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CHRIST AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM: AN FABC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. Acknowledging religious pluralism as a reality in Asia, the Asian bishops firmly believe that conversion to Christianity is not the only path to salvation for people of other faiths. They also reaffirm that no one can be saved without participating in Jesus Christ. While the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) primarily focuses on pastoral activities rather than theological reflection, particularly Christological reflection, the Asian bishops seek to articulate Christ's centrality and ultimate role in salvation, including for adherents of other religious traditions who do not profess the Christian faith.[1] Drawing on various documents of the FABC, this essay presents the Asian bishops' understanding of how Jesus Christ works for the salvation of people of other faiths through creation and the Incarnation within God's universal design and through the universal work of the Holy Spirit. The Christ-event, inseparable from the Word, is the decisive manifestation of God and the foundation of salvation for adherents of other faiths.

Keywords: religious pluralism; receptive pluralism; Paschal Mystery of Christ; living Christ; Christ-event

[1] FABC Office of Evangelization (FABC-OE), "Conclusions of the Theological Consulation," nos. 27-28, in *For All the Peoples of Asia* (FAPA) I, 341.

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Introduction

Grounded in God's universal plan of salvation, the Second Vatican Council affirmed the "ray of truth" (AG 2) and grace of God as a gift of the Holy Spirit in other religious traditions (AG 9).[2] According to the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, the Holy Spirit is mysteriously present and active not only in individuals but also in society and history, peoples, cultures, and religions (RM 28).[3] However, the Church has never declared salvific values in all other religious traditions.

In their first meeting with Pope Paul VI at Manila (1970), the Asian bishops acknowledged religious pluralism not merely as a theological issue, as it is often framed in the West, but as a lived reality in Asia. The FABC Office of Theological Concerns interprets the plurality of religions and cultures as part of the divine will through the operative presence of the Spirit: "The plurality of religious traditions is viewed as diverse ways in which people respond to the prompting of the Spirit, who is the author of religious pluralism."[4] The Belgian theologian Terrence Merrigan insists that the FABC viewed religious pluralism as a starting point for theological reflection.[5] In the First

[2] Vatican II, *Decree Ad Gentes*: *On the Mission Activity of the Church*, December 7, 1965 (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2014), nos. 2 and 9.

[3] Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*: *On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate*, 7 December 1990, Vatican Archive, accessed March 15, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html, no. 28.

[4] "We value pluralism as a great gift of the Spirit. There is also a situation of pluralism that results from the different ways people respond to the prompting of the Spirit, which the Asian Bishops have called 'receptive pluralism'. Again, people encounter the Spirit in their context, which is pluralistic in terms of religions, cultures, and world-views." FABC Office of Theological Concerns (FABC-OTC), "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today," no. 5.4, in *FAPA III*, 321.

[5] Asian theologians and the FABC have made it clear that, in the Asian context, pluralism is, in the first place, a starting point for theological reflection, not an object of such reflection. Pluralism here denotes more than the mere fact of

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Plenary Assembly, the FABC consistently affirmed significant and positive elements in other religious traditions and accepted cultural and religious values as God's eternal will in the divine economy of salvation. Although professing that Jesus Christ is the sole Mediator of salvation and that the Church is necessary for human salvation, the FABC maintains that the conversion of adherents of other religions is not always to the Church, but to God and the Kingdom of God.[6] This implies that receiving baptism is not always necessary for people of other faiths to be saved. This essay explores the FABC's reception of Vatican II's teachings and its Christological reflection in the context of religious pluralism.

1. Christology in Relation to God's Universal Design of Salvation

In encountering the diversity of cultures and religions in Asia, the FABC underlines the cosmic dimension of salvation by recognizing the positive values of these traditions within God's universal plan of salvation.[7] These values originate not merely from the sages or founders of these religions through their own ability, but from God's grace, seeds of his Word, the Holy Spirit, and the paschal mystery of Christ.

1.1. Universality of the Word and Grace of God

In the FABC vision, although the Son of God began his visible presence at a particular time and in the religious tradition of Israel, God's eternal plan of salvation is not bound to the Jewish tradition

religious diversity. Terrence Merrigan, "Jacques Dupuis and the Redefinition of Inclusivism," in *In Many and Diverse Way: In Honor of Jacques Dupuis*, eds. Daniel Kendall and Gerald O'Collins (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 66.

[6] FABC Theological Advisory Commission (FABC-TAC), "Theses on Interreligious Dialogue," *FABC Papers*, no. 48, accessed November 24, 2023, https://fabc.org/document/fabc-papers-048/, 16.

