

UNIVERSALITY OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT

A New Focus for Asian Theological Reflection

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The Decree on the Missions (*Ad Gentes*), and the Declaration on World Religions¹ (*Nostra Aetate*) by Vatican II in 1965 were unique events in the history of the Church, both happening towards the end of the Council after very long and crucial discussions and deliberation. These documents are also to be seen as great achievements of Vatican II in relation to the Church's place in the world in the context of religious pluralism and also the Church's attitude towards secular history through the openness it gained as a result of the long discussions among the Fathers of the Council. Already in 1964 a brief statement on missions was presented, which concentrated largely on juridical and organizational problems of mission and so it was rejected by the Council. This final Decree is a marked improvement, particularly in theological contents. It is to be clearly stated that the Decree opens up a new approach in the missionary activity of the Church. The focus of the missionary activity today is less on territorial expansion than on making the

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¹Though the Vatican document uses the expression, "Non-Christian Religions," we prefer to use "World Religions" because of the bad taste involved in using negative qualifications. This is true of other expressions, such as Gentiles, Non-Believers, and Pagans.

Church an active presence within and native to the diverse and developing cultures in which it exists. Hence the emphasis is on dialogue with other religions, adaptation to local conditions, and participation in community and national life.

The universality of the mission of the Church in time and space, applying as it does to all cultures and all peoples of the world, is something which Vatican II specially called all Christians to understand, as a necessary condition for the manifestation of God's plan in the world. It was an application of the call of Deutero-Isaiah to those who returned from the Babylonian captivity: "Extend the dimensions of your tents and stretch the curtains of your tabernacles. Don't be constricted" (Is 54:2). The document insists that all the members of the Church should have a vivid realization of their responsibility to the world; that they should preserve in themselves a fervent and universal outlook towards the world. In the decidedly biblical approach which this document takes towards mission the master idea is one taken from the Pauline description of God's plan for the whole of humanity to give history its fulfilment, by bringing everything to Christ as the head (Eph 1:9-10). The task of carrying out this plan of God in all its magnificence and universality is the work of the universal Church. When we speak about this universal mission, it is not all about the actual work of the missionaries involved in the various programmes of evangelization, it is also about the ongoing task of the Church and her theologians to reflect on the message of salvation which the Church has to take to all peoples.

When the Council Fathers reflected on the major changes this approach to the missionary activity of the Church proposed, which are very much different from the traditional colonial approach of a "spiritual conquest" of "pagans" and "Gentiles," as they were called, they also had to reflect on a radical change they had to admit about the methodology of theological reflection in these changed circumstances. Making a major and conscious departure from the issue of Thomistic philosophy and theology as the standard philosophy and theology of the universal Church, the Decree on the Missions has articulated the need of developing a theology that is proper to the culture and customs of the country where the theological reflection takes place. The Decree states:

In imitation of the plan of salvation, the young Churches, rooted in Christ and built up on the foundation of the apostles, take to themselves in a wonderful exchange all the riches of the nations which were given to Christ as an inheritance (Ps 2:8). From the customs and traditions of their people, from their wisdom and their learning, from their arts and sciences, these Churches borrow all those

things which can contribute to the glory of their Creator, the revelation of the Saviour's grace, or the proper arrangement of Christian life. If this goal is to be achieved, theological investigation must necessarily be stirred up in each major socio-cultural area, as it is called. In this way, under the light of the tradition of the universal Church, a fresh scrutiny will be brought to bear on the deeds and words which God has made known, which have been unfolded by the Church Fathers and the teaching authority of the Church. Thus it will be more clearly seen in what ways faith can seek for understanding in the philosophy and wisdom of these peoples. A better view will be gained of how their customs, outlook on life, and social order can be reconciled with the manner of living taught by divine revelation. As a result, avenues will be opened for a more profound adaptation in the whole area of Christian life. Thanks to such a procedure, every appearance of syncretism and of false particularism can be excluded, and Christian life can be accommodated to the genius and the disposition of each culture.²

