

## Toward a New Ecumenical Paradigm of Doing Theology in Dialogue with Other Faiths in God's Oikos in Asia

—Peter C. Phan

This essay originated as my keynote given at the eighth meeting of the Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS) held in Kochi, Kerala, India, April 18-22, 2016 under the sponsorship of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA). The overall theme of the conference is: “Doing Asian Theologies in the Context of God’s *Oikos*.” The topic which Dr. Matthews George Chunakara, General Secretary of CCA, assigned for my lecture is well expressed in its title: “Toward a New Ecumenical Paradigm of Doing Theology in Dialogue with Other Faiths.” First, note that the focus of the lecture is “doing theology,” and not some other tasks, such as peace-building and stewardship of creation, or other topics under discussion during the conference. This focus on theological methodology, albeit theoretical, is highly appropriate since the lecture is addressed to CATS, which is an association of theologians. Secondly, the title of the lecture promotes a way for doing theology in Asia, namely, “in dialogue with other faiths.” There are of course legitimate ways of doing theology apart from, and without any concern for interreligious dialogue. However, they are apparently deemed not appropriate for Asia, the land of religious pluralism *par excellence*. Thirdly, doing theology in dialogue with other faiths in Asia is said to call for a new paradigm, which is broadly characterized as “ecumenical.” Linking these three points together, the issue under consideration may be phrased in three questions: (1) Is there anything peculiar to Asia that makes interreligious dialogue an intrinsic dimension of doing theology? (2) If yes, why should such Asian theology be done ecumenically? and (3) How can this ecumenically-based interreligious theology be done? To help answer these questions I begin with a description of Asia and Asian Christianity in order to show why doing theology today in Asia as God’s *oikos* demands dialogue with other faiths. Second, I explore the connections between ways of doing Christian missions and doing theology in the mode of dialogue with people of other faiths. Third, I propose a model for doing theology ecumenically and interreligiously.

### God’s *Oikos* in Asia and the Need for Dialogue between Christians and Peoples of Other Faiths

The Greek *oikos* can mean: (1) a physical house or any part thereof; (2) household affairs or goods or property; and (3) family or members of the household. Asia, viewed as God’s *oikos*, can, I suggest, be described along all three of these meanings. I will argue that corresponding to the three meanings of *oikos*, Asia, first as the geographical abode of God’s peoples, secondly as the locus of Asian cultures and religions, and thirdly as a family of Asian peoples under God’s call and care, points to the need for a Christian theology done in dialogue with people of other faiths in an ecumenical way. Many Asian theologians have argued that the church



in Asia must be not simply *in* but *of* Asia, that is, a fully and wholly inculturated church. Thus the context is not merely the location in which the church exists; rather it determines the church's self-understanding and its mode of being and acting. Consequently, to understand how theology should be done in Asia requires a knowledge of the contexts in which the church exists and to whose challenges the church seeks to respond theologically and pastorally.

### *Asia as Continent*

With regard to Asia as a whole, several features should be kept in mind, and it will be clear that its extreme diversities make it a near-impossibility to refer to anything—Christianity included—as “Asian.” First, there is the immense geography and population. In the first meaning of *oikos*, that is, as a geographical abode of God's family, Asia is Earth's largest landmass, about 31,804,000 sq. km; stretching from the cluster of the former Soviet satellite states in the west to Japan in the east, and from Mongolia in the north to East Timor in the south and the Pacific Islands in the southeast. Conventionally, Asia is divided into Western Asia (the Middle East), Northcentral Asia, Southcentral Asia, Northeast Asia, and Southeast Asia. Asia is also the most populated continent, with a population of 4,166,308,000 in 2010, nearly two-thirds of the world's seven-billion population, with China and India together making up a total of two and half billion. Today, roughly 60 out of 100 humans are Asians.

Second is overwhelming poverty. Despite the presence of some economically developed countries such as Japan and the so-called Four Asian Tigers (Hong Kong, Singapore, Republic of Korea/South Korea, and Taiwan), and despite the dramatic rise of China and India as global economic powers, Asia still remains mired in widespread poverty, with some of the poorest countries on Earth (e.g., North Korea, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar/Burma, and Bangladesh).

Third is systemic oppression. There are various forms of oppression and marginalization; for example, those based on class (the caste system), ethnicity (against the tribals and the adivasis), gender (violence against women and sex trafficking), religion (persecution of various religious groups), and destruction of the environment.

Fourth is political heterogeneity. In addition to having the largest democratic country, namely, India, Asia also features three remaining Communist countries of the world, namely, China, Vietnam, and Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), and several countries struggling to transition from military dictatorship or single-party state to democratic forms of government and from a socialist economy to a market economy.

Fifth is cultural diversity. Though South Asia, Northeast Asia, and Southeast Asia are dominated by the Indic and the Sinic cultures, and West and Central Asia by the Arabic-Islamic culture, in the second meaning of *oikos*, that is, household goods, Asia is a tapestry of extremely diverse cultures and civilizations, often within the same country. For instance, ethnically and culturally, India and China are teeming with astonishing diversity, and more than a hundred languages are spoken in the Philippines and seven hundred in Indonesia.

Sixth is religious pluralism. In the third sense of *oikos*, that is, spiritual family, Asia is the cradle of all world religions. Besides Christianity, other Asian religions include Bahá'í, Bön, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Shinto, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism, as well as innumerable tribal and primal religions.



