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RECEPTIVE THEOLOGICAL LEARNING IN AND FROM THE ASIAN BISHOPS

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Abstract

This article argues three points concerning the Federation of Asian Bishops' writings on theological method. First, because North Atlantic ecclesial and academic communities stand to learn much from their Asian Christian brothers and sisters, the relative invisibility of the latter in North Atlantic contexts represents a missed opportunity to learn from the resources available in World Christianity, specifically Asian theologies. Second, through their own distinctively Asian patterns of receptivity in theological learning, the bishops and their trusted theologians exemplify many key tenets of Receptive Ecumenism and thus warrant study by practitioners of receptive theological disciplines like Comparative Theology, Scriptural Reasoning, and Receptive Ecumenism. Third, in answer to the question, 'what are the conditions for the possibility of receptive learning?', the article proposes that a psychology of faith development can dispose or inhibit one from receptivity. Evidence is adduced in support of the Asian bishops exemplifying what James Fowler would call a Stage 5 conjunctive faith, which may, in the bishops' writings, signify a fresh performance of catholicity.

Keywords: Comparative Theology, Ecumenism, FABC, Inculturation, Interreligious Dialogue, Stages of Faith Development, World Christianity

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In his 2013 article in the journal *Modern Theology*, Roman Catholic theologian and ecumenist Paul Murray demonstrates linkages as well as distinctions in the important projects of “Scriptural Reasoning,” “Comparative Theology,” and “Receptive Ecumenism,” and in the light of the analogies adduced he then invites representatives of each discipline to press themselves one step further to ask whether and how these kindred modes of receptive theological learning might learn from *each other*, attentive to where traditions suffer from wounds which might experience repair through encounter. In Murray’s judgment, a relative weakness in the growing discipline of comparative theology is that it seems to require of its practitioners a “professionalism of interfaith engagement that opens them... to the charge of a certain elitism,” this in contrast to the “democratization” of receptive learning for which Receptive Ecumenism aspires.¹

In this article I think with Murray’s suggestion that comparative theology can learn from receptive ecumenism’s resistance of elitism, but with two additional conversation partners who provide vital resources to *both* models of receptive learning. My focus here falls more on method and on enriching and resourcing comparative theology than on performing it or on testing the fitness of Murray’s judgment against the extensive variety of comparative theological experiments.²

I argue three points pertaining to two Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences’ substantive and very fine papers, Paper 75 on the Asian value of harmony and Paper 96 on Asian theological method.³ First, because North Atlantic ecclesial and academic communities can learn

¹Paul D. Murray, “Families of Receptive Theological Learning: Scriptural Reasoning, Comparative Theology, and Receptive Ecumenism,” *Modern Theology* 29, 4 (October 2013) 90.

²While the concern over professionalization and elitism is valuable in principle, one could nonetheless test its fitness to the discipline of “comparative theology” against recent examples undertaken with Hindu traditions by Francis X. Clooney, SJ (whose work on method Murray cites in his *Modern Theology* article), Kristin Largen Johnston, Michelle Voss Roberts, John Thatamanil, Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, John Paul Sydnor, Reid B. Locklin, John N. Sheveland, or with an array of other authors engaged in comparison with Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, Confucian, African Traditional Religions, and other traditions. The field of Comparative Theology is overwhelmingly indebted to Clooney’s work yet is also multi-religious expansive, and not easily characterized as a group.

³Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences Office of Theological Concerns, FABC Paper 96, *Methodology: Asian Christian Theology (Doing Theology in Asia Today)*, 2000. Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences Theological Advisory Commission, FABC Paper 75, *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, 1996.

much from their Asian Christian brothers and sisters, the relative invisibility of the latter continues not only to diminish the communion of the church body but especially those of us keen to draw from the resources available in World Christianity which may help to stabilize and deepen the practice of a theology that is comparative or interreligious and thus globally responsible. Thus, an *intra*-religious Receptive Ecumenism is appropriate.⁴ Second, through its own distinctively Asian patterns of receptivity in theological learning, the bishops exemplify and answer Murray's call to see "the practical and the organizational act here as portals into the theological rather than the other way around..."⁵ Patterns of reception in Asian theological learning provide the global church additional — even exemplary — options for the construction of theologies that are both interreligiously sourced and sensitively generated from and for the concerns of praxis.

