What Can be the Role of Christian Social Ethics in Inter-religious Development Cooperation by the Asian Churches?

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Introductory Remarks

When Pope Benedict XVI received the new Korean ambassador to the Holy See on 21 October 2010 in Rome, he said in his address that the concentration on economic growth can all too easily bypass ethical considerations, with the result that the poorer elements in society tend to be excluded from their rightful share of the nation’s prosperity. The pope added that the present financial crisis has only worsened the problem and that therefore there is a need to focus attention on the need to renew the ethical foundations of all economic and political activities. At the same time, he acknowledged that the local Church in Korea with its educational programs, its charity programs and its efforts in inter-religious dialogue helps to nurture and promote the values of solidarity and fraternity that are essential for the common good of the human community.

1. The Role of Social Engagement of Christian Churches in Asia

I would like to start my contribution by reflecting on the theological presuppositions of development work, and the need of inter-religious cooperation in this field, as has been discussed within the different study programmes of the FABC in recent years. This seems to be necessary, precisely because the activities by Christians in the fields of development, social work, education, medical care and human rights frequently have been questioned by members of other religions. In many Asian countries, these Christian initiatives are suspected to be nothing but instruments for missionary activities, aimed at the conversion of people in need and distress to Christianity. Members of other religions are reluctant to accept, that the Christians are moved solely by selfless love for their neighbours in need, when they engage in social activities, but suspect rather selfish ulterior agendas. In India, time and again, Christians are accused to make use of the precarious situation of people belonging to the Dalits or Tribals to win them over to convert and join the Christian Churches.

It is, therefore, important that Christians in Asia give account of the motivation, the method and the aims of their engagement in development work. The commitment of the Christian Churches in the fields of medical care, education, integral human development and social activities for the poor, the oppressed and other marginalized groups has been declared in many church documents to be an integral part of the mission of the Christian Churches in Asia. The significant place these social and developmental activities play in the life of Christians, however, often seems to overshadow the spiritual mission of the Asian Christian Churches and has given Christianity an image of being preferentially an institution committed to social work. “In public perception in Asia, the Church is seen as an effective organization, but is not often seen as a spiritual guide, especially on a continent where the religions and spirituality are so much a part of public life. Prejudices are very much alive in Asia. As a social institution the Church is perceived as a foreign body because of its colonial origins.”

1 Conclusions of the Theological Consultation of the FABC in Hua Hin in 1991, in: For All the Peoples of Asia, Vol I, p. 337.
Especially Hindus in India accuse the Christian Churches on account of the many activities in the fields of education, medical care and social action, aimed in the last resort to make converts, to engage purely in secular activities and to lack in spirituality\(^2\). The well-known Indian theologian Felix Wilfred has reflected on the problem of the so-called “rice Christians” from the perspective of the Dalits and the subalterns in India. The term “rice Christians” is used to describe the phenomenon, observed in many former mission countries, that people have been baptised, because they were allured by material gifts of being fed, and offered access to education or other material advantages. From the perspective of the Dalits, Felix Wilfred states that the critics are looking at the problem from a wrong angle, because they construct an opposition between the quest for food and the search for salvation and spiritual values. The desire of the Dalits, to have their fundamental human needs fulfilled, should not be equated with the greed for material goods by the rich and mighty. Looked at in a comprehensive view, the desire for bread, clothing and material security should be considered the basis for liberation and salvation without separating the material from the spiritual. Today all religious traditions are challenged to work for the good of the poor and to find new forms of cooperation for the common task to ensure life conditions which respect the dignity of all human beings.

**2. Obstacles in Inter-religious Cooperation in the Field of Development**

In the eyes of Non-Christians in Asia, as well as in Africa, Christianity has the negative image of having received a **preferential treatment by the former colonial masters** and even today to profit from the neo-colonial structures by receiving material aid from the West. The financial support the Asian Churches receive from their Western partners to finance their activities in development work, education and medicine are viewed with suspicion, because they are seen as instruments for winning converts. In his first encyclical letter “Deus Caritas Est”, Benedict XVI rejected this criticism strongly. “Charity, furthermore, cannot be used as a means of engaging in what is nowadays considered proselytism. Love is free, it is not practised as a way of achieving other ends... Those who practise charity in the Church’s name will never seek to impose the Church’s faith upon others. They realize that a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love\(^3\).”