We must keep in mind these mind-boggling diversities of God's *oikos* in Asia—geographic, linguistic, ethnic, economic, political, cultural, and religious—when broaching the theme of doing theology in Asia. Indeed, even if it is legitimate to use the umbrella term “Asian” to refer to the theology that is done in Asia, given the six common features mentioned above, we must remember that the theology done in Southcentral Asia is quite different from that done in Northeast Asia, let alone that done in Western Asia (the Middle East). Furthermore, even within one region of Asia, for example, Northeast Asia, the theology that is done in Japan is very different from that done in Korea. Thus, theology is inescapably contextual and local.

### *Asian Christianities*

With regard to Asian Christianity, several features should be kept in mind.<sup>1</sup> First, there are its ancient historical roots. Christianity itself is an Asian religion since it was born in Palestine, part of West Asia or the Middle East. Furthermore, though West Asia is now dominated by Islam, it was the first and main home of Christianity until the Arab conquest in the seventh century. The conventional narrative of Christianity as a Western religion, that is, one that originated in Palestine but soon moved westward, with Rome as its final destination, and from Rome as its epicenter, spread worldwide, belies the fact that in the first four centuries of Christianity, the most active and successful centers of mission were not in Europe but Asia and Africa, with Syria as the center of gravity. But even Asian Christians outside West Asia can rightly boast an ancient and glorious heritage, one that is likely as old as the apostolic age. For instance, Indian Christianity, with the Saint Thomas Christians, can claim apostolic origins, with St. Thomas and/or St. Bartholomew as its founder(s). Chinese Christianity was born in the seventh century, with the arrival of the East Syrian (misnamed “Nestorian”) monk Alopen during the T’ang dynasty. Christianity arrived in other countries such as the Philippines, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos as early as the 16th century.

Second, there is colonial heritage. One of the bitter ironies of Asian Christianity is that though born in Asia, it returned to its birthplace only to be regarded by many Asians as a Western religion imported to Asia by Portuguese and Spanish colonialists in the 16th century, and later by other European countries such as Britain, France, Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, and lastly by the United States.

Third, it is important to remember Christianity is a numerical minority. In Asia, Christians predominate in only two countries, namely, the Philippines and the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (East Timor), but Christianity remains a minority religion in Asia, amounting to some 8.5 per cent of the general population in 2010.<sup>2</sup> This fact raises extremely complicated questions about Christian missions, especially with regard to their purposes and methods, since, in terms of conversion and membership, they seem to be a monumental failure after two thousand years of evangelization.

Fourth, we have ecclesial diversity. Asia is the home of many different Christian ecclesiastical traditions, rites, and denominations, so that it is more accurate to use “Christianities” (in the plural) to describe them. In 2010, Christian churches and traditions were distributed in Asia as follows: Anglican (864,000), Catholic (138,702,000), Independent (142,737,000), Marginal (3,159,000), Orthodox (15,787,000), and Protestant (87,279,000).

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1 For an introduction to contemporary Asian Christianity, see Peter C. Phan, ed., *Christianities in Asia* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011). For a history of Asian Christianity, see Samuel H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 1, *Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992) and *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 2, *1500–1900* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005).

2 All the statistics on Asian Christianity are taken from Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross, eds., *Atlas of Global Christianity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009). Another excellent source of information is Patrick Johnstone, *The Future of the Global Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2014).

Fifth, within ecclesial diversity, there is the rapidly growing presence of Evangelicals and Pentecostals in Asia. The Evangelical churches have their roots in the Puritan movement and the Wesleyan revival in the English-speaking world as well as in the Pietistic movement in continental Europe. Evangelicals emphasize personal conversion, disciplined piety, care for the poor and the disenfranchised, flexibility in church organization, and evangelism. Given their little interest in distinct denominational church structures, Evangelicals tend to be interdenominational, especially in their missionary societies or “faith missions,” such as the China Inland Mission (now Overseas Missionary Fellowship), Worldwide Evangelization Crusade (now WEC International), and the Christian and Missionary Alliance. Worldwide, Evangelicals work together through the World Evangelical Alliance and foster evangelism through many congresses (especially the 1974 Lausanne Congress) and the translation of the Bible (the United Bible Societies). In 1910 there were in Asia 1,465,000 Evangelicals; in 2010, 40,140,000. Pentecostalism, as the name implies, emphasize the gifts (*charismata*) of the Holy Spirit. As an American movement, it began in the early 1900s with the Azusa Street Revival in downtown Los Angeles (1906-1909), led by the African American preacher William Seymore. However, it also had roots in Asia, especially in the Mukti Mission near Pune (1905-1907), under the direction of the Brahmin Christian woman Pandita Ramabai; the revival in the Khassi Hills in Northeast India in 1905; the Korean revivals in 1903 and 1907; and the Manchurian revival in 1910. Pentecostalism was later spread in China and throughout Southeast Asia from 1927 to 1940 by the charismatic healing evangelism of John Sung, and from the 1930s to the 1960s by the Hong Kong actress Kong Duen Yee (Mui Yee). In the Indonesian island of (west) Timor a revival started in a congregation of the Gereja Masehi Injili di Timor (Evangelical Christian Church in Timor) in 1965. In the Philippines in 1978 Eddie Villanueva founded the Jesus Is Lord Church, an independent Filipino Pentecostal Church. There too, in 1962, Butch Conde founded the Bread of Life; and among Catholics, Mariano (“Mike”) Verlande led the El Shaddai, a Charismatic Catholic group. In 1910 there were in Asia 5,800 Pentecostals (or Renewalists); in 2010, 179,624,000.

Sixth, again under the rubric of ecclesial diversity, we must consider the explosive and mind-boggling growth of Independent and Marginal Christians. By “Independent Christians” is meant Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions, namely, Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant, and are institutionally independent of them. In 2010, worldwide the number of Independents had grown to over 369 million. Largely the result of indigenous initiative, Independents have spread to every continent, region and country in the world. In 1910 there were 2,301,000 Independents in Asia; a hundred years later, in 2010, there were 142,737,000.