[7] Miguel Quatra, *At the Side of the Multitudes: The Kingdom of God and the Mission of the Church in the FABC Documents* [1970-1995] (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2000), 38.

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or Christianity but extends to the whole of humanity. God's universal salvific will is seen as the basis for interpreting the presence of God and the seeds of His Word in other religious traditions. The diverse presence of the seeds of God's Word is expressed in FABC V: "Seeds of the Word are found in cultures and religions."[8] BIRA IV/12 explicitly affirms the presence of Seeds of the Word in cultures and religions: "Our response to the Word in the Spirit should be open to the presence of the Word in all creation and particularly in the different cultural and religious traditions."[9] Through his Word, God is not merely present but "at work, in many different ways, in all religions."[10] The purpose of God's presence and action is to bring the whole of humanity to his salvation. The FABC Office of Education and Student Chaplaincy points out:

> God speaks to people through their cultures and sows the seeds of His Word in every human culture, because God wants all people to be saved. For this reason, Christians should dialogue with other cultures in order to discover the seeds of the Divine Message planted there which take root, grow, and bear fruit.[11]

The Asian bishops also declare their belief in the universality of God's grace. Following the teachings of Vatican II, BIRA II affirms the universal dimension of God's grace and further underlines the mysterious action of grace in members of other religions: "God's grace may lead some to accept baptism and to enter the Church, but it cannot be presumed that this must always be the case. His ways are mysterious and unfathomable, and no one can dictate the direction of His grace."[12]

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[8] Fifth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC V), no. 3.1.1, in *FAPA I*, 279.

[9] Twelfth Bishops' Institutes for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA IV/12), no. 37, in *FAPA I*, 331.

[10] BIRA II, no. 12, in *FAPA I*, 115.

[11] FABC Office of Education and Student Chaplaincy, no. 3, in *FAPA II*, 22.

[12] BIRA II, no. 12, in *FAPA I*, 115.

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Through their reflections on the universality of seeds of the Word and grace of God, the FABC believes that although people of other faiths remain in their own religious traditions and do not desire to be Christians, they can receive God's grace and encounter Jesus Christ, present as the "seeds of the Word," in their own religions. Acknowledging the universal grace and seeds of the Word provides theological elements for Vatican II to profess the "ray of truth" in other religious traditions (NA 2) and for participants of BIRA V/3 to perceive the ineffable divine mystery in all religions.[13] These reflections, Mendoza observes, originate from the FABC's lived experiences of other religions and through its interreligious dialogues with particular religions.[14] This acknowledgement of God's saving presence and action through his grace and Word supports the interpretation that believers can participate in the divine mystery through their own religious traditions.[15] Receiving baptism is not always the only way for humankind to follow God's saving plan.

1.2. Christ's Presence and Action in History

To explain how God works in other cultures and religions, the Asian bishops acknowledge that God's salvific plan begins not with the establishment of the continent and their cultures or the Incarnation, but with creation. In the First Plenary Assembly, the FABC underlines the presence of God in Asian traditions, such as in ancient worship and traditional beliefs, and even in the oriental philosophies. In ways known only to Him, God has been present with the people of Asia from the beginning, involving Himself in their lives and leading them

[13] "Religion as they are manifested in history are complementary perceptions of the ineffable divine mystery, the God-beyond-God. All religions are visions of divine mystery." BIRA V/3, no. 6, in *FAPA II*, 157.

[14] See Ruben C. Mendoza, *A Journey to the Kingdom in the Spirit: Becoming a Church for all the Peoples of Asia* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2014), 51-57.

[15] Mendoza, *A Journey to the Kingdom in the Spirit*, 107.

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to Himself[16]. Thus, for the Asian bishops, from the beginning of Asian history, God has been present in the midst of the people of Asia:

> From the beginning, He has been present in our history, in our traditions. In hidden ways, He has led the peoples of Asia, enlightening our ancient worship, guiding our traditional beliefs, appearing in strange forms in our folklore, and speaking to us in our oriental philosophies. Through the quiet centuries, patiently, He has drawn us to Himself.[17]

God's presence at the beginning of the world is the presence of love.[18] The act of creation is understood as an act of love. Reaffirming God's love as the reason for creation, FABC VIII asserts that human life began only because of God's love. While discussing "the culture of integral life," the FABC also explains that the culture of integral life is rooted in the love of God, the Creator and Giver of all life.[19] The life of the world originates from God's creation or "divine creation."[20] God's love in the beginning of the world is seen as the primary reason for God's divine creation and human life.