In the last decades the growth of fundamentalist and radical currents in several religions has become an obstacle for inter-religious cooperation in Asian countries. Just to name a few countries, where the use of violence in the name of religion can be observed. In **India**, radical Hindu groups have used and are using violence against Christian institutions and persons, exemplary are the attacks against Christians in Orissa where Christians have lost their lives and property in two repeated outbursts of violence. In **Pakistan**, Christians together with the members of other religious and ethnic minorities are discriminated by the Muslim majority. Also in **Indonesia**, once famous for its religious tolerance, the number of violent attacks against Christian institutions and persons has and is still growing.

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\(^2\) A radical Hindu in India expressed this doubt clearly on the cover of his anti-Christian pamphlet. The cover of the book showed a cross. On top of the cross it was written "schools", on the left arm "hospitals", on the right "orphanages and on the bottom "social centres". In the middle of the cross was circle in which the signs for "Dollars" ($), "Pounds" and "Marks" was written. The message was obvious: Christianity operates with foreign money at its centre, thus financing its educational, medical and social activities - and that is all, there is to it.

\(^3\) Benedict XVI, Deus Caritas Est, no. 31c.
On the Christian side, there is the phenomenon of **aggressive missionary activities by fundamentalist and evangelical groups**. The behaviour of these Christian groups, coming in their majority from the USA, but in ever growing numbers also from South Korea, causes fear and is seen by the members of the Non-Christian religions as threat. These missionaries, who often have only a rudimentary theological training, defame all Non-Christian religions to propagate idolatrous and erroneous teachings. Furthermore, they refuse categorically to enter into inter-religious dialogue, because they consider this to be theologically incorrect and paralysing missionary zeal. Even if the Catholic local Churches, together with the mainstream Protestant Churches, distance themselves clearly from the proselytising activities of the fundamentalist groups, this does not prevent, that Non-Christians do not make any differences between Christian groups and hold all Christians responsible for these activities.

In the last decades we can observe that the new positive attitude regarding the other religions, which was widespread directly after Vatican II, has **lost its attractiveness** and often has been replaced by fear of the fundamentalist and radical groups in the other religions. It is obvious that genuine dialogue relies on the observation of the principle of reciprocity. It is also clear that one cannot maintain a dialogue with persons who propagate violence in the name of religion. But it is equally theologically correct that the theological new insights and attitudes regarding the salvific value, found in the other religions, which Christian theologians, not the least Asian Christian theologians, have developed in the last decades, remain valid. The insight that inter-religious dialogue is one of the central tasks of local Churches in Asia, must not be given up, because of the obstacles it faces by groups opposed to peace and harmony among the religions. Of course, in certain adverse circumstances, dialogue can become impossible. But **there is no real alternative to dialogue**, if one wants to maintain or gain harmony among peoples of different faiths.

3. Criticism of the Church’s Social Teaching in Asia

In Asia, the value and validity of the Church’s social teaching as a global directive for social work and development work applying to all situations in the world alike, is questioned. The Sri Lankan theologian, Aloysius Pieris, has made some fundamental objections against the principles guiding the Church’s work in the field of development from the point of view of the Asian Churches, which are faced by religious pluralism, cosmic religiosity and widespread poverty. Pieris criticises that the perspective of the countries in the South or Third World are not at all, or not sufficiently, taken into consideration. According to Pieris, the Social Encyclicals fail to develop a “third way” which would creatively and substantially point the way to new models of development and the social order in society.

Pieris notices that the situation for the Christian Churches in Asia is different from the West, in that these Churches live in a nearly completely Non-Christian world, where the number of Christians amounts to barely 5% of the total population, that they live in countries controlled either by atheistic Marxist regimes or by anti-theistic capitalist governments, whereas the masses are adherents of cosmic or polytheistic religions. Together with the Christians, the believers in a personal God, creator and saviour, are found in Islam and in some forms of Hinduism. The vast masses of people in Asia, however, live a cosmic religiosity – a kind of spirituality which has an ecological focus on preserving nature and which often is engaged in fights against the excesses of modern technocratic agro-business.