Finally, I propose that an implicit psychology of faith development looms large — if behind — enactments of receptive theological learning which can dispose or inhibit one from the virtue of receptivity in ways that precondition the assessment of learning opportunities. What are the conditions for the possibility of receptive learning? Here I argue that while developmental views of faith are not new, their meaning for us in the face of opportunities for receptive learning might be very fresh indeed if our concern is to enact a fuller catholicity and a fuller conversion to the communion of the people(s) of God beyond ingrained personal and communal habits of identity formation and preservation which can, despite best intentions, function divisively. A contemporary, global approach to the categories of catholicity and communion will benefit from the Stage 5 conjunctive faith framework described by James Fowler. It is no accident that here too the Asian bishops and their trusted theologians may represent a contextual example of the same.⁶

⁴Hardly a novel call, such has been the mood of other theologians such as Peter Phan, "Reception and Trajectories for Vatican II in Asia," *Theological Studies* 74 (2013) 302-320, cf. 320.

⁵Paul D. Murray, "Introducing Receptive Ecumenism," *The Ecumenist: A Journal of Theology, Culture, and Society* 51, 2 (Spring 2014) 6.

⁶This analysis is supported by but moves in a different direction from Edmund Chia, "Receptive Ecumenism through Asia's Triple Dialogue Theology," *Pacifica: Australasian Theological Studies* 28,2 (June 2015): 126-136. Chia's article as well as mine originated as papers delivered at the same conference: *Receptive Ecumenism in International Perspective*, Fairfield University, Fairfield CT, USA, June 9-12, 2014.

1. Receptive Learning in Asian Theologies

1.1. Mystery

Receptivity in theological learning can be nurtured by sensitive appreciation for “mystery” as a fecund theological category. The axial nature of this category for the bishops becomes apparent early in Paper 96 on method, where it is appreciated in at least three interrelated ways.

First, the bishops understand that a sense of the sacred animates all Asian cultures, and that as Asians themselves, their inculturation of Christianity respects these various experiences of the sacred for their relationship with the knowledge of God disclosed in Jesus Christ and Christian tradition. They clearly appropriate a Vatican II sensibility acknowledging the possibility of rays of divine truth present within the religions, yet their inculturated apprehension of this teaching represents less a well-meaning if *a priori* speculation — more tacit than concrete — than a disclosure grounded and confirmed in their personal experience, cultural categories, and historical memory. The bishops are transparent to their own process of reception of Asian ways. A shorthand statement to capture this bold move might be the well-known and remarkable mantra that “dialogue is a new way of being Church.” Indeed, as Edmund Chia notes, the Asian bishops’ stress on dialogue as constitutive of church renders an additional call to be receptive in theological learning somewhat redundant in light of their pre-existing patterns of receptive theological learning.⁷

Second, the bishops observe that for Asian Christians, faith “rests solidly on his or her faith in Jesus Christ in whom the self-communication of God has taken place. But the Asian Christian also realizes that the mystery of the depth of this self-communication remains to be explored further” (FABC Paper 96, “Introduction”). A fuller rendering of the meaning, contents, and praxis of Christian faith — as *sensus plenior* — is ever to be explored and opened up in historically concrete contexts of witness. For the bishops, “rays” of divine truth seem to be experienced and internalized within the witness to a fuller, more plenary apprehension of the mystery of God, a mystery experienced as fecundity rather than a negative category of absence, to which the appropriate response is a *habitus* of learning and integration. Such interreligious learning takes place within — and because of — the commitment to Jesus Christ as the

⁷Chia, “Receptive Ecumenism through Asia’s Triple Dialogue Theology,” 127.

way, truth, and life, as indicated repeatedly in FABC texts (e.g., FABC Paper 75, § 4.7).