While describing the spirituality of dialogue, BIRA IV/12 (1991) expresses the relationship between God and humankind in the moment of creation through the Word. In this dialogue, God comes to humankind through his Word and moves them forward to the Ultimate. The Word is considered the foundation for unity between God and humankind. However, in this dialogue, the FABC does not distinguish between the operation of God's Word and Jesus Christ. The dialogue between God and humankind in the moment of creation has its decisive expression in Jesus Christ as the Word made flesh:

[16] FABC V, no. 3.1.1, in *FAPA I*, 279.

[17] FABC I, "Briefer Statement of the Assembly," no. 31, in *FAPA I*, 24-25.

[18] "Redeemer of our peoples, it is He who has loved them from the dawn of the ages, and who in the fullness of time made their human condition his own." FABC I, no. 44, in *FAPA I*, 18. The FABC VI also expresses God's love in creation: "Creation of all the living out of sheer love." FABC VI, no. 13.2, in FAPA II, 6.

[19] FABC VIII, no. 53, in *FAPA IV*, 20.

[20] FABC V, no. 2.3.9, in *FAPA I*, 279.

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> Christian spirituality is at heart a spirituality of dialogue. It is life in that Spirit which is the bond of relationship between God and humankind, a relationship established through the Word of God. Thus, Christian spirituality is a response in the Spirit to the call of God which comes to us through the Word. It is a spirituality of dialogue in which the whole of humanity is moving towards the Ultimate. This dialogue begins in the very moment of creation (Gen 1:1-3), and has its enfleshed and decisive expression in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh (Jn 1:1-3.14). It thus lays the foundation for unity between God and humankind.[21]

The presence of God is the saving presence. The dialogue between God and humankind is a dialogue of salvation through the Word: "It is the continuation in time and space of the dialogue of salvation initiated by God and brought to a culmination when he uttered his Word in a very concrete historical situation."[22] The relationship between God and humanity is always established through the Word. Through this framework, the Asian bishops interpret the saving role of the Word in relation to God's universal plan of salvation.

God's salvific design is not merely reserved for some individuals, but encompasses social relations, humanity as a whole, and all of creation: "This spirituality embraces the plan of God for the whole creation…, not merely individual salvation but embraces the whole man and all men and the rest of creation."[23] God's plan is not only conceivable in the moment of creation, but also through the continuing process of re-creation. BIRA IV/1 maintains that the destiny of his plan is to gather all peoples and nations into one family, to move them towards his great design of unity as their ultimate goal, and to bring

[21] BIRA IV/12, no. 36, in *FAPA I*, 331.

[22] First Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate (BIMA I), no. 9, in *FAPA I*, 94.

[23] Sixth Bishops' Institute for Social Action (BISA VI), no. 18, in *FAPA I*, 226. "God, in Christ, redeems not only the individual person, but also social relations existing between them. In this context, it is an important obligation and a criterion of all social action of the People of God to hear the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth." FABC-OTC, "The Body of Christ in Pandemic," part 3, A, in *FAPA VII*, 225.

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all things to fulfillment in a new heaven and a new earth.[24] Reflecting on the final prayer of BIRA I, Quatra observes that the fulfillment of God's plan for humanity is not only unity between people of other faiths but building a communion of love and peace with them as true brothers and sisters.[25]

The fullness in God's salvific plan does not merely manifest itself at the end of history, but in transformation of the world into the fullness of life in Christ, the Word of Life,[26] through the Holy Spirit. [27] The fullness of life rooted in the life of the Trinity is not only the destiny of Christians but of all Asians. Together with the Asians, the FABC wishes to pray, to work, to struggle for a better human life, and promote the fullness of life in social, economic, cultural, and all human dimensions.[28] This fulfillment does not exclude secular and profane values. It manifests a loving relationship between God and humanity in their concrete cultural, religious, social, economic, and political situations.[29]

Jesus Christ is the center of fulfillment in God's plan. God's plan is to bring all things to fulfillment in Christ.[30] Jesus Christ is described as the climax of God's plan. In Christ as the Incarnate Word, God has personally entered human history, dialogued with human beings and

[24] BIRA IV/11, nos. 8-9, in *FAPA I*, 319.

[25] Quatra holds that "the destiny of all humans is to live as true brothers and sisters, and to achieve a communion of love, peace and unity among all people." Quatra, At the Side of the Multitudes, 34. Also see BIRA I, "Final Prayer," in *FAPA I*, 112.

[26] FABC VIII, no. 58, in *FAPA IV*, 21.

[27] "The fullness of life can be realized only in and through Christ and his Gospel, and by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit." *FABC VI*, no. 3, in *FAPA II*, 2.

[28] FABC VI, no. 3, in *FAPA II*, 2.