The Declaration on the Relationship of the Church towards Non-Christian Religions was another milestone in the attitude of the Church towards the World Religions, which again was the result of a long process of discussions and deliberation. There were hesitations and fear that the Decree would weaken the difference between Catholicism and all other religions, thus leading to indifferentism and the discouraging of missionary vocations. But the great majority of the Council Fathers saw it otherwise, and it was so decreed. Now, in this historic document, the Church affirms that all peoples of the earth with their various religions form one community; the Church respects the spiritual, moral, and cultural values of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. The late Cardinal Bea, the chief architect of the document, had said: "The Declaration on the Non-Christian religions is indeed an important and promising beginning, yet no more than the beginning of a long and demanding way towards the arduous goal of a humanity whose members feel themselves truly sons (and daughters) of the same Father in heaven and act on this conviction."³ It is this task that the world-wide theologians have to take up as part of their commitment to the Church and to the whole humankind. Though the origin of this document was immediately related to the problem of the relationship of the Church to Judaism with its sad history of anti-Semitism, the document, as it stands now, is an open one extending itself to embrace all the major world religions, and it is a matter of satisfaction that the most ancient religions of India, Hinduism and Buddhism, are treated first in it.

²*Ad Gentes*, art. 22.

³A. Bea, cited from Fesquet, *Le Journal du Concile*, ed. By Morel, 1966, 120.

In spite of this clear and strong encouragement more than 45 years back it is a fact that nothing much has happened in the various cultural and religious contexts of the Church for the creation and development of an inculturated philosophy or theology, and it is equally true about India with its very ancient and profound philosophical and religious traditions. It was 21 years later, in 1986, that the late Pope John Paul II made his historic visit to India and this event made a deep impact on the Pope and his philosophical and theological mind. On February 5, 1986 he addressed a gathering of about 300 representatives of world's great religions, such as Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism and Judaism in Madras and spoke to them about the importance of inter-religious dialogue for the welfare and progress of humanity. He characterised India as the "cradle of religious traditions" and paid tribute to the spirit of tolerance and cooperation among religions that had always been part of Indian heritage.⁴ The same year in October the Pope initiated a day of prayer for peace at Assisi to which he invited 50 Christians and 50 leaders of other Faiths, which was "an act of dialogue in the highest degree". The implication of this event went far beyond the event itself. It conferred a theological legitimacy, necessity and imperative for inter-religious dialogue, not only for the sake of the various religions to come together and relate to each other but also for the religions to become conscious of their task of bringing about peace at all levels in our contemporary society. We can understand the importance of this event from the information we have received recently that in October 2011 a similar event will take place in Assisi to commemorate that historic event twenty five years ago.

Already in 1964 the late Pope Paul VI had paid his tribute to India when he visited this country on the occasion of the World Eucharistic Congress held in Bombay. Before representatives of various religions he said:

Your country is a country of old civilization, the cradle of great religions, and home of a nation which has sought God in constant desire, in deep meditation, in silence and in ardent hymns. Only rarely has this longing for God been expressed in words so full of the Advent spirit as those in your holy books written many centuries before Christ: 'From unreality lead me to reality; from darkness lead me to light; from death lead me to immortality.'⁵

⁴John Paul II, *The Pope Speaks to India*, St. Paul's Publications, Bombay, 1986, 82-87.

⁵*Brihadaranayaka Upanishad*, 1.3.28

This prayer is relevant in our times. Today more than ever before it should ascend from every human heart. Mankind passes through profound changes; it is groping for principles and new forces which are to lead it into the world of the future.