A third FABC insight around mystery may be noted. The experience of divine mystery available in Asian ways and traditions is integral with Christological and pneumatological commitments:

[T]he Spirit is at work outside the visible Christian community, through these various traditions. The Christian will always see these mediations as being related in some way to Jesus Christ, but he or she cannot deny them. The Christian will rather explore them further to sound the depths of the mystery of God's self-revelation and deepen his or her own faith. This is not to say that all ways are the same, but rather that the object of our search remains forever a mystery and the various ways and paths do intersect. (FABC Paper 96, "Introduction").

Perhaps even more indicative of receptive learning — and the solidarity it implies — the Bishops wrote earlier in 1982 that "Christian communities in Asia are entrusted to accompany other believers 'in a common pilgrimage toward the ultimate goal, in relentless quest for the Absolute.' Thus, they are to be 'sensitively attuned to the work of the Spirit in the resounding symphony of Asian communion'" (FABC III, 1982, no.8.2; cited in Paper 75, § 4.10).

Clearly for the bishops, faith is *experience* and response, and not, in the first instance, cognitive or conceptual, and it involves giving space to the capacity of God as mystery to be present in the rich cultures and histories in which Asian Christians are imbedded, implying a vocation toward one's own receptivity to available learning. Mediations of divine mystery can be encountered in ways that are distinctive because analogical, and non-competitive because relational.⁸ Therefore, it would strain hearing not to recognize the FABC to be calling for some form of interreligious or comparative theology when they celebrate a capacity to explore the sacred made manifest in other traditions by virtue of which they may find their own Christian faith deepened as a result. A theology which is interreligious or comparative investigates theological loci in dialogue with other religious traditions, texts, and persons with a view to fresh yet faithful theological construction and transformative praxis generated out of the relational, hospitable space of dialogue. In the more simple and direct words of the Indian Jesuit Michael Amaladoss, which provide a helpful gloss on the categories

⁸For a discussion of the FABC putting down the charge of theological relativism/subjectivism, see Edmund Chia, "FABC's 'Response' to *Dominus Iesus*," in SEDOS Bulletin 33, 11 (2001) 298.

privileged by the Vatican's International Theological Commission, "[p]roclamation witnesses to God's mystery as it has been disclosed to us," while "dialogue reaches out to the mystery of God active in others."⁹ The integral, non-separative relationship between dialogue and proclamation offers additional leverage on the task and nature of an interreligious theological method with a view to establishing *relationship* between proclamation and dialogue.¹⁰ Such conceptual relationship in turn meaningfully captures the tangible and personally experienced relationship, expressed by the bishops, between a faith in Jesus Christ active in the *habitus* of dialogue, and a strengthened and deepened Christian faith as the product of dialogue.

1.2. Harmony

Related to mystery is the category of "harmony." The bishops underscore the Asian value of "harmony" as a resource to help navigate the communalism and violence which scar many Asian communities. Harmony does not mean generic equality, subjectivism, or relativism. Rather, harmony signals a reconciled diversity, a complementarity of distinctive faiths, traditions, and persons which resonates deeply with a Pauline theology of the body of Christ with its own model of a reconciled diversity of gifts bestowed upon the one human family by the one Spirit. The category of harmony provides resources for a felt sense of solidarity and for the praxis of interreligious dialogue which springs from it.

Harmony matters to the bishops in more personal ways, too, as a means to integrate the experiences of their forbearers and of their own psyches within Christian witness. They write that, "[r]ather than saying 'A is true, so B must be false', the Asian tends to say 'A is true, and B is also true in some sense'" (FABC Paper 96, "Introduction"). Moreover, the bishops accept "the great religious traditions" as

⁹Michael Amaladoss, SJ, "Interreligious Dialogue: A View from Asia," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (January 1995) 2-5, at 4.

¹⁰Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 1991. Available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html. Last accessed 01/10/2014. See also the Society of Jesus, General Congregation 34, Decree 5, "Our Mission and Interreligious Dialogue," § 7, in Society of Jesus, *The Documents of the Thirty-Fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus*, St Louis, MO.: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995, 71-72, also available online at http://www.sjweb.info/documents/sjs/docs/Dr%205_ENG.pdf. Last accessed 01/10/2014.