[29] FABC II, "Summaries of the Workshop Reports," no. 2, in *FAPA I*, 44.

[30] First Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate (BIMA I), no. 12, in *FAPA I*, 94-95.

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offered them salvation.[31] It is Jesus Christ who renews all things, heals, transforms, and redeems humanity,[32] and who is the fullness of truth and salvation.[33] The mission of Christ is to save not only humanity but also the world.[34] Thus, in working for God's plan for transformation and fulfillment of the world, Jesus Christ is involved in all dimensions of human life.

Considering the Asian way of thinking, which focuses on personal experience,[35] Asian Christians consider Jesus Christ as the way for them to reach God through their lived experiences, and then to bear witness of God to others. According to Peter Phan, Jesus Christ, for the Asian Christians, is not only the only Savior, but their personal Savior: "The strength and fervor of this witness are born not out of the theological conviction that Jesus is the only Savior but out of the deep experience that he is the personal Savior for me."[36] In the goal of proclaiming Christ through dialogue and deeds, the FABC through interreligious dialogue discovers images of the hidden Christ in other religious traditions and introduces to them the other Asian faces of

[31] "God so loved the world… that He sent his only Son into the world not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved by him. To save, to liberate the world was the mission of Jesus, who 'came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many' (Mk 10:45)." Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church (ACMC), "Conclusions," no. 22, in *FAPA I*, 72. Also see FABC-OE, "Conclusions of the Theological Consultation," no. 28, in *FAPA I*, 341.

[32] See FABC IV, no. 3.7.5, in *FAPA I*, 188.

[33] BIMA II, no. 14, in *FAPA I*, 101.

[34] "God so loved the world… that He sent his only Son into the world not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved by him. To save, to liberate the world was the mission of Jesus, who 'came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many' (Mk 10;45)." ACMC, "Conclusions," no. 22, in *FAPA I*, 72.

[35] Felix Wilfred, "Asia and Western Christianity," *Pacifica* 2 (1989): 272-274.

[36] Peter Phan, "Ecclesia in Asia: Challenges for Asian Christianity," in *The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries*, ed. Peter Phan (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 256.

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Christ, such as Beloved Brother, Liberator, Evangelizer, Servant, and the Way of Salvation.[37] Through the discovery of these images, the Asian Christians' experiences of Christian faith can be enriched and can enrich others in interreligious dialogue.

In summary, from the Asian bishops' perspective, God's saving plan is seen as a global plan that begins at the moment of creation, and has developed in history to restore and to bring all things to the final fulfillment in a new creation, a total liberation and reconciliation between God and the whole world. Christ, the Word made flesh, is central to God's salvific design. If someone asks how the FABC justifies placing Christ in the center of God's saving plan, it is hard to find the answers in the FABC documents. Quatra comments that it is possible to go further on this question, but the FABC does not aim to interpret Christological doctrine systematically but rather to reflect on pastoral aspects. The FABC mentioned Christology in its documents occasionally.[38] The FABC and its offices held a number of conferences and wrote a great number of final statements, but not all of them were published. The researcher was unable to find all the documents of the FABC. Additionally, the ultimate aim of this paper is not to explore Christological dimensions of the FABC documents but reflections relevant in interpreting the FABC regnocentric approach.

2. Christology in Relation to Pneumatology

2.1. The Universality of the Holy Spirit

Besides the universal presence of grace, the FABC acknowledges the universal presence and operation of the Holy Spirit as the agent of

[37] A. Alangaram, *Christ of the Asian Peoples: Toward an Asian Contextual Christology Based on the Documents of Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences* (Bangalore, India: Asian Trading Corporation, 1999), 70-73. Also see FABC V, no. 4.1, in *FAPA I*, 282.

[38] Quatra, *At the Side of the Multitudes*, 63: "It is possible to go further and question the documents on why Christ occupies such a central place in God's salvific plan. The problem was never systematically faced by the FABC, which has been concerned with Christology only occasionally."