Even as Pope John Paul II was very much influenced by his visit to India in 1986 to experience for himself the ancient and valid insights of the religious traditions of this country, India also has received a new enthusiasm and a new vigour to get awakened to a new awareness on the part of the Church and her theologians to initiate a process of developing new ways of understanding the gospel in the specific context of India with its religious pluralism and also its cultural, religious and socio-economic complexities. This happened in 1998 when the same Pope published his Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. In this Encyclical the Pope has invited Indian theologians and philosophers to engage themselves in a re-articulation of the gospel in the Indian context. He wrote:

In preaching the gospel, Christianity first encountered Greek philosophy; but this does not mean at all that other approaches are precluded. Today, as the gospel gradually comes into contact with cultural worlds which once lay beyond Christian influence, there are new tasks of inculturation, which mean that our generation faces problems not unlike those faced by the Church in the first centuries. My thoughts turn immediately to the lands of the East, so rich in religious and philosophical traditions of great antiquity. Among these lands, India has a special place. A great spiritual impulse leads Indian thought to seek an experience which would liberate the spirit from the shackles of time and space and would therefore acquire absolute value. The dynamic of this quest for liberation provides the context for great metaphysical systems. In India, particularly, it is the duty of Christians now to draw from this rich heritage the elements compatible with their faith, in order to enrich Christian thought. In this work of discernment, which finds its inspiration in the Council's Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, certain criteria will have to be kept in mind. The first of these is the *universality of the human spirit* (italics mine), whose basic needs are the same in the most disparate cultures. The second, which derives from the first, is this: in engaging great cultures for the first time, the Church cannot abandon what she has gained from her inculturation in the world of Greco-Latin thought. To reject this heritage would be to deny the providential plan of God who guides his Church down the paths of time and history.⁶

Never before has any Pope written in so beautiful terms the richness of the Indian philosophical and theological traditions. The Pope has invited Indian theologians to take up the challenge of articulating

⁶*Fides et Ratio* 72.

biblical and theological concepts giving due respect to Indian thought patterns and taking into account India's rich religious and cultural heritage. At the same time, Indian theologians must remain open to other articulations, especially the early Hellenistic ones, because they are also part of the treasure of the Church's tradition. Sufficient attention must be paid to the contributions of the Greek, Latin and Syriac Fathers of the Church. Likewise, Indian theologians must appreciate the theological traditions and contributions of other countries and peoples. The basis on which the Pope bases his reasoning is the fact of the universality of the human spirit: The human spirit is universal and its articulations are also universal.

The Asian Context of Pluralism and Religiosity

That the Asian continent has a unique place in the spiritual, theological, economic as well as the sociological global scenario is becoming more and more clear. Asia is perhaps the most variegated and vulnerable region of the earth with regard to its geographical, religious, climatic, ethnic, cultural, economic and environmental complexity. Spread over a very large area on the surface of the earth, with its diversified climatic conditions, Asian countries have to face a series of challenges to cope up with the various demands of their complex situation. Ethnically and culturally also Asia is a very much diversified continent. The phenomenon of the less-privileged and dehumanized Dalits and women dispossessed of their legitimate share in the resources of the world is a stark reality of Asia and it calls for an ethical response. A major characteristic of Asia is its rich religious pluralism. All the major religions of the world co-exist in Asia more or less in a spirit of harmony and mutuality. According to many theologians Asia has the unique privilege of accommodating various religious traditions in this vast continent, almost all of them enjoying equal rights. This phenomenon makes it possible for all religions to have an open mind towards each other, and this prepares the way for the cooperation of all religions to establish a prosperous society. This is very different from the situation where only one religion exists and predominates, because there that one religion monopolizes and controls the whole structure. The presence of many religions with their different philosophies and theologies facilitates a kind of mutual fecundation and corrective criticism, as a result of which a sound and healthy society can gradually emerge. The main condition is that these religions have to be tolerant towards each other and be ready to co-operate among themselves.