“significant and positive elements” in the divine economy and as ingredient to their own nations and cultures:

Over many centuries [the great religious traditions] have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of contemplation and prayer. They have helped give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations. How then can we not give them reverence and honor? And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them?¹¹

Michael Amaladoss punctuates the intuition of many Asian Christians who respect the religious paths and traditions of their ancestors such that a dichotomous view of Christian faith as true and other faiths as preparatory or even false, simply cannot stand the test of experience or the virtue of prudence, and is therefore a somewhat misleading way to construe religious identity. Irreducible to concepts or logic, Amaladoss declares that,

Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and others are part of our life. We share a common culture and way of life. We belong to a common economic and political system. We have a common history... At least for some of us, interreligious dialogue is also an interior, personal search for our own religious roots, which we want to rediscover and integrate.¹²

An integrative, sacramental approach offered by the bishops and Amaladoss expresses intellectual solidarity with the great religious traditions of Asia and moral solidarity with the persons — living and dead — of Asia, but in so doing need *not* imply a relativism or subjectivism of truth.¹³ In the place of a dead-end conversation about relativism — from which the bishops have distinguished themselves repeatedly — one might refocus attention to the personal apprehension of multiplicity and coherence in the Asian faith of which Amaladoss speaks. It is telling that pursuit of understanding

¹¹Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs, I (BIRA I), *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Vol.1, *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970-1991*, ed. Gaudencio Rosales and C.G. Arevalo, SJ, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997, 14. Also cited in Michael Amaladoss, "Is There an Asian Way of Doing Theology?," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 45 (2008, 1) 1-9, 3. Available at <http://eapi.admu.edu.ph/content/there-asian-way-doing-theology>. Last accessed 01/10/2014.

¹²Amaladoss, "Interreligious Dialogue: A View from Asia," 2.

¹³Among the best statements on the misunderstanding are three pieces by Edmund Kee-Fook Chia: "Of Fork and Spoon or Fingers and Chopsticks: Interreligious Dialogue in *Ecclesia in Asia*," *Horizons* 28, 2 (2001) 294-306; "Wanted: Interreligious Dialogue in Asia," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 12, 1 (2002) 101-110; "Regensburg and Dialogue," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 17, 1 (2007) 70-82.

cannot be reduced to conceptual constructions but takes on the hue of personal and social history as the hermeneutical lens through which concepts can then be enlisted in the work of any transformative praxis that would situate Christians in multi-cultural and multi-religious Asia. In other words, the FABC have refined a key trait of the receptive learning Murray and others call for, namely, the priority of lived experience as the driver of theological reflection on the praxis which seeks for the human family transformation toward the unity to which it is called (e.g., NA, 1; LG, 1).

1.3. Dialogue

The role of dialogue in Paper 96 rests upon the foundation set for it earlier by the Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA) which met in various Asian cities as early as 1979 in Bangkok with a focus on dialogue with Buddhists, and then later the same year in Kuala Lumpur with a focus on dialogue with Muslims, and once more in 1982 in Madras with a focus on dialogue with Hindus. The statements produced at each meeting are brief yet richly evocative of Christian communities engaged sacramentally with the world and its peoples, cultures, and religions, expressing Christian identity and witness unmistakably conditioned by dialogical experiences and empowered by the praxis of solidarity created through those experiences.

The dialogue with Buddhists can be cited as but one example. In Bangkok, the bishops affirmed that their motivation to engage Buddhists was the *"prompting of the Spirit of Christ, moving us in love to open ourselves to Buddhists in new ways, respecting them so that we may help one another to grow together to the fullness of our total reality."*¹⁴ Here the particularity of the spirit of Christ functions not as a deterrent to dialogue but as its presupposition, and dialogue proceeds not only from the standpoint of equality and respect for otherness but from the conviction that all stand and learn together as one family (Cf. GS, 1; NA, 1; LG, 1). In the Bangkok BIRA statement the bishops insist that in dialogue all participants enter as partners equally in need of growth toward a fullness not yet reached, and are called to a relational mutuality of sharing and listening in which each partner provides the means of help for the other and, in turn, is helped by the other. This mutuality of sharing is not merely tacit, for a major pastoral orientation of this first BIRA statement can be found in the bishops' call for "a spirit of humility, openness, receptivity, and especially love for Buddhists, and for what God wishes to tell us