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Pieris names three characteristics of Christian Social Teaching:

a) The **dignity of the human person**, which in Christianity is based on the idea of man being created in the “image of God”. This idea is often not shared in Asia, e.g. not by the Buddhists. This conception of an elevated status of man has resulted in the widespread anthropocentrism in Western theological thinking. In the traditional world-view of the West, humans are entrusted with ruling and exploiting nature and all creatures, resulting in the ecological destruction we can observe today. In Asia, however, we find in the traditional world-view of Asian traditions a high regard for the integrity of nature and an understanding of humans being part of nature, not ruling and exploiting it.

b) Christian Social Teaching is based on the **principle of natural law** respectively on the principle of rationality. Contrary, we find in Asia the concept of “Dharma”, respectively. “Dao”, as the eternal laws guiding the universe and which serve as principle for the understanding of justice. In the West, the concept of the dignity of the human person has led to develop the **idea of human rights**, whereas in Asia the idea of **obligation and fulfilment of duties**, are the guiding principles for harmony in society. By the fulfilment of duties, persons attain their place in the group and society and can then can claim also certain rights. The dignity and the rights of the human person have to be merited and are not given by birth and human nature.

c) The principle of the **preference of the common good before the rights of the individual person**, advanced by Christian Social Teaching, however, is shared by the traditional Asian understanding. This understanding is at the basis of the obligation of protecting the natural resources against the exploitation by individual industrialists or capitalists.

The basic ideas and principles of Christian Social Teaching have been developed in the West and are based on Western philosophical and theological insights. In Asia, however, the view on the West is still highly influenced by the negative experiences of colonialism and imperialism. Asians, and for that matter Africans also, are still waiting for an official acknowledgment of the fault, Western missionaries committed by having entertained too close connections with colonial masters in the past. The other failure of Christian Social Teaching is, that it has not been put into the everyday practice, but that it has remained a **lofty theoretical teaching**. In this, Christian Social Teaching differs from the concept of social teaching and activity developed within the circles of Latin American, African and Asian liberation theologians. Pieris summons up his criticism, somewhat sarcastically by stating: “Catholic Social Teaching appears to be a recipe, developed in the First World, but which never has been taken seriously, against an illness, and which today has been exported to our Asian continent.”

**4. Basic Human Communities**

During the last decades, in the theological debates in the local Asian Churches, the term “**Basic Human Communities**” has been used more and more often, when the issue of inter-religious cooperation in development work was discussed. In the ecclesiological debates after Vatican II, a new form of being Church on the local level has been introduced by using the term “**Basic Christian Communities**”. Out of the experience that purely Christian groups, being small minorities in the Asian countries, are very much restricted in their capacity to do
effective integral development work by themselves, Christians in many Asian countries have decided to work together with partners from other religious communities in order to have more opportunities to combat poverty and under-development. In this connection, mention has to be made of the “Office of Human Development” (OHD) of the FABC, which has organised many seminars to coordinate the efforts of Catholic social action groups and to provide them with new insights in this field. The OHD operated on the insight, that only concerted activities together with partners of other religions can be successful, and started a new series of its seminars, called “Faith Encounters in Social Action” (FEISA). The aim of the FEISA-Seminars has been thus described: “The encounters with faithful of different religions are part of the program of the Office of Human Development of the FABC to enrich inter-religious dialogue by common social action”.

The theological guiding principle for this new inter-religious approach to social action is the insight that in the last resort everything which leads to integral human development can be considered to be “Christian”. When using these theological insights, it has to be taken into consideration that – living in an religiously pluralistic environment - activities which are serving only Christian interests will be suspected to have ulterior, namely “missionary” or “proselytising” motives. Out of these considerations the idea of “Basic Human Communities” has been developed. In Basic Human Communities people will come together in the first resort to join forces and resources in working actively for social and community development. The inter-religious aspect, that is of engaging in dialogue on faith issues, takes second place. It is also of secondary importance to which of the many faith communities the members of each Basic Human Development group belong. “The origin and aim of the activities of such communities are the liberation of marginalized groups in society. The members will discover the peculiarities and the uniqueness of every one religion in being engaged together for some period of time in a liberating practice”.