Of special interest is China whose number of Independents surpasses the number of Christians in the USA, 85 million compared to 72.7 million. Since the middle of the twentieth century, millions of Chinese Christians have opted to worship outside the government-sanctioned Protestant and Catholic churches, in the so-called house churches. An extremely significant phenomenon has been taking place, namely, the rise of Independent Chinese Christianity, without any foreign leadership whatsoever, though their founders were influenced to varying degrees by foreign missionaries. These include, with the names of their founders in parentheses: The True Jesus Church (Wei Enbo, 1876-1916), the Jesus Family (Jing Dianying, 1890-1957), and the Christian Assembly, commonly known as the Little Flock (Ni Tuoshen Watchman Nee, 1903-1972).

In addition to these Independent churches, there were indigenous Pentecostal-like and Charismatic movements such as the Spiritual Gifts Society (*Ling'en hui*) in Feixian (Southern Shandong), the “Shandong Revival” (started by the freelance Norwegian missionary Marie Monsen), the Christian Tabernacle (*Jitudu Huitang*), initiated by the conservative Wang Mingdao (1900-1991), and the Bethel Worldwide Evangelistic Band, founded by the revivalist preacher John Sung (Song Shangjie, 1901-1944). These Independent churches, with



emphasis on speaking in tongues, prophesying, miraculous healing, emotional worship, and apocalyptic expectation, also engaged in enthusiastic evangelization, especially of the western parts of China, with their “Chinese Back-to-Jerusalem Evangelistic Band,” dedicated to evangelizing the vast reaches of Xinjiang and the far west.<sup>3</sup>

“Marginal Christians” refer to those who claim to be Christian but do not hold the basic Christian beliefs regarding Jesus Christ and the Trinity. Over 85% of Marginal Christians belong to just two traditions, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Latter-day Saints (the Mormons), both of which originated in the USA in the nineteenth century and are aggressively missionary. Worldwide in 2010 there were 34,912,000 Marginals. In Asia, in 1910 there were 290 Marginals; in 2010 there were 3,159,000. The major Asian-originated Marginal churches include the Unification Church in Korea (also known as the Moonies, with 900,000 members) and the Iglesia ni Cristo in the Philippines.

Again, China is a very interesting case. A large number of groups of Marginal Christians has sprung up in China. These movements, with colorful and biblical-sounding names, can pop up anywhere with charismatic founders, quickly attract a large following, and are not officially registered. These include the Local Church (also known as the Shouters), the Established King Sect, the Lightning from the East, the Lord God Sect, the All Scope Church, the South China Church, the Disciples Sect (also known the Narrow Gate in the Wilderness), the Three Ranks of Servants, the Cold Water Sect, the Commune Sect, the New Testament Church (also known as the Apostolic Faith Sect), the Resurrection Sect, the Dami Evangelization Association, and the World Elijah Evangelism Association.<sup>4</sup> The Chinese government criminalizes these as “evil cults” and arrests, fines, and imprisons their leaders and followers, especially those of the Local Church and its offshoot, the Lightning from the East. Ostensible reasons for this suppression are their heterodox beliefs (end-time predictions and deification of leaders), superstitious practices (derived from folk religion and Pentecostal healing practices) and threat to public order (large-scale activities and meetings), but their large size, rapid growth, and avoidance of government control also play a key role. The above-mentioned house churches assiduously distinguish themselves from these groups, which they themselves condemn as heretical, partly because they do not want to be lumped with them as “evil cults,” a deadly legal categorization, and partly because these groups try to recruit members from them.

Seventh, and lastly, extensive migration, a phenomenon that has transformed the face of Asian Christianity must be considered. According to one statistical report in 2013, 232 million people—3.2 per cent of the world’s population—lived outside their countries of origin. It is predicted that the immigration rate will continue to increase over time. A 2012 Gallup survey determined that nearly 640 million adults would want to immigrate if they had the opportunity to do so.<sup>5</sup> Global population movements today are so immense that our time has been dubbed “The Age of Migration.”<sup>6</sup> In 2010 Asia hosted some 27.5 million immigrants. India had 9 million emigrants, Bangladesh 7 million, and China 6 million. Pakistan, the Philippines, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Indonesia, South Korea, and Nepal were also important countries of emigration. Top Asian

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3 For an informative account of Independent and Marginal Protestants in China, see Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

4 See Fenggeng Yang, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

5 “Dimensionalizing Immigration: Numbers of Immigrants around the World.” Boundless Economics. Boundless, Jul 21, 2015, accessed Oct 08, 2015, <https://www.boundless.com/economics/textbooks/boundless-economics-textbook/immigration-economics-38/introduction-to-immigration-economics-138/dimensionalizing-immigration-numbers-of-immigrants-around-the-world-544-12641/>. There are legions of websites dedicated to the study of migration.

6 The best one-volume study of international migration is by Stephen Castles, Hein De Haas, and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 5th ed. (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2014).

countries of destination include India (6 million), Pakistan (3 million), Hong Kong (2.5 million), Japan (2.1 million) Malaysia (2 million), South Korea (1 million), Iran (2 million), and Saudi Arabia (2 million).<sup>7</sup> Asian migration is fueled mainly by the search for jobs through labor contracts (especially to the Middle East). The majority of migrants are women (the “feminization of migration”) whose typical jobs include domestic work, entertainment (a euphemism for sex industry), restaurant and hotel service, and mail-order marriage. That migrants, and especially refugees, face a host of enormous problems of various kinds needs no elaboration.

