

AN ASIAN PNEUMATOLOGY OF THE FABC AND THE RE-IMAGINING OF SPIRITUALITY IN ASIA

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ABSTRACT

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) has reimagined spirituality in Asia by removing the perception of the church in Asia as "foreign" through interreligious dialogue and inculturation. It has done this by pursuing a threefold dialogue, consisting of dialogue with the local cultures, peoples, and religions. The interreligious component of the Triple Dialogue is based on the premise that the Holy Spirit or the Divine Spirit is operative in non-Christian religions (BIRA IV/2, art. 8.5, in Rosales and Arevalo 1997, 253). Indeed, the FABC document, *The Spirit at Work in Asia Today* (SWAT) issued by the Office of Theological Concerns, begins not with the teaching of the episcopal magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church, but with how the Spirit has functioned in the lives of Asian people within their historical and religio-cultural contexts. In this paper, I examine some of the ways in which the bishops at the FABC have reimagined spirituality in Asia.

Overview: Colonial and Postcolonial Contexts

Although Christianity emerged in West Asia, and, for the first four centuries of its existence, was more present in Asia and Africa than elsewhere, it is nevertheless regarded as a Western religion by most people. The Malabar Church of India is older than the Roman Catholic Church, and Nestorian Christians were present in China in the seventh century, yet Christianity is seen as a foreign religion by many Asians today (Phan 2011, 2-3). These perceptions are probably due to the fact that after its birth in Palestine, Christianity moved steadily northward to Antioch, and then westward to Rome, before it spread southward and eastward to the rest of the world. By the time it came back to Asia, the continent of its birth, it was indeed seen as a foreign religion, whose missionary activities followed the expansion of colonialism in Asia: by the Portuguese in Gao (1510) and Malaka (1511), the Spanish in Cebu (1565) and Manila (1571), the Dutch in Indonesia (17 CE), the British in Lower Burma (1825) and Malaysia (1867), the French in Vietnam (1861) and the Americans in the Philippines (1898).

Western missionaries established churches in Asia by transplanting styles of liturgical worship and institutional structures of leadership from Europe. There was no attempt to contextualize or indigenize Christianity to the local setting, or to develop indigenous churches with local identities. Missionary schools introduced Euro-centric forms of knowledge production, with an emphasis on a particular European language, history, and vocation that effectively dislodged local transmission of indigenous knowledge to the next generation. Furthermore, missionary schools provided the means for those who could afford the education to secure their children's futures as bureaucrats or civil servants. The underlying assumption of this approach to

evangelization and education was that one had to become a European or a Westerner in order to become a Christian and an educated person. It turned out Asian Christians, whose Christian faith was practiced as a foreign religion in their own native setting, and educators with minimal knowledge of their own native history, but sufficient command of a foreign language, history, and skillset, would be awarded the opportunity for social mobility in a colonized society.

After the Second World War, advocates of independence movements in former Asian colonies campaigned for national self-determination and self-government rather than a return to European colonial rule. These movements were often accompanied by a rising tide of nationalism and decolonization. The former saw Christianity as a foreign religion and the latter included a process of de-Christianization that resulted in the confiscation of missionary schools and the expulsion of Christian missionaries from many countries in Asia (Chia 2018, 138). A tangible symbol of the new national identity was often associated with a religion that had been suppressed during the colonial era, but that most Asians could identify with as their own. For example, the essential feature of the Burmese efforts to maintain national unity during the postcolonial period was summed up in a popular saying of the time: “To be Burmese is to be a Buddhist.” A similar saying could be found in Kampuchea: “To be a Khmer is to be a Buddhist” (Bechert 1984). The conflation of nationalism with Buddhism reflects the important role that religion played in the vision of national self-determination and the articulated political consciousness of these newly independent nations in postcolonial Asia.

Theology of Religions

Even though Buddhism is of Indian origin and indigenous to neither Myanmar (Burma) nor Kampuchea (Cambodia), it has been adapted to these respective cultural contexts, to include accommodation of pre-Buddhist practices of spirit worship that were previously common in Southeast Asia. Christianity was transplanted onto the Asian continent, however and was thus never truly at home with Asian cultures and thea. European missionaries and their respective Catholic and Protestant religious institutions presented Christianity as the “true faith,” isolated and aloof from the other Asian religions, many of which pre-date Christianity itself. The theology of colonial Christianity reflected the exclusive model of theologies of religions, in which no salvation is possible outside of the one true savior, religion or church. Dialogue with other religions was not deemed necessary, since it was assumed that there is neither revelation nor salvation in non-Christian religions. The goal of the exclusive model is to replace other religions with Christianity (Knitter 2002, 26-29). An ecclesio-centric approach was adopted, in that initiation into the Christian Church was considered necessary for salvation. It is not surprising, therefore, that a church with such a theological framework would prevent Christianity taking root in Asian soil, in part because it saw itself as superior to Asian cultures and to the various religious identities that already existed in Asia.