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positive values in religions. In the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) Pope John Paul II declared the universal presence and action of the Holy Spirit in individuals, societies, cultures, and religions. However, according to the Pope, the universal action of the Holy Spirit is understood as preparing people of other faiths to gain full maturity in Christ through entering the Church.[39] Participants of BIRA IV/3 in 1986 also asserted the mysterious presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the Asian nations and religions: "It is the same Spirit, who has been active in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ and in the Church, who was active amongst all peoples before the incarnation and is active amongst the nations, religions and peoples of Asia today."[40] The Holy Spirit is at work not only in human souls but also in the contexts people encounter, such as social, economic, political, and cultural structures.[41] Furthermore, the FABC stated that the Holy Spirit is active beyond the confines of the visible Church.[42]

Going further, the FABC, in the context of diverse cultures and religions in Asia, acknowledges plural ways people respond to God's call through the Holy Spirit and proposes a theological concept of "receptive pluralism":

> People encounter the Holy Spirit within their context, which is pluralistic in terms of religions, cultures, and worldviews. In this light, we affirm a stance of receptive pluralism. That is, the many ways of responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit must be continually in conversion with one another.[43]

Declaring their belief in "receptive pluralism" in this text means that the participants of the BIRA IV/3 acknowledge the various ways the Spirit works in other religious traditions and the diverse ways

[39] Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, nos. 28-29.

[40] BIRA IV/3, no. 6, in *FAPA I*, 259.

[41] BIRA IV/3, no. 16, in *FAPA I*, 261.

[42] Ibid.

[43] BIRA IV/3, no. 16, in *FAPA I*, 261.

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humans respond to the action of God in their own religions through the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. Religions reflect ways the Spirit inspires their followers to recognize the ray of truth and divine mystery and respond to God's saving work in their own religions. Spiritual experiences in religions manifested in their scriptures and creeds can be considered ways their members respond to God's revelation through his Spirit. BIRA IV/7 expresses: "The great religions of Asia with their respective creeds, cults, and codes reveal to us diverse ways of responding to God whose Spirit is active in all peoples and cultures."[44] The Holy Spirit is active in other religious traditions, in their members' lives, in their sacred books, cults, creeds, and prayers.

Instead of considering divine mystery in other cultures and religions as mere preparation for the Gospel declared by the encyclical RM 29, the FABC promotes interreligious dialogue between Christianity and other religious traditions. Since the same Spirit works in religious traditions, interreligious dialogue is seen as a way the Church discerns the Spirit's presence and activity in other religions. Interreligious dialogue is seen as the work of the Holy Spirit: "The journey of dialogue therefore, at its very core, entails perceiving and honoring the divine Spirit at work in all peoples, cultures, and religions."[45]

Furthermore, the participants of BIRA V/3 (in 1995) held that religions as they are manifested in history are "complementary perceptions" of the divine mystery.[46] FABC I accepted other religions as "significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation" because they are mysteriously given the ray of truth and divine revelation through the Holy Spirit. In dialogue, the

[44] BIRA IV/7, no. 12, in *FAPA I*, 310.

[45] First Formation Institute for Interreligious Affairs (FIRA I), nos. 2.4-2.5, in *FAPA III*, 120. Also see BIRA IV/3, no. 10, in *FAPA I*, 260.

[46] Beyond the extremes of inclusivism and exclusivism, pluralism is accepted in resonance with the constitutive plurality of reality. Religions as they are manifested in history are complementary perceptions of the ineffable divine mystery, the God-beyond-God. All religions are visions of divine mystery. BIRA V/3, no. 6, in *FAPA II*, 157.

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Church discovers the presence and action of the Holy Spirit and the seeds of the Word in other religious traditions: "There is no Spirit without the Word; and there is no Word without the Spirit."[47] Since the discernment of the Spirit's presence is inseparable from Jesus Christ, discovering the Spirit's action in other religions provides an understanding of the mystery of Jesus Christ within them.[48] The goal in this mutual complementarity and enrichment among religions is for them to grow together towards the fullness of life, that is, unity, love, truth, justice, and peace,[49] and towards the fulfillment of God's saving plan. The diversity of cultures and religions in Asia is not a threat to Christian unity, not a negative issue nor something to be abolished, but something to be promoted and celebrated because "it represents richness and strength" to Christianity.[50] Acknowledging the context of diversity in this way, the FABC fosters the Asian churches to promote unity in diversity.[51] Since the Church is not only enriched but enabled to understand more fully the reality of religious pluralism, religious pluralism, Mendoza observes, can be seen as God's gift to the Church and to the world.[52]

In an explanation of complementarity among various religions, the Theological Advisory Commission maintains that complementarity

[47] FABC-OTC, "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today," no. 3.10.2.3, in *FAPA III*, 298. Also see FABC I, nos. 14-16, in *FAPA I*, 14-15.

[48] The Office of Theological Concern states that "the more we follow the leading of the Spirit, the deeper and closer will also be our understanding of the mystery of Jesus Christ. It also helps us to relate in a harmonious and integral way the universal plan of God manifested in Jesus Christ with our Asian history and experiences." FABC-OTC, "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today," Introduction, in *FAPA III*, 238.

[49] BIRA I, nos. 5 and 15, in *FAPA I*, 110-111.