What has not been sufficiently studied is the religious life of migrants, especially of Christians in Christian-minority countries, especially those of the Middle East. One of the best-kept secrets about Asian Christianity is that migration, national and international in scope, forced and voluntary in nature, economic and political in intent, have changed the faces of many Asian churches. Thanks to the ground-breaking research of scholars such as Kanan Kitani and Gemma Cruz, a fuller picture of contemporary Asian Christianity has emerged in which migration has played a key role in reshaping the membership and organization of the local churches and producing difficult pastoral and spiritual challenges for the churches.<sup>8</sup> Such is, in a thumbnail sketch, God’s *oikos* in Asia, painted on two broad canvasses, namely: the continent of Asia with its unique socio-political, economic, cultural, and religious realities; and Christianity as an ancient yet still minority religion, with its colonial heritage, an extremely diverse ecclesial make-up, and a growing migrant membership. I would like to complete this picture of Asian Christianity with a quick glance at its projected future in 2050. Projecting the future of global Christianity to 2050 with a measure of probability presupposes reliable data on world demography and world Christian affiliation. Data for the former are provided by the United Nations Demographic Database, and those for the latter by the *World Christian Database*, developed for the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, first edition (1982), and continuously updated.

As far as Asia is concerned, it is projected that by 2015 the number of Christians will increase from 352,239,000 in 2010 (8.5% of the Asian population) to 595,333,000 (11.3% of the population). In 2050, the Asian countries with the largest Christian population will be: China (225,075,000), the Philippines (125,252,000), and India (113,800,000), with China ranking second, the Philippines, sixth, and India, eighth among the ten countries of the world with the largest Christian populations. (The rest are, in descending order: USA, Brazil, DR Congo, Nigeria, Mexico, Ethiopia, and Russia.) That three Asian countries out of ten worldwide will have the largest Christian populations in 35 years renders the task of doing theology the Asian way all the more necessary and urgent than ever.

### **Christian Mission and Doing Theology as Interreligious Dialogue**

We can now broach the issue of our essay: How should theology be done in Asia and Asian Christianity as briefly described above? The answer implied in the title of the essay is that it should be done in dialogue with other faiths and this, ecumenically. But why should Asian theology be done in this way? Before answering this question I would like to point out that the precise issue at hand is not doing theology ecumenically. This

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<sup>7</sup> On migration in the Asia-Pacific region, see *ibid.*, 147-71.

<sup>8</sup> Kitani has focused on the Pentecostals and Evangelicals, especially in Japan, and Cruz on Roman Catholics, especially in Hong Kong. See Kanan Kitani, “Invisible Christians: Brazilian Migrants in Japan,” *Latin America between Conflict and Reconciliation*, ed. Susan Flämig and Martin Leiner, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012) 195–214; and Gemma Cruz, *An Intercultural Theology of Migration* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). As an illustration of how migration has radically changed the faces of the Asian churches, Kitani points out the astounding fact that of the 1.1 million Christians in Japan, more than half are Brazilians, Filipinos, Chinese, and Koreans. This makes the expression “Japanese Christianity” rather misleading as it may suggest that the majority of Christians in Japan are Japanese-born. Perhaps it is more accurate to speak of “Christianities in Japan.” See Kanan Kitani, “Emerging Migrant Churches in Japan: A Comparative Analysis of Brazilian and Filipino Migrants’ Church Activities,” in Elaine Padilla and Peter C. Phan, eds., *Christianities in Migration: The Global Perspective* (New York: Palgrave, 2016), 89-112.



should no longer be a disputed issue for mainline Protestants since the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 and the founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948. For Catholics, doing theology ecumenically is an academic and ecclesial imperative since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Thus, to say that today theology must be done ecumenically, in Asia as well as elsewhere, is simply preaching to the choir.

Nor is the issue about doing theology in dialogue with secular cultures, especially through philosophy---what is referred to today as “contextualization” or “inculturation.” Theological inculturation is as old as Christianity, and was extensively pursued down the centuries by theologians as they tried to express the Christian faith in Hellenistic, Roman, and broadly speaking, Western categories. In Asia, this task of inculturation was also widely undertaken, notably by the St. Thomas Christians of Kerala, the so-called Nestorians in China, and among Catholics, by Jesuit missionaries such as Matteo Ricci in China, Roberto de Nobili in India, and Alexandre de Rhodes in Vietnam.

While inculturation does present difficult challenges and problems of its own, these pale in comparison with those posed by interreligious dialogue. The reason for this is rather obvious. Historically, Christianity, whose early cultural products are insignificant, has always been deeply respectful of the cultural achievements of Greece and Rome, especially their philosophies, which it extensively, albeit critically, borrows to articulate its beliefs. By contrast, Christianity as a religious system, considers itself far superior to its religious competitors, whose beliefs it categorically rejects as ignorance and error, and whose rituals and practices it condemns as superstitious and immoral. Central to Christianity’s negative attitude toward other religions are its faith in Jesus Christ as the incarnated Word of God, the eschatological prophet, the full and final self-revelation of God, and the unique and universal savior, and its belief in the church as the exclusive community of the elect outside of which there is no salvation (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*).

#### *Missio ad gentes and Theology as Apologetics*

This sense of religious superiority and exclusivity undergirds Christian missions with their twofold purpose, namely, conversion through baptism and planting the church. Given this Christology and ecclesiology it comes as no surprise that dialogue with other religions is deemed not only unnecessary but also dangerous. Unnecessary, because Christianity believes it already possesses the fullness of truth and therefore has nothing to learn from other religions; and dangerous, because interreligious dialogue might contaminate the faithful with pagan superstitions and immoralities. Consequently, missions are conceived as something Christians do *to* or *for* the pagans or heathens in a one-way movement. Christian mission to non-Christians used to be, and still is, called in the official documents of the Catholic Church *missio ad gentes*.<sup>9</sup> Note the theological force of the preposition *ad* [to]. The *gentes*, that is, those who have not yet accepted the Gospel and are still to be incorporated into the church through baptism, were once termed “pagans” or “heathens,” and were regarded as the object or target of evangelization and conversion.

