of comparative religions as *non-biblical* religions in contrast with Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The last mentioned three soteriologies, which we have designated as 'agapeic' in our discussion so far, are also classed as *biblical* religions because of their roots in the Semitic context that produced the Bible. Since the Hebrew Scriptures serve as God's Word also to Christians and since the Covenant of Sinai has not been abrogated but made new in Christ, our discourse on the Spirit would remain incomplete without a reference to something unique which we have inherited from our West Asian Semitic origins. The following thoughts are, therefore, a sort of appendage which supplements the proposition we have already spelt out in Parts 1 and 2.

#### 3.1 The Crisis of Biblical Religions in Asia

Islam is the most widespread representative of biblical religiosity in Asia. As for Christianity, it cannot claim more than 3 percent of Asians as its followers. The Jews are even less in number. The tragedy about them is that a bloody violence marks their relationship in many parts of our continent. The counter-witness, which Israel and Palestine have projected about the God of their ancestors is mirrored also in the relationship between Muslims and Christians. As a consequence of this scandal, Asia has been deprived of an authentic knowledge and appreciation of *agapeic* religiosity so characteristic of biblical religions. Love (*ahab, agape*), which is the power that creates things out of nothing and resurrects the dead, is not proclaimed or witnessed to in a universally recognizable manner. Hatred unfortunately is.

To introduce an authentic harmony and initiate a creative collaboration between these two "peoples of the book" (*ahl al-kitab*), we can never look to Pneumatology as the starting point or the basis, given the distinctive notion of Islamic monotheism which rejects Trinitarian theology. But its advocacy of a non-idolatrous commitment to life strikes a chord in the Christian heart. Apart from this common basis, which it shares with all other religions, there is another common ground between us, namely, our hope in the *resurrection of the body*. Here, our common *biblical faith* makes us both commit ourselves to *this physical world* as the sacrosanct shrine of God's redemptive intervention. It is our common mission to confirm the cosmic religions in their positive assessment of this world as a sacred sanctuary and also to complement (rather than contradict) the gnostic religious approach to this world of suffering.

Creation and Resurrection, which both Islam and Christianity as divine interventions that make this world an arena for salvific activity, impose on

their adherents a socio-political involvement to be undertaken as a religious responsibility. Regrettably, this positive approach of both religions to human and world affairs has engendered negative results in the present situation of global violence. What is common to the two religions has been a cause of conflict rather than a basis for a collaborative action. Their positive engagement in the vicissitudes of the present life is directed against each other. The physical world which we hold sacred has become our battleground.

The saddest of all is that contemporary Islam's contention that Christianity collaborates with "Western Imperialism" in the struggle to conquer the world is so strongly imbedded in the minds and hearts so many non-Muslim Asians that the ideological undercurrent known as *Occidentalism* has now emerged to the surface of the Asia's collective consciousness threatening Christianity's credibility. Occidentalism mainly consists of attributing to the West and to its religious ideology (Christianity!) all that spoils what is good in the non-West!<sup>27</sup>

Whether we agree with "Occidentalism" or not, we have to reckon with its challenge to the Asian churches. The effort to regain mutual credibility between Islam and Christianity in Asia, therefore, must receive top priority in the agenda of both parties if they wish to contribute to the redemption of Asia from its poverty, fatalism and despair in the face the phenomenon of a massive cultural erosion. The children of Abraham, who advocate a theism that values material progress as a spiritual obligation, have to return to their common biblical faith lest they fail in their God-given mission. Hence we must discover with our Muslim brethren a "Spirit-uality of this worldliness" based on our common *biblical origins* and directed towards *authentic* material progress, which Asia desperately needs.

### 3.2 The Spirit-Dimension of Material Progress

Our catechisms and theological manuals still speak of our faith within an anthropology that does not reflect its biblical origins. The idea of saving souls based on the Hellenistic anthropology of the immortal soul informing the body, an idea taken for granted both by Christianity and Islam is an uncomfortable intruder into our doctrine of bodily resurrection. Ironically, it is thanks to Muslim philosophers such as al- Farabi, Avicenna, al Ghazali, Averroes that the Aristotelian concept of the human person came to settle down in the scholastic theology of the Middle Ages and continues to haunt our catechesis even today. Christianity even more than Islam would find it difficult to make sense of the doctrine of resurrection on the basis of that anthropology.