[50] FABC-OTC, "Methodology: Asian Christian Theology," no. 1.4, in *FAPA III*, 336.

[51] FABC-OTC, "Methodology," 336.

[52] Mendoza, *A Journey to the Kingdom in the Spirit*, 77.

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among religions regards the historically and culturally conditioned ways in which people have experienced and expressed their relation to the Absolute.[53] Since every religion is limited in the experience of God's revelation and all religions are considered mutually complementary, BIRA V/3 declared that no particular religion can be considered the norm for other religions.

With regard to explaining the limits of the religions, Michael Amaladoss, an Indian theologian, adds that every religion, even Christianity, is limited and relative not because Reality is in any way limited, but because the religion's capacity to experience and to express the Absolute is limited.[54] Avoiding the term relativeness regarding Christianity, the FABC does not explicitly claim that Christianity encounters limitations or needs to fulfill its doctrine from other religions, but perceives limitations in Christian experiences and Christian expressions of their experiences to God.[55] Of course, both the FABC and Amaladoss avoid any kind of indifferentism that declares all religions are the same.[56]

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[53] Complementarity among religions is not affirmed with regard to the Absolute to which each one feels committed, but to the historically and culturally conditioned ways in which people in a pilgrim state have experienced and expressed their relation to and the significance-to-life of the Absolute. FABC-TAC, "Thesis on Interreligious Dialogue," 14.

[54] Michael Amaladoss, *Making all Things New: Dialogue, Pluralism, and Evangelization in Asia* (Gujarat, India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1990), 229-230.

[55] "We know from experience that any human knowledge is limited… In theological knowledge, the expression always falls short of reality, precisely because we are dealing with a mystery which cannot be fully comprehended. Since no expression is perfect, additional expressions are not only possible, but beneficial for a fuller understanding of the mystery." FABC-OTC, "Methodology: Asian Christian Theology," no. 1.5, in *FAPA III*, 337.

[56] BIRA IV/10, no. 10, in FAPA I, 314. Also see Amaladoss, *Making all Things New*, 250.

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2.2. Christology in Relation to Pneumatological Dimension

Although the Holy Spirit described in the FABC documents is not always directly related to the Word or Jesus Christ, the Spirit is inseparable from Christ. Participants of the BIRA IV/3 identify gifts of the Holy Spirit in relation to the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit as the gift of the Father to humankind in the Son and the Holy Spirit who bears witness to Jesus Christ.[57] Although professing the inseparable action between Christ and the Holy Spirit, Quatra also expresses the distinct action of the Holy Spirit in relation to the Father and to Jesus Christ. In the former relation, Christ and the Holy Spirit act conjointly. The latter considers Christ as the one who acts through the Spirit.[58] Thus, it is possible to call the Spirit the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of Christ.

Participants of BIRA IV/12 see the Holy Spirit as "the bond" of the relationship between God and humanity, a relationship established through the Word.[59] The Holy Spirit is the link in which God establishes a relation with humanity through the Word and is the outpouring of the Father who communicates himself through Jesus Christ.[60]

Creation is not only the work of the Father and the Son but also of the Spirit. The FABC VI gathered in 1995 named "the Creator Spirit" who relates all life of the world to creation. Then in the document "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today" (1997), the FABC Office of Theological Concern confirmed the intimate relationship between the Word and the Holy Spirit in God's work of creation: "The Spirit of God is intimately

[57] BIRA IV/3, nos. 9-11, in *FAPA I*, 260.

[58] Quatra, *At the Side of the Multitudes*, 67.

[59] "It is the life in that Spirit which is the bond of the relationship between God and humankind, a relationship established through the Word of God. Thus, Christian spirituality is a response in the Spirit to the call of God which comes to us through the Word." BIRA IV/12, no. 36, in *FAPA I*, 331.

[60] See BIRA V/3, no. 5, in *FAPA II*, 157.

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related to the Word of God. Already in creation, we find the intimate relationship between the Spirit and the Word. If it was the Spirit who was at work in creation, it was through the Word that God called the universe into existence."[61]

Moreover, Jesus is considered "the source of the Spirit." With regard to the Spirit given to Jesus' disciples at Pentecost, Jesus, according to the Office of Theological Concern, is seen as the one who sends the Spirit from the Father so that Jesus and the Father will be present with Jesus' disciples. The FABC considers the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Christ and the dependence of the Spirit on Christ. If Jesus Christ is the Truth, the Spirit who guides people to Jesus Christ is called the "Spirit of Truth."