In this context, doing theology was largely an academic activity performed in the service of *missio ad gentes*, seeking to articulate the Christian beliefs with the goal to move the pagans to renounce their religions and convert to Christianity. If there is any attention to non-Christian religions at all, the purpose is not to enter into a respectful dialogue with them, but with the apologetic aim of demonstrating their errors and defending the truth of Christianity. Unfortunately, this apologetic task is made vastly more complicated by the split

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<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Pope John Paul II’s encyclical on mission *Redemptoris Missio* (1990). The pope laments the waning of *missio ad gentes* and devotes a whole chapter of his encyclical to it (Chapter IV: “The Vast Horizons of the Mission *Ad Gentes*”).

of Christianity into many churches and denominations. To most Asians, the seemingly endless number and unlimited variety of Christian churches and denominations, often in the same city and even on the same street, is a mind-boggling mystery. It is to be noted that only in Asia are the Catholic Church and the Protestant Churches legally classified as two distinct *religions*, and not just denominations of one religion, alongside other religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Daoism, Confucianism, and Shinto. There have been of course notable efforts at creating church unions, for example, in India and Pakistan, and national councils of churches have been instituted in many countries of Asia. Sadly, where such collaboration is absent, especially with the proliferation of Independent Churches and Marginal Christians, to the scandal of non-Christians, the evils of denominationalism are exacerbated by rivalries, “sheep-stealing,” and mutual condemnations to hell. In this context, Christianity is faced with an embarrassing conundrum: If Christianity proclaims itself to be the only true religion, non-Christians will rightly ask: Which one? Given the current unedifying spectacle of church divisions in Asian Christianity, especially between the historic churches on the one hand and the Evangelical, Pentecostal, Independent, and Marginal Christians on the other, work for ecumenical unity, which had been in the forefront in the few decades after the founding of the World Council of Churches and which has recently experienced a noticeable eclipse, is more urgent than ever, and the role of CCA and CATS in fostering a truly ecumenical way of doing theology is indispensable.

### *Moving beyond missio ad gentes and toward Dialogue*

As I have observed above, however, the pressing task for Asian theology today is not doing theology ecumenically but doing theology *interreligiously*, that is, in dialogue with other faiths and in an ecumenical mode. Fortunately, in recent times it has been widely recognized, especially among mainline churches, that the old apologetic way of doing theology is no longer an appropriate paradigm, if it ever was, for Asia. A new paradigm for doing theology in dialogue with other faiths is emerging in which non-Christians are no longer seen as targets for conversion who will be condemned to hell unless they profess an explicit faith in Christ and are baptized into the church, and in which the doctrinal teachings and the moral and spiritual values of non-Christian religions are respectfully acknowledged. One exceptional example of this new appreciation of non-Christian religions and a call for a new way of doing theology are found in Vatican II’s 1965 *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)*:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions [primal religions, Hinduism, and Buddhism]. 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....The church, therefore, urges its sons and daughters to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, together with their social life and culture.<sup>10</sup>

The council’s teaching on the relation of Christianity to other religions represents a radical reversal of the church’s centuries-old condemnatory attitude toward people of other faiths, though some post-conciliar statements, such as *Dominus Iesus*, a Declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (2000), which tries to reverse the council’s open position. Another Vatican document (1991) helpfully spells out in detail the various ways in which interreligious dialogue can be done. It is important to note that dialogue as a

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<sup>10</sup> The English text of *Nostra Aetate* is taken from *Vatican Council II: Constitutions Decrees Declarations*, general editor Austin Flannery (Northport: Costello, 2007), 569-74.





mode of being church in Asia does not refer primarily to the intellectual exchange among experts of various religions, as is often done in the West. Rather, it involves a fourfold presence:

- a. The *dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.
- b. The *dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.
- c. The *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values.
- d. The *dialogue of religious experience*, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance, with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.<sup>11</sup>

This understanding of the four modes of interreligious dialogue, especially the first, second, and fourth, can shed light on the new ecumenical paradigm of doing theology in dialogue with people of other faiths. It opens a new way of viewing Christian missions, and hence a new way of doing theology in Asia. In addition to *missio ad gentes*, I suggest that there are two other, much more adequate, ways of understanding missions in Asia. I will use two prepositions in Latin as helpful short hands: *inter* (among) and *cum* (with), so that we have the two phrases: *inter gentes* and *cum gentibus*. A few words of terminological clarification on each are in order. First, the preposition *inter* in the phrase *missio inter gentes* means *among* or *in the midst of*, so that *missio inter gentes* means a *reciprocal* mission between the missionaries and the believers of other faiths. In other words, mission is not a one-way activity, done by the missionaries to the *gentes*, but rather a two-way activity done by the *gentes* to and for the missionaries, and by the missionaries to and for the *gentes*. It is therefore a *mutual* mission: Both the missionaries and the *gentes* “do mission” (as agents) and “are missioned” (as recipients).

Furthermore, in addition to reciprocity between missionaries and the *gentes*, mission in Asia is performed *together*, so that *missio inter gentes* is also *missio cum gentibus* (mission with people of other faiths). This implies that there is a common cause to which both the missionaries and the *gentes* are committed and for which they labor together. I now explore these two aspects of *missio inter gentes* and *cum gentibus Asiae* in some detail.