Both religions must uphold that the gender-free human person called the "Earth-being" (*Adam*) made of the dust of the earth (*adamah*), but later

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<sup>27</sup> See Ian Buruma & Avibhai Margalit. *Occidentalism, The West in the Eyes of its Enemies* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).

differentiated as Man and Woman, lives solely by God's Breath (*ruah*), not by means of an immortal human soul. Remove God's power (which Christians call the Spirit) and Adam would return to dust. It is the same Breath of God that brings back the dead from dust to life. Even if this Divine Breath is not regarded as a 'Divine Person' by the Muslims, they do not deny that it is the Power of God that creates and recreates all life, and that this creative and resurrectional power is Divine Love.

According to this Semitic anthropology a person does not have a body but *is* the body. The body, i.e., the human person is made of flesh (*sarx*) and soul (*psyche*), both of which are impermanent and mortal,<sup>28</sup> that is to say, made of dust. What dies is this dust-body. Paul calls it the fleshy-body (*soma sarkikon*) or also the soulish body (*soma psychikon*); what rises again is the Spiritual Body (*soma pneumatikon*) as the same Paul teaches us (I Cor 15: 44). Here "Spiritual" does not mean non-material as the Greeks thought but the body living its bodiliness completely under the Holy Spirit's power. Christian discipleship which anticipates the end-time resurrection consists of *living out his bodily life as a Spiritual Worship*, (Rom. 12:1), which, according to the Semitic idiom, means living out one's secular and social commitments under the influence of the Spirit.<sup>29</sup> To save 'ourselves' does not mean saving our 'souls' in hylemorphic sense, but saving our bodies which comprise all that is physical, psychical, social and cosmic. The resurrection of the Body means the resurrection of the whole creation: a new heaven and a new earth; which alone is the ultimate goal of our *Spirit-uality*.

The Holy Spirit and the Apostles of Christ are manifested *together* at Pentecost, Congar reminds us<sup>30</sup> and, therefore, we are on a mission in synergy with the Spirit to "renew the face of the earth" not merely to explain the earth rationally. The church's confession "I believe in the Holy Spirit" is followed by the fivefold missionary agenda, the last three items being "forgiveness of sins, resurrection of the body and life everlasting". These are the three dimensions of the *Spiritual* destiny of the whole of Creation.<sup>31</sup>

Hence, "to be spiritual", according to our biblical faith, is to anticipate the final restoration of all things with continuous and ever-increasing doses of material progress, psychic healing, social solidarity and cosmic harmony. It

<sup>28</sup> See J.A.T. Robinson, *In the End God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 95-100.

<sup>29</sup> E.Kaesemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 327 ff.

<sup>30</sup> Y. Congar, *The Mystery of the Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965), 105.

<sup>31</sup> As demonstrated in A. Pieris, "I Believe in the Holy Spirit: Ecumenism in the Churches and the Unfinished Agenda of the Holy Spirit", *Ishvani Documentation and Mission Digest*, XXI/2, May-Aug. 2003, 164-191; *CTC Bulletin*, XIX/3, 2003, 36-52; *East Asian Pastoral Review*, 42' 1-2, November 2005, 96-121; Abridged version: *Spiritus* (USA), 3, 2003, 53-67. Spanish version in *Misiones Estranjerias*, No 202, (2004), 407-419 and No 203 (2004), 537-547.

is a *Spirit*-uality of this-worldliness which Asia has the right to expect from Islam and Christianity, both of which believe in the divine power summoning humankind to rise from death and decay to construct a world worthy of the same God who called it into existence and is now summoning it to become a new heaven and a new earth. It is time that Muslims and Christian cease being rivals in a race for supremacy and become partners in this common *Spiritual* mission.