In Sri Lanka, Aloysius Pieris has been cooperating with Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Marxist members of such Basic Human Communities in connection with the Catholic Workers Movement. In working together with partners from the other religions and ideology, the Christian members learned and understood better the specificity and uniqueness of the liberating message of the Gospel, which consists in the realisation, that God in Jesus Christ has made a covenant, to defend the interests of the oppressed. In theological jargon, this is commonly called the “fundamental option for the poor”. For Christian this has the consequence that they have the duty to be open for members of other religions, and to work for changes in society and to engage in building a more human society. This commitment is an expression of a fundamental spirituality of the kingdom of God, and calls for a life-style which is free from accumulating material goods. Such a spirituality is akin to forms of spirituality in other Asian religions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, which also proclaim the renunciation of richness, and highly value forms of a life in freely chosen poverty.

Pieris mentions another important aspect for a relevant contribution of the Asian Churches in social and societal problems in Asia, which he maintains, can only be achieved, if the Asian local Churches are capable to give answers to the cosmic religiosity of the poor in Asia, or continue, as in the past, to seek exclusively only the contact with the members of the meta-cosmic religions. In Indian mission history, in the case of Roberto Nobili, and later in China in the case of Matteo Ricci, the often praised missionary method of accommodation, suffered from the deficiency that the reference point was the high culture of the elitist groups in Indian and Chinese societies, not considering the lives of the lower sections in society, but trying to

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3 Cf. Aloysius Pieris, op.cit.
convert “from the bottom down”. In similar fashion, the first Indian theologians, e.g. D.S. Amalorpavadass in the National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre in Bangalore, tried to inculcate Christianity into Indian cultural and religious traditions, by orientating themselves on the high culture of Brahmanic tradition in Hinduism.

The danger in this approach is, that the Asian Churches find it easier to engage in development programs and other charity activities, which avoid working directly with the poor, but try to better the lives of the poor “from above” and thus keeping them in a dependent situation and not empowering them to begin acting by themselves for themselves (help for self-help).

Also within the FABC, the demand for building up Human Basic Communities was positively addressed, sometimes a bit diluted, when the term “Neighbourhood Communities” was used. In the colloquium “The Church in Asia in the 21st Century”, held in Bangkok in 1997, one of the passed recommendations reads: “Efforts should be made to promote the formation of inter-religious ‘neighbour communities’ in which individuals and families of a locality experience genuine support, concern and acceptance”.

In similar fashion, the Office of Human Development (OHD) recommends inter-religious dialogue and inter-cultural solidarity: “It is a good sign that a great number of people and religious leaders feel the need of inter-religious cooperation and dialogue to promote peace and harmony among the people. Inter-religious dialogue, inter-cultural solidarity at all levels would certainly strengthen the efforts taken to promote the human rights of all peoples, regardless of caste, colour and religion.” This appeal is reiterated: “In the continent of cultural and religious pluralism, building inter-cultural and inter-religious communication and solidarity including inter-ecclesial communion and cooperation as the way of being church is imperative for the work of effective advocacy.”

In the conference “Asian Integral Pastoral Approach” (ASIPA), held in Hong Kong in October 2000, we find a short reference to Basic Human Communities: “We have experienced that Small Christian Communities have become an effective means for proclamation through dialogue of life. In this context they explore the possibility of building human communities. Thereby they pave the way for incarnation of the Church in the cultural milieu of the place, making it ever more relevant to the changing circumstances. Transformation of all the intricate systems and structures of the world by bringing them under purview of the Kingdom also is made possible.”

Again in the Formation Institute for Inter-Religious Affairs, help in Ipoh, Malaysia in 1998, it is said: “To promote inter-religious dialogue on the local level, we encourage the forming of Basic Human Communities, composed of the adherents of various faith traditions which have a common concern and goal of living together in brotherhood and which work together to promote peace through dialogue.”

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6 For All the Peoples in Asia, Volume 3, p.45
7 Seminar of the OHD „The Prophetic Path To The New Millennium Through Social Advocacy, Pattaya, September 2000, For All the Peoples in Asia, Volume 3, p. 50.
8 For All the Peoples in Asia, Volume 3, p.53.
9 For All the Peoples in Asia, Volume 3, p.109.
10 For All the Peoples in Asia, Volume 3, p. 123.
5. Cosmic Religiosity – a Resource of a pan-Asian spirituality?