While in the hardcore exclusivist model, or what Paul Knitter calls the “total replacement model,” dialogue with non-Christian religions is seen as a betrayal of God’s revelation in Christ, in the more inclusive approach subscribed to by the Second Vatican Council, dialogue with adherents of other religions is considered essential to the Christian life, because God’s presence can be found in these religions as well. There is not only revelation in non-Christian religions, but also the possibility of salvation. These religions can be considered “ways of salvation,” even though the salvation of all humans ultimately comes from Christ. In other words, salvation outside of Christianity is possible, even though it is always ultimately dependent on one true savior and one true church. This is a Christocentric approach in that the salvation of all people—Christians and non-Christians, believers and non-believers—ultimately comes from Christ. Knitter calls this the “fulfillment model,” since the salvation of all people is ultimately fulfilled by Jesus Christ (Knitter 70-79). As Pope John Paul II (1990, sec. 6) aptly put it in his encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, “Christ

is thus the fulfillment of the yearning of all the world's religions and, as such, he is their sole and definitive completion".

The fulfillment model is a major improvement on the total replacement model in that it does not limit God's grace from working beyond Christianity, and it acknowledges the idea that those who do not yet know Jesus can still experience the saving love of God, even if they do not understand the fullness of what they have experienced in terms of the big picture of salvation. We see this idea with regard to salvation of non-Christians as individuals in the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium*, which makes clear that "[t]hose who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation" (LG 16, in Abbott 1966, 35).¹ There are, however, weaknesses associated with this model. First, it engages other religions from a Christian perspective. In other words, it applies Christian categories like "God," "Jesus Christ," and "salvation" to understanding religions whose conceptions of divinity and salvation may be different, even completely different. Second, it often appears imperialistic, in that it comes to conclusions about religious others without encountering the believers of those religions (Light 2014, 79).

The third model in theologies of religions is the pluralistic model, which posits that all religions are equal and have different paths leading to salvation. This model promotes dialogue because it acknowledges that there are many true religions, none of which can claim superiority over the others. It is a theocentric model in that it recognizes that many true religions can have different ends, but that salvation ultimately comes from the same God of these religions. Relativism is the major weakness of this model. The approach taken by the late Indian Protestant theologian, Stanley Samartha, illustrates this point. He argued that Jesus is recognized as one savior among many others in the religiously pluralistic context of India (Samartha 1991, 125). In so doing, he relativized the soteriological uniqueness of Christ without offering an alternative model of interreligious dialogue that does not foreground Jesus in an exclusive manner, yet remains faithful to the basic Christian affirmations about Jesus.

Samartha, however, provided two images that are quite helpful in capturing the colonialist and indigenous approaches to Christianity in Asia: He used the image of the landing of a helicopter to describe the evangelization approach taken by missionaries during the period of European colonization of Asia. While descending upon Asian soil, the helicopter blows away everything on the ground in order to pave the way for the transplantation of a European church. Theologically, the image of a helicopter landing on Asian soil resembles Knitter's total replacement model, which also sought to replace all religions with Christianity.

In contrast, the image of a bullock-cart, a two-wheeled vehicle pulled by oxen, describes an indigenous Church that is in touch with the peoples and cultures of Asia. Just as its wheels touch every inch of Asian soil, as the bullock-cart is pulled along the road, the bullock-cart church "must be in continuous contact and friction with the people and religions of Asia if it wants to move forward" (Chia 2004). This image describes the kind of indigenous church advocated by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). It is a church in which the Christian Gospel has been incarnated in the lives of people in Asia in order that "faith is inculturated and culture is evangelized (Eilers 2002, 27).

Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences

¹ For a detailed explanation of each of the conditions listed in LG 16, as well as the ecclesio-centric grounding of *mission ad gentes*, see Tan (2004, 678-9).

The FABC is “a voluntary association of episcopal conferences in South, Southeast, East and Central Asia, established with approval of the Holy See. Its purpose is to foster among its members solidarity and co-responsibility for the welfare of the Church and society in Asia, and to promote and defend whatever is for the greater good” (Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences 2019). Established in 1972, with approval of the Holy See, as a federation of nineteen Asian bishops’ conferences and eight associate members of South, Southeast, East, and Central Asia, the FABC, since its inception, has had considerable impact upon the reimagining of spirituality in Asia. Here spirituality refers to an encounter with the Ultimate through beliefs and practices, and the shaping of one’s life based on that encounter. The focus is on the person, because an interreligious dialogue is not a dialogue between two religions, but between believers from their respective religions.