Moreover, the still unaccomplished social and economic equality in Asia presents a challenging situation for all these religions to engage themselves in an urgent struggle towards creating a just society,

conscientizing both the Asian and the international community about the need of a radical change in the established structures of the Asian society. They have to use a common language and evolve a common policy for action. The services of sociologists, theologians and anthropologists are all to be pooled together in organizing this struggle. In order to achieve this the major religions of Asia have to undergo a process of *tapas*, a process of interior warming up, by which to identify the inner essence of these religions and become more tolerant, more open-minded and more co-operative among themselves. It is true that we have passed through the stages of intolerance and hatred among religions. In some quarters there has developed a closer understanding among religions, which tries to establish a principle of complementary thinking, according to which each religion shows its readiness to be purified and perfected through its association with other religions. It is from this perspective that we try to see the richness of the main Asian religions with regard to their spiritual contributions. This is an area in which Asian religions can come closer and give a message of mutual recognition and appreciation. At this stage Asian religions remain at their simplest form and it is here that they can give a healthy and enriching message to the entire world.

The Universality of the Human Spirit

It is in this context that we have to bring in the concept of the universality of the human spirit about which Pope John Paul II has written in his *Fides et Ratio* as a platform on which we can base our theological reflections. The human spirit is said to be the same in all religions and in all cultures. It is a common factor and a binding force. At the very outset we think it important to remove a certain misunderstanding about the concept of the spirit, specifically as a Christian reality. Several years back a well-known Anglican theologian wrote: "The real problem is to know whether the *pneuma*, the spirit, is part of man as such, or whether it is only part of a man after he has become a Christian, whether the *pneuma* is part of human nature or whether it is the gift of God to redeemed human nature." J.E. Frane in his commentary on 1 Thessalonians cites a passage from Theodore of Mopsuetia: "God has never placed the three, soul, spirit and body in an unbeliever; but only in believers. Of these the soul and the body are natural, but the spirit is a special benefit (*euergesia*) to us, a gift of grace to those who believe." Basing his reasoning on the same line, the Anglican author concludes:

A Christian is distinctively a man into whom this presence and this power have entered as it cannot enter into other men. It would then be true to say that the spirit of the Christian is nothing else than the Holy

Spirit taking up his residence in a man, and giving his life a peace and a beauty and a power which are simply not available or possible for a non-believer.⁷

It is precisely in this context that we have to see and evaluate the bold statement of Pope John Paul II about the universality of the human spirit. A striking concept which the Pope brings in to relate all humans and all religions among themselves and to each other is what he understands by the expression "universality of the human spirit". Through this very clear expression the Pope was trying to articulate something which we could otherwise put in simple words as "human nature." But by using this specific expression "spirit" it seems that the Pope wanted to elevate the human reality from its specific concreteness to its superior level in the divine milieu. In other words, the realm of the spirit is that which identifies the human reality with its innate orientation to things divine. And the claim made here is that at the level of the spirit all humans and all religions are inter-related as one community and remain the same. Through this expression we are introducing an important principle in theological anthropology that has definitive consequences both for Christian philosophy and theology, precisely because *pneumatology* is traditionally treated as a privilege of Christian theology. With its Trinitarian doctrine of the Holy Spirit as the starting point of reflections on the spirit, Christian theologians have made the concept of the spirit a transcendental reality. It seems that there are valid insights available in our everyday experience of life to start our reflection on the spirit as something active and present in our daily life in this world of matter.

The concept of the spirit is often understood as God's enabling power, a mysterious power conceived of as the mode of God's activity, manifested both in creation and in other natural and supernatural events. Humans and the cosmos, as a whole, continue to exist and operate within the orbit of God's power and action through this spirit. God is the creator of the cosmos who acts in every situation, whether in nature or in history, through his energizing spirit, often rendered by the Hebrew *ruach*. The Hebrew *ruach*, translated most often as *pneuma* into Greek by the LXX, can mean breath, air in motion, breeze, wind, spirit in general and Spirit of God. As a matter of fact, breathing is the most primitive form of the operation of the spirit and it is the ongoing process taking place in all human beings as well as other living beings on this planet earth, and it is an exercise through which they reveal their close relationship to God as the source of their life. Thereby they assimilate the vital power of God into themselves and so it is a

⁷*Flesh and Spirit*, Edinburgh, 1978, 14.

marvellous exercise of divine and human solidarity. Hence breathing is one of the holiest exercises of human life. All living beings draw into themselves the vitality that is invested in this material creation through the life-giving spirit of God and their entire life and vitality depend on this power of God. The meditative Psalm 104 has a significant observation about the spirit "When you hide your face, your creatures are dismayed: when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the earth" (Ps 104:29-30). It is within this larger perspective of the meaning of the spirit that we have to understand the specific meaning of the spirit in religious thinking and spirituality.