In the first years after Vatican II, the initiatives in inter-religious dialogue and in the theological work of inculturation were nearly exclusively directed to the adherents of the “great” Asian religions – Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam. Only later some theologians, among them Aloysius Pieris, Stephen Fuchs, and Jojo Fung, pointed out the rich potential of the religious traditions of the tribal populations in Asia. After all the traditions of the cosmic religiosity are determining the life of the great majority of the peoples in Asia, especially that of the indigenous tribal ethnic groups.

Within the FABC too, the topic of indigenous and cosmic spiritualities has been taken up. In a seminar “Christian Humanism within the Mosaic of Asian Cultures”, held in Samphran in 1999, it is stated: “The Church takes cognition of the spiritual potential and cultural values present in indigenous religions. Among these values deserving special mention are the spirit of communion with God and nature, simplicity and openness to the Gospel. The Church is called to promote and purify when necessary the cultural values of indigenous peoples”11.

A few years later, in 2001, the FABC held a consultation on “Indigenous Tribal Peoples in Asia and the Challenges of the Future” in Pattaya. Again the values contained in the traditions of the tribal and indigenous peoples are acknowledged. The obligation of the Church is stressed to engage in the preservation of these cultural and religious traditions found in the indigenous tribal peoples in Asia. Problematic, however, is the position that the best way to ensure the preservation of these traditions is evangelisation. The role of the Church is described in somewhat paternalistic terms: “The Church’s concern for indigenous and tribal peoples must extend to all aspects of their lives. It includes the struggle against oppression and support for the just causes of the people. It means devising and carrying out educational programs which respond to the real needs, programs which not only enable new generations to improve their economic and social status, but also to work for sustainable development and to enter into the fields where they will be able to defend and advance the causes of their people. Education is the key to well-being and the solution to the many problems that afflict indigenous and tribal peoples”12.

Till today, we can find only relatively few examples of successful cooperation of Asian Christians with members of other religions in combating social injustice and working for an integral human development. There is an urgent need, however, that members of different religious – and for that matter also ideological – groups start fighting the glaring unjust structures of the caste system, bounded labour, the oppression of women and the other discriminations. Aloysius Pieris points out that the task of the Asian Churches and theologians cannot consist in adding a missing biblical perspective and thus accommodate the Social Doctrine, coming from Rome, to the context of the local Asian Churches. The task is rather, to take care that the Social Doctrine, developed within the Basic Human Communities, reaches the masses and to initiate a process that this social doctrine in a process of critical reception develops into a Pan-Asian vision of a more just and human society13.

Cooperation of Christians with members of other religions, often is suspected to degenerate into a non-permissible syncretism and to create a hotchpotch of many different religious traditions. But the fears and suspicion by traditional groups and sometimes the Church’s magisterium are unfounded in the case of the Basic Human Communities. In these

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11 For All the Peoples in Asia, Volume 3, p. 29.
12 For All the Peoples in Asia, Volume 3, p.228-229.
communities we find rather a **healthy symbiosis of different religious traditions**. The common challenge to work together for development and liberation of the poor and oppressed, each tradition is called to draw on its own resources and detect again or for the first time the **liberative potential** contained in them. Thus every religion is profiting in describing its own specific tradition and to learn and become enriched by the contributions coming from the other religions.

6. Christian Social Work an Inspiration for Hinduism and Buddhism?

In the encyclical letter “Deus Caritas est”, Benedict XVI makes reference to the outstanding charity work of the first Christians which impressed Roman society at the time and which prompted the renegade Emperor Julian to make use of this example in his efforts to revive the dying pagan Roman cults. What has been valid for the early Christians, is all the more valid for the many and varied social activities in the Christian Churches in Asia. It is an established fact that the Christian engagement in the fields of social work, health care and societal development has **initiated corresponding developments within Hinduism and Buddhism** which without the Christian example would not have happened or not happened the way they did. In the past, the doctrine of Karma prevented Hindus to care for the poor, the sick and other people in need. After all, the precarious situation of these people was considered to be the consequence of their actions in this or former lives. To render help to these people, therefore, was considered to be inappropriate, because it would hinder them in atoning for their former faults and thus not improving their Karma. This, after all, was the understanding of Mahatma Gandhi who called the Dalits euphemistically the “children of God” (harijan) to indicate his conviction that that these people should accept the miserable situation they were in as a chance of reaching a better Karma. The **reform movement in Hinduism** such as the Brahmo Samaj took another stance and engaged in development and social work. In doing so, they claimed to have rediscovered in ancient Hindu traditions examples and doctrines supporting their reformist position. When observers dared to suggest that the inspiration for this new position really was prompted by the example of Christian charity work, they reacted angrily and denied such an influence.