To carry out its pastoral mission of becoming a church of Asia by removing the perception of the church in Asia as “foreign,” the FABC has pursued a threefold dialogue: the dialogue with local cultures (inculturation),² the dialogue with peoples, especially the poor (human development), and the dialogue with other religions (interreligious dialogue).³ These dialogues are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are interrelated. They are concrete ways of proclaiming the Gospel in Asia. I now briefly examine each of these kinds of dialogue.

Asia is the home of some of the oldest civilizations known to humankind. It is also the continent that gave birth to all the major religions of the world, including Christianity. As such, there are elements of truth and goodness in Asian cultures that the Catholic Church considers the “seeds of the Word”⁴ of God. Furthermore, Aloysius Pieris, a leading Asian theologian, reminds us that culture and religion cannot be separated in much of the Majority World, because “culture is the variegated expression of religion” (Pieris 1992, 97). In other words, if there are elements of truth and goodness in Asian cultures, these same elements are present in Asian religions. The goal of the dialogue with Asian cultures is to integrate the “seeds of the Word” found in Asian cultures and religions with the Christian faith in order to form a truly local Asian Christian church, in which Asian ways of thinking, praying, and living become part and parcel of what it means to be Asian Christians.

Having grown up in Burma (Myanmar), a country in which there has been a constant state of civil war between the national government and its ethnic minorities since gaining independence from the British in 1948, Cardinal Charles Maung Bo has focused on issues of peace building in Asia since he took over the helm of the FABC as its President on January 1, 2019. To achieve peace

² In the early documents of the FABC, “inculturation” was used interchangeably with words like “indigenization,” “acculturation,” and “adaptation.” Over the years since the Manila conference of 1979, which devoted a workshop to inculturation as an Asian missionary task, there have been definite characteristics associated with the process of inculturation (Kroegeer 2008). Three salient characteristics are:

1. “Inculturation is not a mere adaptation of a ready-made Christianity to a given situation, but rather a creative embodiment of the Word in the local church” (Rosales and Arevalo 1997, 138).
2. “Inculturation is a dialogical encounter process understood in its deepest meaning that comes from the salvific movement of the Triune God, because evangelization itself is above all a dialogue between the Gospel message and the given reality” (Rosales and Arevalo 1997, 138-9).
3. “Dialogue is a primary means and way for inculturation.” (Rosales and Arevalo 1997, 142)

According to Edmund Chia, Senior Lecturer at the Australian Catholic University, inculturation “simply means enabling Christianity to fit into the context and resonate more with Asian sensibilities” (Chia 2018, 139). It goes beyond the short-term measures of indigenizing Christianity, such as translating the Gospel to the vernacular or “adapting it to an indigenous world-view with the concomitant local concepts, images, and culturally specific symbols ... [that] do not address the critical issues of the Church’s identity” (Chia 2004). It involves the total transformation of the life of an Asian Christian community in such a way that the Gospel of Christ has been incarnated in the lives of people in that community. For the FABC, the Triple Dialogue is the fundamental operative approach to inculturation in Asia.

³ At the Pontifical Theological Faculty of Southern Italy in Naples, Pope Francis on June 6, 2019 urged theologians to temper history and tradition with dialogue across religious and cultural boundaries (Seneze 2019).

⁴ This phrase is from St. Justin Martyr’s “Spermatikos Logos”.

in a continent where people have faced the horrors of ethnic conflicts, religious intolerance, and violence, Bo rearticulates the triple dialogue of FABC as a dialogue with government, with the poor, and interreligious dialogue (Sainsbury 2019). Dialogue with government is to ensure that the dignity of every person is protected and that the “seeds of the Word” are preserved in Asian cultures and religions. As such, it is the political component of a much larger dialogue with Asian cultures.

In his opening address at the third meeting of the Asian Theological Conference, Samuel Rayan, a Jesuit from India, captured the vastness of the Asian continent with its diversity of peoples and cultures, as well as the plight of the suffering millions, the majority of Asia’s population (ATC III):

Let us be silent for a moment
 Silent before the awesome reality of Asia ...
 Before Asian’s vastness, variety, and complexity ...
 Asia’s peoples, languages, and cultures ...
 Asia’s poor, their cries, tears, and wounds ...
 the death of her babies by the millions and
 the humiliation of women ... and men ... and their struggles. (Rayan 1992, 11)

While Rayan delivered this address in 1992, and while some Asian countries, China in particular, have experienced tremendous economic growth over the past twenty-seven years, Asia as a whole is still extremely poor. The majority of people are under-nourished, uneducated, marginalized, and poor. With the exception of the Philippines and East Timor, where the majority of the population are Christians, the rest of Asia where, by conservative estimates, over ninety-five percent of Asians live, is almost entirely non-Christian. This makes dialogue with the poor and dialogue with non-Christian religions essential aspects of the church’s pastoral mission of evangelization.