¹⁴BIRA I, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Vol. 1, 110.

through them.”¹⁵ In Bangkok, the bishops gave voice to a Christian identity solicitous of “non-Christian” learning, confident in the Spirit present to and through the world, a confidence which renders the negative identifier just used — namely, “non-Christian” — deficient, unsatisfying, and pneumatologically misleading. While real, concrete, and to be respected, religious differences are taken for granted as a matter of course and honoured, and yet by themselves do not give adequate expression to the relationship. Negative qualifiers such as “non-Christian,” however rightly understood and intended, helpfully register difference and yet are preliminary and in need of fuller description of the relationship sensitive to the experience of unity brokered through encounters with difference, such as is offered through pneumatological reflection.

In his 1999 response to the promulgation of John Paul II’s *Ecclesia in Asia*, Cardinal Julius Darmaatmadja raises this same pneumatological point in a discussion on mission for Asia. He wrote,

It is important that the local churches be capable for seeing the religious values and the culture they [Asian religions] embody, which need to be considered specially as partners in dialogue for the area in question. Religious and cultural aspects which bear values of universal goodness and truth, fittingly are to be accepted as treasures, since they approximate the marks of the guidance of the Holy Spirit who has been working within these cultures and living human institutions (Cf. *RM* no. 28).¹⁶

With these words Cardinal Darmatmaadja clearly signals the inadequacy of negative identifiers like “non-Christian” or “extra ecclesiam,” in favour of a conscious relationship of difference grounded in the unpredictable and unknowable economy of the divine Spirit. In step with the BIRA Bangkok statement and a driving focus of Receptive Ecumenism, he continues to say that: “In the eyes of the religious adherents and practitioners of such [Asian] values, the new way the church bears itself will enable these people to understand us better, enable them to come closer to us, but also enrich us in return in the way we live our Christian lives.”¹⁷ With difference clearly acknowledged, Darmaatmadja moves toward the language of relationship and intimacy with the religions, cultures, and peoples of Asia, in the company of whom the church finds itself enriched and its praxis deepened. The new evangelization serves the

¹⁵BIRA I, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Vol. 1, 111.

¹⁶Cardinal Julius Darmaatmadja, “A New Way of Being Church in Asia,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 63 (1999) 888-889.

¹⁷Cardinal Julius Darmaatmadja, “A New Way of Being Church in Asia,” 889.

integral development of Asian human persons, through the realized intimacy of a church self-consciously *with* and *for* the people, a people Darmaatmadja describes as both “radically religious” and “badly in need of almost everything.”¹⁸

Dialogue in this sense begins to connote redemptive possibilities precisely by creating space for the unfolding of life together in community with its discoveries and adaptations, enabled by a patient humility empowering critical receptivity toward Asian cultural and religious resources, whose influence can be explored and integrated, though not pre-determined. The particularity and distinctiveness discovered and subsequently honoured through dialogue with others empowers the church to be, in the words of the FABC, a “communion of communities,” where difference is respected and reconciled in a framework of unity different in kind from uniformity.¹⁹ Moreover, this Asian view of dialogue finds encouragement in Receptive Ecumenism’s post-foundationalist “dual shift” in human understanding. According to Murray, Receptive Ecumenism first shifts *from* the view of knowledge as a superstructure progressively erected on the basis of certain foundations *to* a view of knowledge as a “complex, flexible, context-specific web.” The second shift is *from* viewing truth in terms of cognitive, discursive understanding *to* enacting efficacy and fruitfulness in human affairs.²⁰

1.4. FABC Enactment of Core Principles in Receptive Ecumenism

In his 2013 *Modern Theology* article referenced at the start of this chapter, Paul Murray outlined a helpful “systematic summary account” of twenty-seven core orientations animating Receptive Ecumenism.²¹ Of these, one could argue that fully twenty-seven are present in the Asian Bishops’ writings, although less with respect to *ecumenical* receptive learning than receptive learning from Asian cultures, religions, and various movements for social transformation deemed movements of the Spirit and therefore as sources for theological reflection, such as women’s movements, and the reality of Asia’s teeming poor or *anawim* who, the bishops maintain, “draw God’s liberating presence” (Paper 96, § 3.2.4.4).