In Buddhism in South East Asia, too, we can observe new forms of social activities. In 1989 the movement **“International Network of Engaged Buddhists”** was founded. This group consists of Buddhist individuals who are working for human rights work, for the emancipation of women, for peace education, for development projects, and for preservation of nature. The most influential initiator of this movement is Sulak Sivaraksa, a former monk, journalist and socio-political activist. Besides being trained in Buddhist traditions, Sulak Sivaraksa was educated in Thailand and in the UK in Christian institutions which have influenced his way of thinking and acting in many aspects. As he has written himself, he was especially impressed by the American Trappist monk Thomas Merton who had succeeded to combine meditation with social commitment in an exemplary fashion. Sulak wrote: “A Buddhist can only reflect on Christianity from a Buddhist perspective. He can do no more. If a Buddhist understands that the Christian love of God makes him love his neighbours, his submission to God makes him selfless and compassionate to all beings – human or otherwise.

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14 “The reform of paganism attempted by the emperor Julian, the Apostate is only an initial example of …how the power of Christianity spread well beyond the frontiers of the Christian Faith”, Deus Caritas Est, no. 31.
In his encounters with Christianity, he sees the cross as a sign that will strengthen him to share suffering not only with his Christian friends but also with all God’s creatures.\

Buddhists and Christians. both are united in the search for liberation of all the powers that endanger humans in the full development of their humanity and which are an obstacle that people reach fulfilment, be it called Nirvana or the Kingdom of God. But this goal can only be achieved when people can enjoy psychic, social, emotional and intellectual freedom. In the practical realm of social action, we can observe that Buddhists are influenced by Christian examples. In Sri Lanka Buddhists have been inspired by Christian examples, even if Buddhists are reluctant to admit this Christian influence, to engage in social activities, a change from the traditional way of “fleeing the world” by becoming monks. Today Buddhists lay people have started reform movements in development work, social action and medical care. In some of these groups Buddhist monks are in the leadership.

7. Inter-Religious Cooperation within the FABC

In several of the Bishops’ Institutes for Social Action (BISA) reference is made to cooperation of Christian in Asia with members of the other faiths in a general way. As early as 1983 we read in the final declaration of BISA VI in Kandy: “In Asia, where Christians are an insignificant minority in terms of numbers, compared with the masses in the non-Christian religions, the dialogue of life with the poor is paralleled with a dialogue of life with members of non-Christian religions. This dialogue studies the positive elements in thee religions in order to make all people, both Christians and non-Christians, respond together to the poor, irrespective of caste or creed.\

The Asian bishops and theologians have studied the significance of Asia’s religio-cultural heritage for human development, and pointed out the close connection between poverty and religiosity in Asia: “In our Asian continent, which is the cradle for all the great world religions, culture and religion are integrated. Religion is the dynamic element of culture. Together they form the religio-cultural system which interacts with the socio-economic political system of society, permeating every sphere of human life. In Asia, poverty is not a purely economic concept, neither is its religiosity merely cultural. Poverty and religiosity are interwoven in the Asian ethos.” The growing cooperation of Christians and non-Christians in the Asian Churches is viewed by the bishops as a positive sign and as first step to overcome the hitherto valid tendency among the religions to uphold the status quo by opening themselves changes in the political, economic and social spheres in society.

In 1997 the Asian bishops reiterate the need of Christians working together with the members of non-Christian religions: “With the exception of the Philippines, the Church is a minority all over Asia. Hence, we feel the need to join with our brothers and sisters of other faiths in dialogue in all its forms. Sharing a common humanity with them, we can practice the dialogue of the heart, which is the basis for the dialogue of living and acting together for human rights and social change.”

In another seminar in the BILA-series that was dealing with the situation of women in Asian societies, the bishops stated in the final declaration that the manifold forms of discrimination of women often are legitimised by religious traditions. “Female foeticide and infanticide,

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16 For All the Peoples of Asia, Volume I, p. 225.
18 Final Declaration of the First Bishops’ Institute for Lay Apostolate (BILA I), held in Tagaytay in 1997, in: For All the Peoples of Asia, Volume III, p. 69.
dowry deaths, and discriminatory practices against female children as well as against widows, divorced and abandoned women are widespread in some parts of Asia. In almost all the countries women are discriminated against because of their gender. Sadly, this is often legitimised by religio-cultural practices.  