Pauline Reflections on the Spirit

In order to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the universality of the spirit as a basic datum of the humankind it is important that we have a clear idea about what the spirit means within the larger context of Paul's theological reflection. Anthropology is one of the most ambiguous areas of the theological thinking of Paul. It has always been a question whether the Pauline concept of the human person is Hellenistic or Hebrew, and the simple answer is that it is neither Hellenistic nor Hebrew, it is specifically Pauline. Whereas the traditional Greek concept of the human person is based on the doctrine of matter and form, the Hebrew concept is that the whole human person is *animated flesh* (Gen 2:7). Borrowing from both, Paul developed his own anthropology which is based on a principle of polarity. Deriving the concept of flesh (*sarx*) from the Old Testament as denoting the basic condition of human existence in this world of matter with its weakness and mortality, Paul applied it to human nature as something natural to the humankind. And this concept of the flesh is contrasted with that of the spirit, which alone can render the human person authentic and integrated.

Paul uses the word *sarx* in a variety of senses. But most distinctively he uses it in the sense of human nature as weak and unregenerate. Persons who guide their lives according to the flesh are called *sarkinoi*, and they produce the works of the flesh (Gal 5:19-21). The flesh is subject to the law of sin and death: "If you live according to the flesh, you will die," Paul wrote to the Romans. "For those who sow to their own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption" (Gal 6:8). Again, it is to be clearly understood that Paul makes a distinction between 'flesh' and 'body'. Body, for Paul, is an altogether nobler word. Although it is closely associated with the flesh, body is destined to resurrection and transformation insofar as this "body of sin" (Rom 6:6) and "body of death" (Rom 7:24) is to become a spirit-

body through the power of the Spirit of God. In this approach Paul thinks very differently from the Greek philosophers, for whom the *soma* was the *sēma* of the soul.

According to Paul, the human person is body (*soma*), soul (*psyche*) and spirit (*pneuma*) at the same time. Whereas the body is the visible and material aspect of the human persons, the soul is the principle of their biological life. Every living being has a *psyche*. In that sense human persons can be called *psychikoi* insofar as they live on their natural level. As *psychikoi* their basic tendencies are self-preservation and self-centredness and they are characteristic of every matter-bound life. But the really important aspect of the human persons is their *pneuma*. It is, as such, the controlling dimension in the human persons. It is the spirit which controls the thoughts and emotions, the mental activities and the passions of a person. It is precisely the participation in the spirit which makes human persons different from the animal world. Moreover, the *pneuma* is the real link between God and the humankind. It is through the *pneuma* that God can reach the humans and also the humans can have fellowship and communion with God.

As something that constitutes the selfhood of human persons, the spirit always tries to elevate the humans to the higher level of thinking and acting. But the flesh understood as the weak human nature does not allow the human spirit to exercise its power. As a result, all persons remain *sarkinoi*, flesh-dominated ones, even as the spirit longs to exercise its power and make them *pneumatikoi*. But it is not a dualism; rather it is a tension and a polarization, similar to what the philosopher Ovid wrote: "I see the better and I approve of them; but I do what I hate". It is in this predicament situation that Paul brings in his original thinking about the human spirit and the Spirit of God. According to Paul, the risen Christ imparts the power of his Spirit to all who believe in him, whereby the power of Christ is communicated to them, and consequently they are enabled to exercise the power of their spirit. In the same way as Jesus of Nazareth here on earth lived under the guidance of the Spirit of God, the risen Christ now imparts his Spirit to those who recognize him and are committed to him. Here we have the flowering of the concept of the spirit in Pauline theology.