The last component of the Triple Dialogue—i.e., dialogue with other religions or interreligious dialogue—is regarded by the Asian bishops as an essential component of how Asian Christians live their faith amidst their neighbors of other religions (BIRA IV/2, art. 8.5., in Rosales and Arevalo 1997, 253). We have seen the significance of interreligious dialogue above in my discussion of dialogues with both culture and the poor. Dialogue with culture entails dialogue with religions because cultures and religions are interlaced in the Asian context. Thus it has been said that all East Asians, to some degree, whether they are aware of it or not, exhibit in their lives elements of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, just as all South Asians display some ethos rooted in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Deeply entrenched in Asian cultures are the practices of filial piety, engagement in ancestor veneration, and other aspects of popular religious traditions. To abandon these for the sake of Christianity or secularization is tantamount to getting rid of one’s Asianness. Consequently, multiple religious belonging is the rule in Asia rather than an exception. In *Being Religious Interreligiously*, Phan (2008, 62-63) observes that in Asia, “religions are considered not as mutually exclusive religious organizations but as having specialized functions responding, according to a division of labor, as it were, to the different needs and circumstances in the course of a person’s life”. A couple of examples will illustrate this. It is not uncommon for a Japanese to be a Shinto at birth, a Confucianist during the prime of his/her life, and a Buddhist in the twilight of his/her life. An East Asian Christian can be a Confucianist at work and be attentive to the Daoist side of life outside of work by sipping tea (*cha*), doing Tai Chi, or even composing a few lines of poetry. In other words, intrareligious negotiation is an inherent part of their lived experience to the degree that it has become naturalized. Moreover, dialogue with the poor entails dialogue with other religions, since most of the poor in Asia are non-Christians. Hence, interreligious dialogue is a *sine qua non* for Asian Christians in particular. Indeed, the Asian church’s pastoral magisterium has proclaimed that “unless one engages in interreligious dialogue one cannot be regarded as a true Christian” (Chia 2004).

Asian Pneumatology

As pastoral gatherings or conferences, the aim of the FABC is not to formulate a systematic and comprehensive understanding of the theology of the Holy Spirit; rather, the intention is to offer a rough contour of the ways in which the Spirit has operated in the life and pastoral mission of the Asian church, situated in a multicultural and religiously pluralistic context. This is what “Asian Pneumatology” refers to in this article, rather than an in-depth treatment of the theology of the Holy Spirit.⁵

In *The Joy of Religious Pluralism*, Peter Phan (2017, 57), Ignacio Ellacuria Chair of Catholic Social Thought at Georgetown University, explicates the double meaning of the “Divine Spirit” as God as “spirit” (with the lower-case “s”) and the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Blessed Trinity. They are two ways of understanding the same Spirit. The Divine Spirit is God in action: i.e., how the Spirit has operated in the lives of people since the beginning of time through their various histories, cultures, and religions. The Holy Spirit is an abstract and ahistorical formulation of the identity of the Spirit that came from the Christological controversies of the first seven ecumenical councils. While SWAT recognizes that there are deep differences between some Christian beliefs and those of other religions, it also acknowledges “resonances” of the Divine Spirit can be detected in history and in non-Christian religions (Phan 2017, 59-60). Using St. Irenaeus’s metaphor of Jesus and the Holy Spirit as two “hands” that carry out the one plan of salvation of the Father, Phan emphasizes “the fact that there is only one economy of salvation does not entail that the two ‘hands’—Son and Holy Spirit—act in the same way, at the same time, in the same place, with the same people, and in total dependence on each other” (Phan 2017, 56). We find this sort of relationship among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the Athanasian Creed as well: “And the Catholic faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity. Neither confounding the Persons nor dividing the substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost” (Sullivan 1907). The implication is that the God Catholics worship is no supreme monad existing in eternal solitude. Catholics worship an inherently relational Trinitarian God, comprising three distinct Persons, yet united in the one divine plan of salvation. We see this in the manner in which the Holy Spirit carries out the “economy” or plan of salvation, which can neither be contained nor limited, for “[t]he Spirit blows where it wills”⁶ (Jn 3:8). The FABC acknowledges “the work of the Holy Spirit both in the Church and beyond its visible boundaries, since the Spirit acts in freedom and His action cannot be reduced to persons, traditions, institutions or problems of relationships” (Rosales and Arevalo 1997, 249).