¹⁸Cardinal Julius Darmaatmadja, “A New Way of Being Church in Asia,” 890-891.

¹⁹*For All the People of Asia*, Vol. I, 287. Cf. Peter Phan, “A New Christianity, but What Kind?” *Mission Studies* 22, 1 (2005) 73.

²⁰Murray, “Families of Receptive Theological Learning,” 81.

²¹Murray, “Families of Receptive Theological Learning,” 79, 85-88.

To be sure, the strength of the FABC orientation toward receptivity is owed in part to their distinctive Asian inculturations of the gospel. Their receptivity may stem also from several layers of marginality. As Christians, they experience the numeric marginality of constituting but 3 percent of all Asians and but 10 percent of all Christians globally.²² We may also reflect upon the marginality entailed in a heavy millstone of colonial history, the memory of which continues (1) to be evident in the internalization, among many Asians, of a European colonial view of them as emasculated, idolatrous, shameful, and powerless, and (2) to animate prejudice and violence between communities of difference. Both residual deposits of colonial history understandably may hold some degree of influence over how Asians receive ecclesial authority and power today.

Perhaps a third form of marginality pertains to a relative invisibility arising from a hesitation among many in the North Atlantic to learn from distinctive Asian witness, from those who speak different languages and view theology and context through different cultural spectacles. Some greet with suspicion the distinctive inculturations of the gospel generated in and for the two-thirds world, or reduce them merely to examples of “contextual” theology fittingly ignored outside of their originating contexts of meaning, as if theology could ever be context-free and as if the *koinonia* of the church could be something other than a discipleship of equals. Here one might consider that the FABC’s distinctive witness to the Church as a communion of communities and as a discipleship of equals may be sharpened by and rendered a prophetic teaching precisely through repetitive experiences of contrast, from which learning and eventual change cannot be discounted.

Receptive learning proves to be difficult not only *between* Christian communities themselves but *within* communions whenever difference is perceived as divisive or subject to the management and control by some over others, rather than a constitutive feature of *koinonia* itself. Indeed, receptive learning is difficult for us as *individuals*, which is why some orientation in the psychology of faith development — explored below — generates insight to the conditions of its possibility. But in insofar as Asian method exemplifies key orientations in receptive ecumenism, its relative invisibility in North Atlantic contexts unjustly denies communion and becomes a missed opportunity for many to learn into the catholicity of the church and to

²²Peter C. Phan, “A New Christianity, but What Kind?” 68.

learn from contextual insights which may bear universal import, especially concerning the prospects for a theology that actualizes its interreligious or comparative possibilities.

In a related vein, Paul Avis has noted in the context of ecumenical relationships, the rhetoric of “completeness” or “fullness” in official Roman Catholic ecclesiology however intended and rightly understood has given rise nonetheless to considerable woundedness in those churches not in communion with Rome, and the therapeutic aims of Receptive Ecumenism thus become that much more challenging when placed in this context of a static hierarchical typology of completeness in one and incompleteness in others.²³ By extension, an analogous need for therapeutic address can be found *within* the Roman Catholic communion itself, wherever some are regarded to be centre and fixed and others as periphery and variant, where fullness is imputed to some members of the body of Christ while questioned or challenged in others. In such moments, all stand in need of therapeutic address: the ‘centre’ for the lost opportunity for communion and enrichment that it would otherwise enjoy through right relationship; the ‘periphery’ for its internalization of how it appears in the partial and objectifying gaze of the ‘centre’, especially as experiences of marginality become repetitive, reinforced over time, and rightly or wrongly conflated with enormous historical burdens, such as colonialism.

By way of illustration, one can consider just three of Murray’s twenty-seven key core principles of Receptive Ecumenism which are hiding in plain sight in the bishops’ writings. Prudent reception of these Asian patterns of receptive theological learning might “source” Receptive Ecumenism and Comparative Theology alike with fresh possibilities and, more importantly, help therapeutically to restore communion among those for whom it has been strained.