> The Holy Spirit is presented as the Spirit of Jesus Christ, especially in the Gospel of John. The giving of the Spirit to the disciples through the breathing of Jesus (Jn 20:22) is an indication of it. The Spirit is given by the Father at the request of Jesus (Jn 14:16) and in the name of Jesus (Jn 14:26). It is Jesus who sends the Spirit from the Father (Jn 15:26). Through the Spirit, Jesus and the Father will be present with the disciples. The Holy Spirit is qualified as the 'Spirit of Truth' while Jesus is the Truth.[62]

The Holy Spirit is the one whom Jesus himself breathed on his disciples commissioning them to fulfill what Jesus had begun. Since mission is understood as "a continuation in the Spirit of the mission of Christ,"[63] the Spirit enlightens the Church to continue Christ's mission. The Spirit of Christ renews the face of the earth and leads the mission of Christ to fulfillment.

However, Jesus Christ is seen as dependent on the Spirit in his life and ministry, from the incarnation to the resurrection. Reflecting on Biblical passages, the FABC-OTC writes:

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[61] FABC-OTC, "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today," no. 3.5, in *FAPA III*, 287.

[62] FABC-OTC, "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today," no. 3.6.2, in *FAPA III*, 289.

[63] FABC V, no. 3.1.2, in *FAPA I*, 280.

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> Jesus is conceived and born of the Holy Spirit. Jesus starts his public ministry having been anointed by the Holy Spirit. He is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. The presence of the Spirit in Jesus was manifested in his preaching the Gospel, in his teaching with authority, in his miracles, in his power to forgive sins, in his prophetic knowledge and utterances, and finally in his death and resurrection.[64]

Jesus Christ is truly seen as Spirit-filled and Spirit-led.[65] The relationship between Christ and the Spirit is not limited to creation and incarnation but extends to revelation, sanctification, and salvation. Moreover, the FABC recognizes the Spirit's action as representing and communicating the mystery of Christ. The BIRA IV/3 states:

> We affirm any effort towards an experience of immediate access to the Spirit to be seen in relation to Jesus Christ to whom the Spirit bears witness. What is done in the name of the Holy Spirit must be in keeping with the life, teachings, and mission of Jesus Christ… What the Spirit does, and continues to do, is inseparable from what Christ said and did.[66]

In this text, BIRA IV/3 stresses the close connection between the action of the Holy Spirit and the paschal mystery of Christ. Additionally, the FABC reaffirms the declaration of Vatican II concerning the relationship between the Spirit and Christ's paschal mystery: "The Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal

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[64] FABC-OTC, "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today," no. 3.6, in *FAPA III*, 288. FABC VI also states: "Conceived in the virgin's womb by the Spirit's power, anointed by the Spirit at his baptism in the Jordan, driven to the wilderness by the Spirit to be prepared for his mission, sent to preach the good news of salvation by the Spirit's action, Jesus ushers in the new creation, the fullness of life in God. As the Risen One, he breathes the Holy Spirit on his disciples, making them partakers of his life and mission." FABC VI, no. 12, in *FAPA II*, 6.

[65] "Filled with the Spirit, he [Jesus] preached the Good News of the Kingdom of God and commanded his disciples to do the same." FABC V, no. 3.1.1, in *FAPA I*, 279.

[66] BIRA IV/3, no. 11, in *FAPA I*, 260.

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mystery."[67] Since the Holy Spirit is mysteriously present and operative beyond human history, social, cultural, and religious structures, the Christ-event consisting of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is also mysteriously present and operative in all human situations. Quatra rightly underlines that according to the FABC, "in the paschal mystery of Christ, the Christ-event transcends, through the Holy Spirit, the limits of time and space and extends itself in all dimensions of the whole history."[68] Through the Holy Spirit, the Christ-event, or the living Christ, has been active in human history before the Incarnation, after Jesus Christ's resurrection, and in the present situations of all people. Wherever and whenever the Holy Spirit is present and active, Christ also is.

3. Uniqueness and Universality of Christ

The uniqueness of Christ is not the primary aim of the FABC's documents. The belief that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world is not a problematic issue in the bishops' discussion. Explaining this reality, Mendoza notes that the traditional proclamation regarding Jesus' uniqueness is not problematic for the bishops, but the question of "how Jesus is to be proclaimed and how the Church's faith in him is to be reinterpreted in a manner that is faithful to the Christian tradition and, at the same time, is intelligible and meaningful for Asians."[69] The Asian bishops focus their interpretations on Christ's salvific role in the context of religious pluralism: "The main questions are the following: how do we understand the centrality and decisiveness of Jesus Christ in the context of religious pluralism?"[70] Additionally, the uniqueness of Christ is understood not only as the uniqueness of salvation in

[67] FABC-OE, "Conclusions of the Theological Consultation," no. 49, in *FAPA I*, 346. Also see Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22.