### *Missio inter gentes as Mutual Evangelization*

Perhaps a story in the life of the American Dominican veteran missionary to Pakistan, Chrys McVey (1933-2009) best illustrates the concept of *missio inter gentes*. Once he was asked how many converts he had made during his four decades of mission, he replied: “One, myself.”<sup>12</sup> It is a widely shared experience of mission in Asia (and of course also elsewhere) that in evangelizing the *gentes*, missionaries themselves are evangelized by them, and indeed, that the effectiveness of their mission work depends on the extent to which they are open to being evangelized by the *gentes*. By this I do not refer to the banal fact that there are people of other faiths who are much wiser and holier, even by Christian standards, than the missionaries themselves, or that there are certain official actions by the church as an institution that the *gentes* deem immoral and therefore they find no compelling reasons to join the church. I refer rather to the fact that in not a few areas of Christian life there are teachings and practices of the religions and cultures of the *gentes* that missionaries would do well to learn and practice in order to be better Christians and missionaries. Examples abound in areas such as sacred books, ethics, prayer, spirituality, and monasticism. This fact was recognized by luminaries such as Matteo Ricci in China, Roberto de Nobili in India, Alexandre de Rhodes in Vietnam, as mentioned above,

<sup>11</sup> The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 42 (May 19, 1991). This conception of interreligious dialogue is fully appropriated by the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences.

<sup>12</sup> See Prakash Lohale and Kevin Toomey, eds., *Dialogue as Mission: Remembering Chrys McVey* (Chicago: New Priory Press, 2014).

and countless other, lesser-known but no less effective, missionaries, both women and men, in the distant past as well as in the present.<sup>13</sup>

Recognizing and celebrating the goodness and holiness of people outside one's religious tradition and culture—the *goyim* or *gentes*—is not an invention of progressive missionaries. It was practiced by Jesus himself. Jesus praises the Samaritan leper who alone among the ten lepers he has cured, comes back to thank him (Lk 17:17-18). He also holds up a Samaritan as the model of love of neighbor (Lk10:33-35). Jesus is said to have been astonished or amazed by “such great faith” of the Roman centurion (Mat 8:10). That Jesus was— and did not pretend to be— “astonished” (*ethaumasen*) implies that the existence of such faith in a *goy* was something he did not expect or know. Thus, in a real sense, the Roman centurion's faith-filled behavior revealed to Jesus how universal God's saving grace is. Even more tellingly, the “great faith” (Mat 15:28) and the perseverance of the Canaanite woman, in spite of Jesus' curt, even insulting, refusal to grant her request for her daughter's healing, and her humble retort that even “the dogs [a Jewish term of abuse for the *goyim*, which Jesus himself used] eat the crumbs that fall under their masters' table” (Mat 15:27), succeeded in changing Jesus' earlier understanding that he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. Here, it is Jesus' ethnocentric understanding of his ministry that was changed and enlarged by a Gentile, and a woman to boot!

In their work, in light of Jesus' own practice, missionaries in Asia must be willing and able to open their minds and hearts to be changed intellectually and transformed spiritually by the “reverse mission” of the people of other faiths to them. Admittedly, they are severely hampered in this by the fact that the traditional descriptions of mission as “teaching,” “proclamation,” “evangelization,” and “conversion” that form part of the theology of *missio ad gentes*, do not dispose missionaries to adopting a posture of listening and humility.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, if one comes to a foreign place with the conviction that one or one's church already possesses exclusively all the truths in all their fullness; that one's primary task is to “proclaim” these truths, as if standing at a pulpit or behind a lectern, with a megaphone in hand, and “teach” them like an all-knowing professor; and that the objective of one's mission is to “convert” the heathens, would it come as a surprise that the heathens are seen as nothing but targets of one's mission (as is implied by the preposition *ad*) and that success in mission is measured by the number of baptisms, just as victory in a war is demonstrated by the number of casualties and cities destroyed or occupied? Would it be strange that the *gentes Asiae* will look upon Christian mission as a neo-colonialist attempt to conquer and destroy their religions? How can we plausibly defend ourselves against this charge if in fact the goal of our mission is to “convert” the followers of other religions to Christianity?

What would missionaries do and how would they act if they come to Asia not as proclaimers and teachers and converters and evangelizers but as guests—and uninvited, and even unwanted, guests at that—who totally depend for their physical and spiritual survival on the kindness and generosity of the *gentes* as hosts? What if we bring our Christian faith not as something to be proclaimed and taught in order to evangelize and convert the Asian *gentes* but as a humble gift, as a token of our gratitude for their hospitality, which our hosts have the perfect right to accept or refuse, use or not use? What if, as befitting grateful guests, we do not insist that they abandon their beliefs and adopt ours, reject their moral norms and follow ours, condemn their rituals and practice ours, disown their religions and be baptized into ours? Suppose, with a sincere and humble heart, we let ourselves be “taught,” “proclaimed,” “evangelized,” and “converted” by our hosts' beliefs, moral values,

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13 In this context it is vitally important, even a matter of sheer justice and historical accuracy, to recognize the role of lay women and women religious in mission. On this, see the pioneering works of Dana Robert.