In other seminars too, the FABC continues the same ideas, e.g. in the Fourth Formation Institute for Inter-Religious Affairs (FIRA IV), held in Pattaya in 2001. In the final declaration we read: “In Asia, inter-religious dialogue cannot be separated from inter-cultural dialogue and solidarity with the poor and oppressed. In the dialogue of culture, Christians engage in a critical but constructive involvement with the cultural heritage of their regions and nations and in doing so discover truly Asian ways in which to express Christian faith and live according to its precepts. Out of this inter-cultural dialogue, new Asian theologies and liturgies are emerging which seek simultaneously to remain faithful to Scripture and the Christian tradition and to integrate all that is good and holy in the life and culture of the people. In dialogue with those who are suffering and marginalized, Christians learn to support their just causes and to take part in joint projects to promote an authentic human liberation. In this way, dialogue avoids being an intellectual exercise for the elite and becomes an instrument for building justice and harmony in Asian societies. Where possible, Basic Human Communities should be formed in which believers of various religions contribute to the common good according to the ideals and insights that arise from their religious commitments.”

8. The Seminars: “Working Together for Harmony in God’s World

The series of seminars with the overall theme of “Working Together for Harmony in God’s World” (BIRA V) were organised by the Office for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs (OEIA) between 1992-1996. Each seminar was dealing with one of the major Asian religions, with Muslims (Pakistan 1992), with Buddhists (Thailand 1994), with Hindus (Delhi 1995), and with Daoists and Confucianists (Taiwan 1996).

In the dialogue with Muslims the difficulty was to find a common terminology to describe the way inter-religious cooperation between Christians and Muslims could be realised. In the final declaration it is said: “Love and submission to God will help in building of God’s kingdom on earth. Our concerns for the poor, the oppressed and the weak will not be done in a spirit of condescension, but with genuine love which is the expression of our experience of the love of God in our lives. Consequently, we pledge to discern together the fundamentals of our traditions. The many obstacles that come in our way, we will try jointly to remove.”

The last sentence points to the obstacles which often hinder Christian-Muslim cooperation, which sadly to say, have not been diminished but grown due to the worsening of the relationship between Christians and Muslims e.g. in Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia.

The final declaration of the meeting between Buddhists and Christians in Thailand in 1994 describes the communalities in the understanding of the central concept of harmony: “We, Buddhists and Christians, agree in our concern for the suffering and oppression of people in the world. We agree that religion must focus on personal and social transformation in this world leading to universal harmony. We agree that some of the causes of disharmony are ignorance, egoism, and attachment shown in sinful behaviour. We agree that the remedy lies in promoting personal conversion and awareness, ethical behaviour and social action. We

20 FIRA IV, III, p. 140-141.
21 BIRA V/1, For All the Peoples of Asia, Volume 2, p. 146.
agree that we can engage in this common service of kind compassion together. We agree that in order to be together at the service of harmony in the world we must promote harmony among ourselves through authentic dialogue and mutual respect. In the practical recommendations it is stressed that Buddhists and Christians should work together with all people of good will in promoting justice and freedom, peace and harmony among people, upholding their rights, especially of the poor and oppressed, with the particular attention to women and children and the environment, not hesitating to condemn injustice wherever it is done. Furthermore, the differences between the two religious traditions are acknowledged: “While we find motivation and inspiration for our commitment, each in his or her religion, we will have to develop a common language that will facilitate a shared understanding of problems and the commitment to solving them.”

The meeting between Hindus and Christians in New Delhi in 1995 dealt intensively with the understanding of harmony in both traditions. When formulating the possibilities of joint action the final declaration fails to describe concrete common goals and ways of action. It simply states: “Hindus and Christians should collaborate in areas of spiritual guidance, counselling programs, literacy campaigns, conscientisation on justice issues, defence of human rights, promotion of peace in conflictual situations, protection of the environment and promotion of women and the girl child.”