While the Holy Spirit, is for many Catholics the silent member of the Blessed Trinity, the Divine Spirit as God-“spirit” is God in action: God at work in the universe, in the church, and in Asian multicultural, pluri-religious, and socio-political realities. The actions of the Divine Spirit are revealed when we see people of different backgrounds—be it religious affiliation, nationality, race, ethnicity, or some other factor—come together in peace and reconciliation. A few examples will illustrate this. A week after the worst terrorist attack in the modern history of New Zealand, which left fifty people dead, many women across the country wore headscarves or hijabs in a show of support for the Muslim community. One New Zealander, Bell Sibly, told ABC News in Christchurch the primary reason she was wearing a headscarf was that “if anyone else turns up waving a gun, I want to stand between him and anybody he might be pointing it at” (Durando 2019). During the same week, people from all faith traditions held hands to form a symbolic ring of peace around mosques in Middletown, Toronto, and elsewhere around the world to show their solidarity with the victims of the Christchurch attacks. When we see people standing in solidarity with victims

⁵ For an in-depth discussion of Asian Pneumatology, see Peter Phan (2017, 67-74).

⁶ In many biblical translations, this passage is rendered as, “The wind blows where it wills”. The word “wind” here is the Hebrew word *ruach*, which can also be translated as “Spirit”.

of religious intolerance and violence, we cannot help but recognize a sign of the work of the Divine Spirit. Dramatic examples of the workings of the Divine Spirit include the dismantling of the Berlin wall, the breakdown of the Apartheid system in South Africa, and the dissolution of the former Soviet Union. From a Christian perspective, as well as that of the FABC, when people come together in reconciliation and forgiveness, one can be sure it is the work of the Divine Spirit. Implicit in this assertion is the conviction that the Divine Spirit is actively present in all religious traditions (BIRA IV/12, art. 7, in Rosales and Arevalo 1997, 326). This does not necessarily mean that the Divine Spirit is the *final cause*, to use Rahner's terminology, but it can imply that the presence of the Divine Spirit in non-Christian religions can open the door regarding these religions as "ways of salvation."⁷ This is the approach taken by the FABC in articulating the starting point of its understanding of the Divine or Holy Spirit.

As noted above, SWAT begins its treatment of the Spirit, not with the teaching of the episcopal magisterium, but with a description of how the Spirit is active in Asian cultures and religions. Phan points out the significance of this approach, when he writes, "implicit to this methodology is the theological conviction that Divine Spirit is actively present in non-Christian religions in and through the Holy Spirit and that to this extent these religions may be regarded as 'ways of salvation'" (Phan 2017, 59). Such a theological conviction does not come from a vacuum. As Jonathan Y. Tan, professor at Case Western Reserve University, observes, the FABC's articulation of the Holy Spirit was built upon two important insights promulgated by the Second Vatican Council (Tan 2014, 101-2). They are:

Ad Gentes (Decree on Missionary Activities) that "the Holy Spirit was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified," (AG 4, in Abbott 1966, 587)

and

Gaudium et Spes (Church in the Modern World) that "since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery." (GS 22, in Abbott 1966, 221-2)

Tan (2014, 102) notes that, based on these two theological insights from Vatican II, the Asian bishops have declared that "God's Spirit is at work in all religious traditions" (BIRA IV/12, art. 7, in Rosales and Arevalo 1997, 326) because "God's saving grace is not limited to members of the Church, but is offered to every person" (Rosales and Arevalo 1997, BIRA II/12, art. 12, in Rosales and Arevalo 1997, 115). These are some of the theological and pneumatological bases upon which the FABC has reimagined spirituality in Asia.

Reimagining of Spirituality in Asia

SWAT reimagines spirituality in Asia by reflecting on how the Divine Spirit has been at work in various religio-cultural traditions, as experienced by believers of these traditions within their own *sitz im leben*. While the FABC recognizes the deep differences between some Christian beliefs and those of other religions, it affirms that "there are deep resonances between them" as well. SWAT highlights these deep resonances between the Divine Spirit or the Holy Spirit and the various religious and secular realities in Asia by focusing on ways the Divine Spirit is actively present in Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Asian primal religions, Islam, the church,

⁷ This is different from Rahner's idea of "anonymous Christians," which reflects the position that the saving love of God is present in all people and that those who do not yet know Jesus can still experience the saving love of God even if they are not aware of it. For further discussion, see Phan (2017, 59) and Karl Rahner (1966).

the biblical tradition, and the socio-political realities of Asia. What follows is a brief summary of SWAT's take on the Spirit at work in some of these Asian religious traditions; what Christians can learn from Asian religions; what Christians can offer from their own tradition; and how different approaches to evangelization in Asia have been sources of tension between the Vatican and the Asian bishops.