The Human Spirit in relation to the Holy Spirit in Christian Theology

The Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit as a Person in the Holy Trinity and our discussion on the human spirit as a universal reality operating in the entire humankind receive a happy blending when we realize that the Holy Spirit operates in the world not by replacing

the universal human spirit, but by awakening and empowering it. What God did in Christ was to establish and constitute a human model in Christ who allowed himself to be totally guided by the Spirit of God and thereby establish the possibility of this Spirit inspiring all human persons in their respective life situations. It is a possibility open to everyone and it operates outside of the juridical dimensions of a visible Church. The risen Christ in his Spirit-Body existence releases his power to all human beings and enables them to lead a life corresponding to his own life. The Spirit of Christ is the sanctifying agency in the lives of all; he supervises the perpetual warfare the human spirit has to wage against the flesh, but the Spirit is more powerful than the flesh and so can put the flesh progressively out of action in those, whose lives are yielded to his control.

But here we have to come to a crucial question. What is the relationship between the Spirit of the risen Christ to the human spirit? Is the Spirit of Christ something that replaces the human spirit or is it only empowering and transforming the human spirit? The answer to this question makes the difference between theologians. It is not a question of replacing, but of empowering the human spirit. Moreover, the concept of the Holy Spirit taking up his residence in the human persons is philosophically and theologically not a correct expression. The Holy Spirit does not do it. What the Spirit of God does is to empower, strengthen, inspire and guide the human spirit. Without the power from above the human spirit cannot operate as it should. That is why Paul could write: "You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption. When we proclaim⁸ 'Abba! Father!,' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are the children of God" (Rom 8:15-16). What we receive is the power of the Spirit of God which empowers our spirit and with that power we are enabled to proclaim that God is the Abba of the entire humankind. It is not the Spirit of God who calls God as Abba, but we humans are empowered by the Spirit of God.

What is important for us to keep in mind in this whole process is the complementary dimension of the human and the divine. Over against Naturalism and Rationalism there developed a Supernaturalism which equally did a lot of harm to theology. Whatever human was understood as sinful, and consequently the divine was called for as the only way to salvation. Moreover, the way to salvation was explained as the exclusive privilege of the Christians which thereby

⁸The real meaning of the Greek expression *krazomen*, is proclamation, corresponding to the Hebrew *qara*.

restricted the universality of the grace of God. Thanks to the new insights about the universality of the spirit we are gaining through the study of religions and their philosophy and theology, we are now in a better position to understand things in a wider perspective. This broader and wider outlook can enable us to see another area of complementary thinking, namely, the close relationship that exists between *pneuma* and *atman*. In the same way as *pneuma* has to exercise its power against the power of the *sarx*, so, too, the *atman* has to overcome the *samsara*. The more the human *pneuma* realizes itself and its divine dimensions, the more it is related to the supreme Spirit, in the same way as the *atman* is related to the *Brahman*. It is not a question of the opposition of the human and the divine, but of a congenial and complementary approach and in this both the Christian and the Indian speculations converge. The human *pneuma* has two stages of consciousness: one is the awareness the *pneuma* has of its greatness and at the same time the other awareness that it cannot exercise its greatness because of the power of the *sarx*. The second is the awareness that it can be and is strengthened by the divine *pneuma* through which it is empowered to exercise its greatness. It is this consciousness that all persons try to arrive at and perhaps Christian theology can contribute something in this quest of all human persons in their journey towards the goal of their lives.

Challenge of Complementary Thinking in Theological Reflection

Identity and complementary approach are two aspects of all realities, which together constitute fullness and fulfilment. Whereas identity is that aspect of a reality by which it maintains its selfhood, complementary approach is the aspect through which a reality opens itself to be completed and fulfilled by something other than itself. Identity can be understood either as individualized or as relational. Whereas the former tries to grow in isolation, the latter is ready towards relatedness, from which it derives an enhanced growth. When we apply this principle to the realm of religion, there comes up a host of problems. First of all, religion is a very sensitive and emotionally charged area where people are the least prepared for any kind of complementary thinking. It is true that there is no question of surrendering one's religious identity and becoming indifferent to one's own religion. But there is a dimension in which people can maintain their own religious identity and authenticity and at the same time open themselves to other religions and thereby experience a new vitality and dynamism in the realm of their own religious experience. Any real religious identity is to be marked by authenticity and openness through which every religion has to articulate its inner meaning and grow in an atmosphere of mutuality and cooperation.