The result of the meeting between Daoists, Confucianists and Christians in Taiwan in 1998 is summed up in a description of the common understanding of harmony. It closes with a quotation from the Dao-De-Jing: “I have just three things to teach: simplicity, patience, compassion. These three are your greatest treasures. Simple in actions and in thoughts, you return to the source of being. Patient with both friends and enemies, in accord with the way things are. Compassionate toward yourself, you bring all beings in the world into harmony.”

In the concluding seminar held in Indonesia in 1996 most participants in the previous seminars came together to analyse the results of the preceding seminars. There was agreement that the results of the conferences had to be concretised in order to become effective.

9. Evaluating the Program of Inter-Religious Cooperation within the FABC

In a sober assessment one has to admit that weak point of the many seminars of the FABC in the fields of inter-religious dialogue and inter-religious cooperation lies in the fact that the results do not reach the faithful at the grassroots. We read in a document of a seminar in Malaysia in 2000: “We reflected on the apparent ambiguities between the Church’s call for dialogue and the actual practice of dialogue. It is as if inter-religious dialogue is happening more on paper and documents than in practice involving Christians at the grassroots. While we appreciate the values and ideas promoted by some of these Church documents, we feel that they are often written in theological language inaccessible to the laity. Moreover, many of our Christians are from the lower echelons of society and are illiterate, and so have practically no access to these Church documents.” Consequently the demand is made: “We are convinced that inter-religious dialogue will be more fruitful if we move away from theological issues which divide and focus on commonalities which unite. In particular we

22 BIRA V/2, For All the Peoples of Asia, Volume 2, 152.
23 BIRA V/2, For All the Peoples of Asia, Volume 2, 153.
24 BIRA V/2, For All the Peoples of Asia, Volume 2, 153.
25 BIRA V/3, For All the Peoples of Asia, Volume 2, 157-8.
26 BIRA V/4, For All the Peoples of Asia, Volume 2, 165.
27 FIRA III, For All the Peoples of Asia, Volume 3, 136
believe that inter-religious dialogue ought to focus on issues of social justice and the option for the poor, oppressed and the marginalized. It is in this context that we advocate a “secular” approach which takes as its basis the human person, irrespective of her/his religious affiliation28.

Appendix: Areas of Inter-Religious Cooperation in Asia

Preliminary Remark

The Asian bishops have declared that cooperation of Christians with members of the other faiths is a duty and at the same time an opportunity for the Christians to become acknowledged as belonging to Asia and no longer to be considered foreign implants.

“A Church that stands with sisters and brothers of other faiths in confronting issues of life and death will necessarily be transformed in the process. In other words, it will become inculturated – at a level with includes but goes deeper than changes in ritual and symbol. Such a Church may at last become a Church of Asia not simply a Church in Asia. It may then no longer be perceived an alien presence29.”

Areas of Inter-Religious Cooperation

1. Cooperation in the case of natural catastrophes, such as earth-quakes, tsunami, etc.
2. Assistance for migrants and refugees, e.g. Cambodia, Vietnam and other.
3. Inter-religious cooperation in the fight against the HIV/AIDS Pandemie e.g. in Thailand
4. Inter-religious cooperation against discrimination and violence
   - In the Philippines: Bishops’- Ulema-Forum, Silsilah Movement in Zamboanga.
   - Malaysia: Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism
   - India: Cooperation between Christians, Hindus and Muslims in Rajasthan for the defence of human rights.
      In Madhya Pradesh the National Secular Forum (Rashtriya Secular Munch) was formed from members of different social groups to defend the rights of the minorities in 2006.
   - Indonesia: Peace-Building Courses were held for young Christians and Muslims from the problem areas of Sulawesi and the Moluccas in Bali in 2006.
   - Philippines: Seminar “Cebu Dialogue on Regional Interfaith Cooperation for Peace, Development and Human Dignity” with Christian, Buddhist, Muslim and Hind participants was held in Lapu-Lapu City in 2006.
5. Inter-religious Cooperation in human rights issues e.g. in Thailand, Bangladesh and other Asian countries.
6. Inter-religious Cooperation in the field of international tourism e.g. ECPAT (End Child Prostitution/Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes).

28 FIRA III, For All the Peoples of Asia, Volume 3, 137.
29 BIRA IV, For All the Peoples of Asia, Volume 1, 333.