14 On the relationship among proclamation and mission, see Peter C. Phan, *In Our Own Tongues* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004), 32-44.



modes of worship, and religious affiliations because in fact there are things that are of great, or even greater, truth and value in these than in ours.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps, someday, after we have known and trusted each other as friends, we can play host in our turn and invite the *gentes* as honored guests into our spiritual home, which we call “church.” Then we can proudly display its splendor and *gemütlichkeit*, its welcoming atmosphere and warm hospitality. Then we can talk about our beliefs and practices; tell them our family history, from the ancient Hebrews to Jesus to us as Jesus’ disciples, with warts and all; and invite them to create with us a larger religious family made up of theirs and ours. But then we must reckon with the likelihood that as guests, they too will bring us their own gifts of faith, which may very well be of great use to us, or which we even may find that we are in need of very badly. In this way, our mission is no longer *ad gentes* but *inter gentes*. The “evangelizers” become “evangelized” and the “evangelized” become “evangelizers,” in mutual respect and appreciation, in open honesty and genuine friendship, correcting one another when necessary, and always reaching out to greater truth and goodness.

### ***Missio cum gentibus*: The “Reign of God” as Our Shared Goal and Destiny**

Christian mission is not only done *inter gentes* but also *cum gentibus* (together with people of other faiths). This means that Christian mission is a collaborative enterprise which involves both Christians and the believers of other faiths and which they help each other carry out. Both Christians and non-Christians are bound together in a common cause and purpose.

On the face of it this notion of *missio cum gentibus* sounds rather strange: Why should non-Christians contribute to Christian mission? The point is well taken only if mission is conceived as *missio ad gentes*. Of course, Asian believers of other religions can hardly be expected to help missionaries plant and expand their own churches. Nor should they be blamed for their suspicion and rejection of Christian mission if it is geared toward conversion to Christianity, which they rightly perceive as a destruction of their religions.

The situation would be completely different if mission is undertaken as *missio inter gentes*, since in this case the ultimate goal of mission and the final destiny of humanity are not expansion of the church but the realization of the kingdom of God, however this reality is understood and named in various religious traditions.<sup>16</sup> To make the kingdom (or reign or rule) of God (or heaven)—and not the church—the ultimate goal of mission is no theological innovation. On the contrary, it represents fidelity to Jesus since there is no doubt that Jesus himself made the reign of God the center of his life and ministry. It is this total commitment to the reign of God that allowed Jesus to recognize that a man who drove out demons in his name, even though he was not one of his disciples (“not one of us,” said John), was not against him but for him and should not be stopped from doing it, since driving out demons was part of working for the kingdom of God (Mk 9:38-40). Interestingly, there is no record that the exorcizing man ever knew Jesus personally, or that Jesus ever attempted to make him his disciple, or required him to be one. It is thus possible (and indeed is a fact) that a person can do something “in the name of Jesus” without knowing him or being his follower.

There is another reason why in Asia *missio inter gentes* must also be *missio cum gentibus*. I mentioned above both the tiny percentage of Christians among the Asian population and the unlikelihood of mass conversion of the Asian *gentes* to Christianity. This means that from a practical point of view Christians in Asia will never be able to effectively work for God’s reign of justice, peace and reconciliation without the collaboration of the

<sup>15</sup> On the concept of the missionary as guest, see the insightful writings of the Catholic anthropologist and missiologist Anthony Gittins.

<sup>16</sup> On the symbol of the kingdom of God in mission, see Peter C. Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 75-97.



*gentes*. They simply cannot “go it alone.” This is especially true in socialist-communist countries and in countries with Muslim majorities, where Christianity lacks the necessary resources and encounters severe restrictions to its mission. Thus, while the *gentes* cannot and must not be expected to work for the expansion of the church, they can be encouraged to work with Christians for the reign of God—however this reality is named, since Buddhists, for instance, do not even mention God—by promoting justice and peace, reconciliation and love. Indeed, in many places of Asia, they have in fact already done so. Once again, it is to be noted that in *missio inter gentes* and *cum gentibus*, the goals of Christian mission can be amply fulfilled, without the *gentes* being converted, baptized, and made members of the church. Of course, there is no opposition between church and the reign of God. In fact, the former is a sign and instrument, or sacrament, or symbol of the latter. But it would be idolatrous to identify the church with the reign of God. It is the difference between the two that enables the people of other faiths to work for the kingdom of God and yet not belong to the church, either *reapse* [in fact] or *in voto* [in desire].

### **A New Paradigm for Doing Theology: Interreligious and Ecumenical**

So far I have been speaking of missionaries and Christians. But, as I have noted above, how mission is understood shapes the way theology is done. In the old paradigm theologians practiced their craft in the service of *missio ad gentes*. In the new paradigm, theology is still an ecclesial activity, and not just an academic discipline, like religious studies. However, as I have described above, the continent of Asia in which theologians live and move and have their being possesses unique socio-political, economic, cultural, and religious realities, and the Asian churches in which theologians find their home are an ancient yet still minority religion, with their colonial heritage, an extremely diverse ecclesial make-up, and a growing migrant membership.

#### *Theology as Interreligious Dialogue*

With both the continent of Asia and the Asian churches as God’s *oikos*, how can Asian theologians not search for a new way of doing theology that helps the churches meet the challenges facing them and fulfill their mission as *missio inter gentes* and *mission cum gentibus*? In a world in which different Christian traditions are treated as distinct *religions*; in which Christian divisions are a scandal for the faith (“scandal” in the sense of the Greek *skandalon*); in which one Christian denomination sometimes condemns another to eternal damnation; in which the very Christian identity is blurred by the rise of Independent and Marginal churches, is it not a solemn obligation of Asian theologians to work together *ecumenically*, for the sake of the Gospel and the reign of God? Must we not abandon our ecclesiological complacency and egoism, rejoicing in the fact that my particular church, thanks be to God, unlike other churches, is doing well in membership, finance, and ministry, and is not wracked by scandals, without making efforts at being church *together* in Asia?