Of the many concepts of Hinduism, SWAT highlights concepts such as *antarayami* or *antarayamin* ("the inner controller" or "indweller"), *ananda* (bliss or joy), *sakti* ("power" or "energy") as having deep resonance with the Christian concept of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, OTC makes clear that the Divine Spirit or the Holy Spirit is also present in concepts less congenial with the Spirit and in the Indian tradition itself (Eilers 2002, 241-2). From Buddhism, SWAT examined *anatta* or *anatman* (no-self), *karuna* (compassion), the Four Noble Truths, and other Buddhist concepts, and aptly points out that the resonance of the Spirit can be detected, not necessarily in Buddhist concepts themselves, a few of which are non-theistic, but in the living out of those concepts. It offers the practice of the Four Noble Truths as an example of an encounter between Buddhism and Christianity.

One of the weaknesses of SWAT's analysis of Hinduism and, in particular, Buddhism, is that it focuses too much on abstract concepts and hardly at all on the popular practices of lived religion. Had they examined the lives of lay Asian Buddhists, they would have realized that many—even those among the very few who know what *anatta* means—regard it as an abstract concept that has no relevance to their lives, because most lay Theravada Asian Buddhists believe in a concept of a "butterfly soul," a pre-Buddhist belief that has been incorporated into Southeast Asian Buddhism.⁸ In other words, the Office of Theological Concern that issued SWAT, missed the opportunity of discovering that lived Buddhism has more elements in common with Catholicism than the concepts articulated by the Buddha himself.⁹

SWAT did notice the similarities that exist between the collection of the teachings and thoughts of Confucius in the Analects (*Lunyu*) and those of Jesus in the Christian Gospels, as well as between the personalities of the disciples of Confucius and those of Jesus. There was even a Judas figure amongst Confucius' disciples. Jan Qiu, a financial administrator for a rich minister, was later repudiated by Confucius for his lack of compassion toward the poor. Given the tremendous influence Confucius' teachings have had in Chinese culture and in the countries neighboring China, SWAT states that "it is unthinkable that such a human spirit did not have the Spirit working in him" (Eilers 2002, 248-50).

While the Dao is encoded within human culture in Confucianism, it is embedded within the natural tendency of things in Daoism. SWAT summarizes the complementary nature of Confucianism and Daoism:

In many ways, [Confucianism and Daoism] reflect the workings of the Holy Spirit in the Cosmos and particularly in humanity and its history. The Daoist virtues of docility, trust, humility, non-violence, detachment, equanimous love; and the Confucianist virtues of responsibility, honesty, loyalty and fidelity are but manifestations of the fruits of the one Spirit of God working in all sorts of different ways in different people in the world. (Eilers 2002, 257)

SWAT concludes that because Confucianism and Daoism are deeply influenced by traditional Chinese approaches to family and institutions, nature and harmony, the Holy Spirit is also unquestionably working in and through them.

⁸ For more information on butterfly soul or *leikpya*, see Spiro (1982, 84-86).

⁹ For further discussion on lived Buddhism, see Cheah (2011).

SWAT reimagines Asian spiritualities by acknowledging the workings of the Holy Spirit in Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, as well as in areas not discussed in this article; namely, in Asian primal religions, Islam, the church, the biblical tradition, and the socio-political realities of Asia. Since the Catholic Church declares that the Holy Spirit is present in these religions, then Catholics and other Christians should be able to learn something from these religious traditions that will help make them better Christians. What can Christians glean from Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Daoism that might help them better understand their own religious faith?

What Christians Can Learn from Asian Religions

In its sacred text, the *Rig Veda*, Hinduism tells us that “Truth is one, but the wise speak of it in many ways.” It is a saying that approximates the prismatic recapitulation of the nature of diversity in traditional Indian culture, where each facet reflects truth in a different light. It is like the classic story of the blind men and the elephant. The first blind man puts his hand on the elephant’s side and thinks he is touching a wall. The second takes hold of the elephant’s trunk and thinks he is grabbing a snake. The third blind man puts out his hand and touches the elephant’s tusk, which is smooth and sharp and thinks for sure that he is touching a spear. The fourth blind man holds on to one of the elephant’s legs and thinks he is holding on to the base of a tree. The fifth reaches out and touches the elephant’s ear and thinks he is touching a huge fan. The sixth blind man holds the tail of the elephant and thinks he is holding on to a rope. The moral of the story is that each of us has a partial perspective or vision of the reality of truth. None of us has access to the whole truth. In other words, Hinduism reminds Christians that no one has an exclusive corner in the market on truth. Most Christians hold this to be true as well.¹⁰ All Christians, however, need to be reminded that there is no singular perspective on truth and that we do not have the whole thing “bagged” or figured out. Christians need to have an attitude of openness that they might discern the movement of the Spirit beyond their own tradition.