1.4.1. Fresh Performances: *“The authentic spirit-led vitality of Christian life and tradition consists not in identical repetition of received articulations but in preparedness to return to core callings and to ask what fresh performances and articulations are appropriate to the specific challenges and opportunities of current times and context.”*²⁴ Hardly a jettison of tradition or received teachings, this “core principle” of Receptive Ecumenism aptly gives space for bodies like the FABC to enact their faith in ways responsive to core callings in Asian contexts of living

²³Paul Avis, “Are We Receiving Receptive Ecumenism?” *Ecclesiology* 8 (2012) 232.

²⁴Murray, “Families of Receptive Theological Learning,” 86.

and dying. The desire to engage in a triple dialogue as a new way of being church in Asia functions on the global stage of World Christianity as one example of authentic spirit-led “fresh performances.” The triple dialogue insists on treating persons personally, as persons, attentive to the context in which they find themselves, which is the same context in which God addresses and redeems them as persons. The dialogue with the poor, whose overwhelming and pervasive poverty diminishes the lives of millions, is constitutive of any promise of redemption or repair that addresses persons in the particularity of their experience and the conditions which threaten them. The dialogue with other religious persons and communities, against the backdrop of which the Christian community in Asia is but a small minority with historical and ancestral roots in the majority populations, is a necessary step for Asian Christians to understand themselves and their neighbours integrally. Dialogue with the many cultures of Asia is an appropriate form of Christian witness, self-appropriation, and construction of meaning in a church which is polycentric and multicultural.

1.4.2. Dynamic Webs: *“Traditions are better understood as dynamic webs rather than inflexible structures.”*²⁵ In the multicultural and global church, this insight should be taken as a matter of course, and yet a projected homogeneity of experience and individual perspective often work against this freedom. Being able to give space to cultural and religious experience distinct from one’s own merely specifies the need to view received tradition in its historical and therefore multi-vocal and multi-situational reality. The model of traditions as complex, dynamic webs of thought and practice allowing for “variability, adaptability, creativity and, inevitably, tension,” rather than as inflexible structures, not only reflects global human experience but gives space for receptive theological learning about the God who as spirit works in ways — toward all — that are grace filled.²⁶

1.4.3. Leaning into the Promise: *“We need to ‘lean-into’ the promise of God’s purpose and the presence of God’s Spirit and ask what it means in practice for us to enter into this more fully in the here and now.”*²⁷ Reception of FABC wisdom in North Atlantic settings here and now may require a clarification of the nature of contextual theology. If local, contextual theologies can, as the Asian bishops intend, be the

²⁵Murray, “Families of Receptive Theological Learning,” 86.

²⁶Murray, “Families of Receptive Theological Learning,” 80-81.

²⁷Murray, “Families of Receptive Theological Learning,” 87.

subject of mutual conversation, engagement, and even criticism among members of the body of Christ across global settings, this raises the possibility of one community's local, contextual theology speaking a good word to another entirely distinct community whose particular life situation may nonetheless be addressed, seen into, repaired or healed through intercultural dialogue. Viewed within the framework of the FABC pneumatology, such opportunities are not to be taken lightly or recreationally, but in anticipation of the unexpected ways in which God as spirit addresses persons in prophetic and reparative ways.²⁸

While merely suggestive, these three core principles of Receptive Ecumenism ubiquitously available in the writings of the Asian bishops give reason to think that dialogue between the two can be mutually enriching.

2. Cognitive and Affective Factors Conditioning Receptive Learning

The bishops give expression to a mature faith when they call for “a cultural and religious atmosphere in which every group is willing to learn and unlearn, where all are eager to know each other better, and thus also to know themselves better, so that through common effort they may come to a deeper and broader knowledge” (FABC Paper 96, § 1.1). This orientation toward learning in relationship correlates well with the developmental faith perspective of James Fowler — especially his fifth stage — which has been influential especially in North America since the publication of his *Stages of Faith* in the early 1980s.

Fowler proposed a typology of six observable and cross-religious stages of faith development, the earliest of which simply correlate with age and the progression from childhood to adolescence. His concern is that many religious people do not progress past Stage 3 — a “synthetic-conventional” stage typical in adolescence which features literalism, conformity to received authority without the strength to develop an independent perspective, and naïve, simplistic renderings of religious stories and myths, which view human difference as differences in *kind* of people, as is typical of unconscious ideologies.²⁹

In stage 4's “individuated-reflective” faith, typical of young adulthood, some personal tension with and independence from authority occurs, yet one still inhabits one's own overly-rationalized

²⁸Murray, “Families of Receptive Theological Learning,” 86.