It has been remarked that there is an “ugly ditch” separating the so-called “ecumenical churches” and some groups of Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Independent, and Marginal Christians which is deeper than the division between Christians and non-Christians. There is, it has been said, a brutal ideological warfare between ecumenical Christians who despise the Charismatic Christians as theological rednecks with their biblical fundamentalism, beliefs in prophecy, miracles and exorcisms, and “Prosperity Gospel,” and the latter groups charging ecumenical Christians with betrayal of the Gospel, failure to carry out evangelizing, hankering after relevance to the godless world, and surrender to the modern ethos of relativism. How can Asian theologians work together ecumenically to build a bridge of mutual acceptance and harmony between these two groups of Christians, especially in their theological formation and practice of mission?



In a continent in which Christianity still remains a minority after two thousand years of missions; in which Christians daily rub shoulders with believers of other faiths; in which non-Christians put Christians to shame with their prayer life, monastic practices, meditation on their sacred books, pilgrimages, fasting, and commitment to and work for justice and peace and the integrity of creation; in which religion is hijacked to justify and instigate violence against believers of other faiths; in which the number of migrants and refugees keeps increasing every day, how can theologians help the churches overcome the old model of mission as converting (proselytizing?) people of other faiths to Christianity and planting as many churches as possible, as if missions were a colonialist enterprise of conquering spiritual kingdoms for the Lord in Asia? How can we challenge and correct the way of doing theology that bolsters that way of doing mission?

To answer some of these questions, allow me to return to the four modes of interreligious dialogue listed above and reflect on their impact on theological method. Church leaders and theologians are familiar with the third form, namely, dialogue of theological exchange. That this form of intellectual sharing is absolutely indispensable is something for which members of CATS require no proof and convincing. It is, so to speak, our bread and butter, literally and metaphorically. Again, that theological exchange as interreligious dialogue is not an easy task is shown again and again in practice. It is not just getting together and “talking” over food and drinks. On the contrary, it requires years of intense study and disciplined training to acquire a solid knowledge of other religious traditions, and above all, intellectual openness and humility to learn from and be corrected by peoples of other faiths, without defensiveness and self-justification for oneself and the institutions one represents. In so doing one tries to achieve a measure of understanding of the others as *other* and not just as a different, often inferior, version of oneself, and on that basis seek concerted action for the common good of church and society.

While all this is necessary, I suggest that theological exchange be made subordinate to the other three forms of dialogue, namely, dialogue of life, dialogue of action, and dialogue of spiritual experience, which provide the context, that is, perspective and resources for the dialogue of theological exchange. Liberation theologians never tire of insisting that theology is the “second act,” arising at sundown, after a day of common life, action, and spiritual experience. Academics tend to dismiss these activities as unscholarly, and indeed little credit is given to them come time for tenure and promotion in the academy. Yet, there is no doubt that unless theologians of different denominations and church traditions are deeply immersed, at least periodically, in action, work, and above all, spiritual experience with believers of other faiths, our way of doing theology will fall short of producing an ecumenical theology in and of interreligious dialogue. What I am proposing here is no earth-shaking innovation; it is being done in many centers of theological formation and seminaries all over Asia. What is still needed is a more consistent, intense, and comprehensive practice of this way of doing theology in theological formation and scholarship.

### *Theology Done Interreligiously*

Limited space does not permit me to show how theology done in this dialogue of life, action, theological exchange, and religious experience will challenge and transform our traditional understanding of the Christian faith, especially in Asia. In a real sense, we Asian theologians, given the situation of Asia and Asian Christianity as described above, are especially charged, more than our colleagues elsewhere, with asking and answering inconvenient questions such as the following: Will our theology of divine revelation and our biblical hermeneutics remain unchanged if done in the company of believers for whom the Sacred Book or the Classics is paramount, such as the Sikhs with their *Adi Granth* and the Confucians with their *Four Books* and *Five Classics*? How will our classical theology of God be changed if done in the company of non-theistic



Buddhists? What insights can we get for our theology of the Trinity if done in the company of those Hindus who believe in the *trimurti*? How will our Christology, with its claims of uniqueness and universality for Jesus, be different if done in the company of Muslims who make the same, even stronger claims for the Qur'an as the Word of God made Word (Arabic)? How will our pneumatology be affected if done in the company of believers in Shakti, or *Qi* or spirits? How different will our theology of the church be if developed in the midst of the sangha of bhikkhu and bhikkhuni? How will our theology of grace look like if it is done together with Pure Land Buddhists? Will our traditional Just-War theory be unchanged if formulated in the company of Jains? How will our ecological ethics be framed if done in the company of Daoists? How will our theology of death and the afterlife sound if elaborated in the midst of Tibetan Buddhists? How will our theology of the communion of saints look like if done in the company of practitioners of ancestor veneration?

These are but a sample of questions, and a host of others can be added by theologians specializing in other areas of Christian theology. The crucial thing to note is that the purpose of this theological exercise is neither to combat what we consider errors in other religions nor to search for similarities and parallels between Christian beliefs and non-Christian beliefs that do not exist. Rather, it is to listen attentively and respectfully to the beliefs and practices of people and then ask where they can correct, complement, and enrich our own Christian beliefs and practices. It is a new form of comparative theology that in many ways resembles comparative religion but with the all-important difference in that it is done from the personal commitment to the Christian faith and its theological standpoint, in dialogue with other religions, for the sake of a deeper understanding of God and God's action in the world on behalf of the whole humanity.



**Peter C. Phan** is the inaugural holder of the Ignacio Ellacuria Chair of Catholic Social Thought at Georgetown University. He is the author and editor of some 30 books and 300 essays. He holds three earned doctorates and two honorary doctorates.

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