The teachings of Theravada Buddhism state that the Buddha is inaccessible after parinirvana, a release from the cycle of rebirth for someone who has attained nirvana in his or her last rebirth. The Buddha is only a model or a guide in our journey towards the attainment of nirvana. We cannot pray to him or ask for his assistance. However, in popular Buddhism, the actual practice of Asian Buddhists in their everyday life, the Buddha is an object of worship and devotion, especially in times of adversity. In other words, no matter what textual Buddhism says about the Buddha, in the actual living out of their Buddhist faith, Asian Buddhists regard the Buddha as providing the fulfillment of the basic human need to experience the sacred in prayer. It is in prayer that lay Buddhist devotees encounter the Divine Spirit mediated through the Buddha, bodhisattvas, and/or other supernatural agents. Indeed, lay Buddhist devotees pray every day in front of their domestic altars. If praying is essential in this so-called “atheistic religion,” how much more it ought to be in a theistic religion. Such a natural human need or desire to experience the sacred through the practice of prayer and meditation is but a sign of the working of the Divine Spirit.

Rooted in the wisdom tradition, Confucianism values the art of learning and a strong work ethic. It teaches that the maintenance of social relations among people, and, in particular, within one’s family unit is of utmost important. It emphasizes the communal aspects of our relationships. One is never the source of one’s own meaning. A person is a part of a family and larger social institutions. Confucianism teaches that we can become better people by living out our roles in life within these institutions—be it as son or daughter, father or mother, teacher or student, and other roles we assume in life. Confucianism reminds Catholics in particular that they are a part of the larger communion of saints, of which Mary is the head. While there are weaknesses in

¹⁰ Those who maintain that they have the fullness of truth and are opposed to interreligious dialogue include many Fundamentalists, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals. See Knitter (2002).

Confucianism, as in any religious or philosophical system, the deeply humanistic approach to relationship and life that comes from Confucianism is but a sign of the Divine Spirit working through it.

Daoism is not about fulfilling our role in life, however. A person is more than the roles that he or she assumes. One has to find one's own "niche" so to speak – one's "real identity," which resides deep within oneself and what one is called to do in life. This involves seeking inner-harmony through the process of *wu-wei* (not-doing) and being responsive to the natural flow of things in one's life in relation to the world. The process of discovering the Dao encoded within the ways of life itself involves getting in touch with the promptings of the Divine Spirit deep within.

As Christians learn from Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and other religions, and affirm the Divine Spirit working in and through these great religious traditions, they also have much to teach from their own tradition. For example, Catholics can talk about the importance of the Eucharist in their tradition and relate it to the meal-sharing aspect of Asian hospitality. Alternatively, they can share their sacramental and incarnational worldview and the mediational and communion principles that are uniquely put together in Catholicism. Whatever Catholics or other Christians contribute to this dialogue, they cannot avoid the fundamental Christian belief about the uniqueness of Jesus as the universal savior. This is one of the most significant aspects of Christian thought, yet it has continued to be an obstacle to authentic interreligious dialogue if presented in non-negotiable terms. Because Christology is not the focus of this paper, my comments are limited to the Vatican's proclamation of the universality of salvation in Jesus Christ and the evangelization approach taken by the Asian bishops. A special assembly of the 1998 Synod of Bishops for Asia convoked by Pope John Paul II in 1994 is a good place to start.

Dialogue as a Means of Evangelization

It is customary that about two years prior to a synod, the Vatican sends the bishops a document called a *Lineamenta*, which contains an overview of the synod's theme and topics for deliberation, as well as an invitation to the bishops to respond to the theme and the issues to be considered at the synod itself (Tan 2014, 83). The theme for the 1998 Asian Synod was "Jesus Christ the Savior, and his mission of love and service in Asia." The synodical theme and the content of the *Lineamenta* emphasized proclamation over interreligious dialogue. It wanted Asian bishops to focus on the primacy of the proclamation of Jesus Christ as the universal savior and the work of the church in continuing the evangelizing mission of Jesus Christ (General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops for the Special Assembly for Asia 1996, chapters 4 and 5) rather than interreligious dialogue engaged in by the Asian churches.