²⁹James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, San Francisco: Harper One, 1995, 172-173.

view of reality and assimilates others into it. Stage 4 struggles to respect difference, since others are what I determine them to be through my own categories and frameworks of meaning.³⁰ The discovery that I might need a “thou” who is and remains genuinely “other” to me, and that I might need her *for my own sake*, has not appeared at Stage 4, as genuine others are not yet occasions for materially new learning.

Unusual before mid-life, the “conjunctive” faith of Stage 5 integrates thoughtful commitment to one’s own tradition with vulnerability to what prior stages — especially stage 3 — would have regarded as strange or even threatening to self and outlook. Stage 5 gives rise to what Fowler, invoking Ricoeur, refers to as a “second naïveté,” in which the very same symbols of faith that previously may have been held naively or absolutely have been subjected to self-critical analysis and are now reconstituted as symbols that unify oneself with the world *precisely through* the particularities of one’s faith commitment, thereby becoming new and powerful and reconciling.³¹ Particularities of faith are purged of ideological narrowing in favour of the truth as a praxis which seeks unrestricted justice for all. This truth refuses and dissolves socially constructed boundaries separating persons from each other and, equally, refuses to domesticate others into familiar images of oneself. In the face of the other, the self is “porous,” open to influence and learning from her and, in the language of receptive ecumenism, recognizes its “need for refreshment and renewal from without, from alternative logics and ecclesial experiences of other traditions.”³² The self is also sacrificial in being willing, in Fowler’s words, “to spend and be spent for the cause of conserving and cultivating the possibility of others’ generating identity and meaning.”³³ Decisively, those in Stage 5 solicit friendship with others from any other stage, for they rejoice in the other and perceive the imperative of reconciliation and act for it, unilaterally if need be, with insight and sensitivity. In the language of Receptive Ecumenism, Stage 5 faith finds itself attracted to a form of “diagnostic and therapeutic analysis” of fracture and woundedness in human community with a view to reparative, healing action.³⁴ A

³⁰Fowler, 182-183.

³¹Fowler, 197.

³²Paul D. Murray, “Introducing Receptive Ecumenism,” *The Ecumenist: A Journal of Theology, Culture, and Society* 51, 2 (Spring 2014) 4.

³³Fowler, 198.

³⁴Murray, “Families of Receptive Theological Learning,” 81.

signal contribution from the conjunctive stage of faith is that it sensitively attunes to fracture in the human community and perceives the boundaries separating people as illusory. What's more, Stage 5 is saturated, in Christian terms, with a kenotic spirituality which powerfully seeks in acts of self-emptying care and concern other's meaning and well-being above all else — even at cost — by creatively apprehending and deploying religious symbols and narratives to concrete situations of interpersonal, intercultural, and interreligious fracture and loss in ways that liberate, unify, and condition future possibility toward the same.

Something along these lines is occurring in the role the bishops assign to mystery in theological reflection, and in how dialogue discloses the presence of God as Spirit in and to the world, which in turn renders Christians comfortable in a pluralistic world and empowered to reconceive familiar and strange theological proposals in terms of mutuality and complementarity. North Atlantic Christians are free to view the bishops' invitation to learn from global contexts of theological reflection as a test-case for all, which can be stated now in the form of an open question: *do we appropriate faith in ways vulnerable to the experiences and truths of those who appear other, ready for closeness to that which is different and even threatening to ingrained personal and communal habits of identity formation and preservation?* This open question may find its disposition in the answer to yet another: *do we possess what the bishops seem to exemplify and what Fowler calls an "ironic imagination," namely, "a capacity to see and be in... one's group's most powerful meanings, while simultaneously recognizing that they are relative, partial and inevitably distorting apprehensions of transcendent reality"?*³⁵ If we do not now possess this capacity, from whom shall we receive it?

³⁵Fowler, 198.