One of the salutary signs of our times is that religions, as a whole, are showing such healthy signs of cooperation.

As we have seen, Asia is a land of religious pluralism. All the major world religions have their homeland in this continent. It is both a fact and a philosophy of this continent. It is in the context of this pluralism that these religions have to live its identity and complementary dimensions. The question we have to be asking ourselves is this: what then is unique about Christianity? The uniqueness of Christianity is not its exclusiveness and claim for superiority over other religions, rather it is its capacity to transcend the categories of historically conditioned religious traditions and its broad-based approach to all other religions. It is an area of exploration which Asian theologians have to carry on as a major task committed to them by the Church. What we all need is courage to recognize that God is above all considerations based on caste, colour and culture. Asian theologians have to develop a dialogical method of theologizing which is based on the principle of complementary thinking as the outcome of inter-faith dialogue. They have to be sensitive to the context of their theological reflection and be aware of the fact that they are dealing with a pilgrim theology. On the one hand, they have to be totally committed to their religious convictions and, on the other hand, they have to open their mind and heart to see the inexhaustible mystery of God present in every religion. They must also recognize the limits of their own religious experience and its expression and the need of self-purification, readiness to share with others what they have, and a genuine love that calls for an empathetic identification with the others without losing their own identity. There is need of laying greater emphasis on a personal language in contrast to an objective and neutral language because dialogue is not between religions but between believers who are able, in and through their religions, to make an absolute commitment to God who manifests himself in diverse ways. An enriched consciousness of God's plan about the whole human race, which includes different religions, challenges the Christian theologians to work together with the theologians of other religions in harmony and understanding. This does not mean indifferentism or relativism, but attempts at giving birth to a Christian theology capable of adequately accounting for the presence of other religions also, convinced of the fact that one cannot understand oneself except in relation to others. It is our firm conviction that inter-faith theological reflection is one of the major theological issues of our times and it should become the concerns not only of Asian theologians but also of the international community of theologians in spite of the fact that it would involve

certain uneasiness for the traditional understanding of the Christian movement.

The words of Paul Knitter are very much to the point. He wrote: "If Christians, trusting in God and respecting the faith of others, engage in this new encounter with other traditions, they can expect to witness a growth or evolution such as Christianity has not experienced since its first centuries. This growth will paradoxically both preserve the identity of Christianity and at the same time transform it. Such a paradox is no mystery; we are acquainted with it in our personal lives as well as in nature." It is this enriching and transforming experience which Christian theologians are now called upon to articulate, and this they have to do with the same intensity of faith commitment to God who guides the whole human history and leads it to eschatological fulfilment. In the words of Raimundo Panikkar, what the Roman Catholic Church now needs is not a Vatican III, but a Second Jerusalem Council, a Council which will clearly articulate the role of the world religions in the plan of God, which is to be done with a renewed commitment to the very same principle which guided the discussions of the first Jerusalem Council.⁹ It all means that the biblical as well as systematic theologians have to accept their role in the Church as prophetic theologians, sometimes making it necessary to uproot and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow in order to build and to plant (Jer 1:10). The sooner the theologians accomplish this task, the better it is, not only for Asian Christian theology but also for Christian theology taken as whole.

⁹According to many scholars, there are two versions of this Council in the New Testament, the version of Luke in the Acts and the version of Paul in Galatians. Whereas the version of Luke has its accent on the role played by Peter (Acts 15:6-12), the Pauline version (Gal 2:4-10) reserves the credit of the whole event to the role played by Paul himself. But in both versions the issue was something crucial insofar as the early leaders of the Church had to face a new challenge in preaching the gospel.