Many of the FABC bishops expressed serious concerns that the *Lineamenta* failed to understand the FABC approach to evangelization in the religiously pluralistic context of Asia. The Philippine bishops called for "toning down the emphasis placed on Jesus Christ as Savior in the *Lineamenta*, saying it does not help interfaith dialogue—even though most of the Philippine population is at least nominally Catholic" (Fox 2002, 161). Echoing their Philippine confreres, the Indonesian bishops added: "In pluri-religious societies, it is often difficult to directly and explicitly proclaim the central role of Jesus Christ in the economy of salvation. This proclamation must be adapted to concrete life conditions and to the disposition of the hearers" (Fox 162). The Japanese bishops found the *Lineamenta*'s emphasis on Jesus as universal savior too defensive. They noted: "Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life, but in Asia, before stressing that Jesus Christ is the truth, we must search much more deeply into how he is the way and the life. If we stress too much that 'Jesus Christ is the one and only Savior,' we can have no dialogue, common living or solidarity with other religions" (Fox 160-1). To be sure, the Asian bishops are not fundamentally denying the uniqueness of Jesus as the universal savior. What they oppose is the method of evangelization advocated by Rome: that the primary task of the Asian bishops is to proclaim the universality of

salvation in Jesus Christ.¹¹ They maintain that this basic strategy of evangelization, which recognizes the universality of a particular religion to the exclusion of others, did not work in Asia in the past and will not work in the present. The Asian bishops insist that they know Asian cultures, religions, and people better than their white counterparts at the Vatican, and that dialogue with other religions is the best means of effective proclamation.

Conclusion

Since the establishment of the FABC nearly half a century ago, in their deliberations and documents the Asian Bishops have imagined spirituality in Asia differently from the colonial church that previously claimed an exclusive possession of the fullness of truth and salvation. They have moved towards an increasingly inculturated church that emphasizes dialogue as the most appropriate mode of evangelization for Asia. Dialogue is the process by which the church makes contact with Asian peoples, cultures, and religious traditions. The recognition of the abiding presence of the Divine Spirit in peoples, cultures, and religions stems from the Second Vatican Council, whose goal was to bring the church “up to date” with the modern world or *aggiornamento* as Pope Saint John XXIII called it. As the Catholic Church opened its windows to let in the fresh air, so to speak, the Asian Catholic Church was gradually coming of age. No longer satisfied with the Vatican’s micro-management of the affairs of Asian churches and, in particular, its insistence of a singular approach to evangelization on the Asian continent, the FABC bishops took charge of the pastoral life and mission of the Asian Catholic Church and made interreligious dialogue an essential component of a new way of being church in Asia. The FABC has reimagined spirituality in Asia by recognizing itself as an *ecclesia discens* (a learning church) and not just an *ecclesia docens* (a teaching church). Learning about and engaging with non-Christian religions is essential and it can help Christians to better understand their own faith. This entails being able to relate the religiosity of another religion to one’s own, and, for the benefit of one’s religion and spirituality, to incorporate and bring to life the Spirit-influenced areas of the other into one’s religion. The lived experiences of Asian bishops have enabled them to recognize “the same Spirit, who has been active in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and in the Church, who was active amongst all peoples before the Incarnation and is active amongst the nations, religions and peoples of Asia today” (BIRA IV/3, art. 6, in Rosales and Arevalo 1997, 259).

The Asian bishops have grappled with how to present Jesus as the universal savior in a continent where the Divine Spirit is operative in cultures, peoples, and ancient religions. As we have seen, the claim of the pre-conciliar church of the exclusive possession of the fullness of truth and salvation is neither theologically acceptable, nor is it held by the Catholic Church today. Indeed, in the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions), when discussing non-Christian religions, the council declares that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. It has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women” (*Nostra Aetate* 2). What this means is that interreligious dialogue as a mode of evangelization is crucial, if not essential, in a part of the world where Christians comprise a tiny minority in the sea of non-Christians. While Catholics have much to teach from their tradition, spirituality is reimagined not by proclaiming the universality of salvation in Jesus Christ as the non-

¹¹ The proclamation of the universality of salvation of Jesus Christ was reiterated in *Dominus Iesus*, a declaration by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) on the “Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church” (August 6, 2000), signed by its then Prefect, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI. The document was declared to be in reaction to the alleged “relativistic” theories advanced by theologies of religious pluralism, exemplified by the works of Jacques Dupuis in particular. However, it was also directed against interreligious developments in India and, indirectly, to the approach taken by the FABC. While there were some supporters of *Dominus Iesus*, the document itself was controversial and was not well received either inside or outside the church.

negotiable truth, but by engaging in an authentic interreligious dialogue of being open to learning from “a ray of truth” found in the other religion. Only then can the church becomes a truly listening and learning church (*ecclesia discerner*)—which is absolutely essential for interreligious dialogue.

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