[68] Quatra, *At the Side of the Multitudes*, 87.

[69] Mendoza, *A Journey to the Kingdom in the Spirit*, 238.

[70] FABC-OE, "Conclusions of the Theological Consultation," no. 27, in *FAPA I*, 341.

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and through Christ but also as the fulfillment of all things in Christ as God's universal plan of salvation: "In the context of dialogue we tried to penetrate the meaning of uniqueness of Christ in our own inner experience, in our contact with others, in the very plan of God to bring all things to the fulfillment in Christ as head."[71]

Reflecting on the mysterious presence and action of the Christ-event offers the bishops a profound understanding of the Incarnation in the Asian context. In the Incarnation, Christ made "his own totally of the human condition,"[72] not in abstract beings but in concrete persons determined in time and place.[73] In the First Plenary Assembly, the Asian bishops implicitly confessed that human histories, traditions, and religions are traced by the living Christ as "Christ of the peoples of Asia":

> Christ of the peoples of Asia… You have been present already in their histories and traditions. In hidden ways, you have led them, because for them too, you are the *Way*. In ways unknown to us you have enlightened them in their worship, their beliefs, and their philosophies, since for them, you are the *Truth*. In diverse manners, you have already made yourself present in their lives, for you are their *Life*. From the beginning, you have called all peoples, and from your Cross, you have drawn them to yourself.[74]

In hidden ways, Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life was present at the beginning of creation and has called all the peoples of Asia to communicate with him and has enlightened them in their own religions and cultures. While expressing the cosmic dimension,

[71] BIMA I, no. 10, in *FAPA I*, 94.

[72] The FABC I affirms: "…God's Son assumes the totality of our fallen human condition so that He might make it truly His own, and redeem it in his paschal mystery." FABC I, no. 12, in *FAPA I*, 14.

[73] In BIRA IV/7 the bishops write: "For us Christians, such a commitment flows from our faith in Jesus Christ who identified himself through his incarnation with every person and with every aspect of human life." BIRA IV/7, no. 9, in *FAPA I*, 309.

[74] FABC I, no. 46, in *FAPA I*, 19.

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the bishops, in this text, are not speaking about the role of the Word but Christ of the Cross, as the Redeemer. In number 12 of this final statement, the FABC emphasizes the saving action of Christ by stating that the Son assumes every human condition, makes it truly his own, and redeems it.[75] Through the power of the Holy Spirit the living Christ has been active and present in all other religious traditions and human situations.[76] Likewise, Quatra underlines that for the Asian bishops, the living Christ of the Gospel is a concrete answer of God to the injustice, marginalization, poverty, oppression, and suffering of the Asian people.[77] Reflecting on the living Christ provides the key not simply to encountering religio-cultural dimensions, but also socio-political issues.

The paschal mystery of the living Christ is considered the decisive action of God in human history, including traditions and religions. The FABC maintains that in Jesus Christ God has personally entered human history and that the Christ-event ushers in the renewal of creation and constitutes the decisive step of God's Kingdom on earth.[78] Quatra also concludes that the Christ-event is not understood in terms of beginning, but the foundation, the personal entrance of God into history, and the decisive step in God's universal design of salvation.[79] The Christ-event is decisive also because it has manifested and sealed the relationship between God and humanity. Through the influence of the living Christ God's own destiny has become "involved with

[75] FABC I, no. 12, in *FAPA I*, 14.

[76] FABC I, no. 46, in *FAPA I*, 19.

[77] Quatra, *At the Side of the Multitudes*, 79 and 89.

[78] FABC-OE, "Conclusions of the Theological Consultation," no. 28, in *FAPA I*, 341.

[79] "They [the Asian bishops] describe the meaning of the Christ-event not in terms of beginning, but by having recourse to expressions like 'to lay the foundation,' 'to incarnate,' or enfleshed moment,' personal entrance of God into history,' decisive step.' That is to say that God's universal salvific plan effectively covers the whole history, and each age falls equally, without discrimination under the action of divine grace." Quatra, *At the Side of the Multitudes*, 87.

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humanity's destiny."[80] Therefore, the human history extended by the Christ-event to cultures, traditions, and religions becomes the history of salvation in Christ.

Summary

From the Asian bishops' perspective, God's design of universal salvation acts through his grace and Word, through the Holy Spirit and the living Christ in all aspects of human history. God's salvific love through the Spirit and the living Christ has been present and active not only in the incarnate Christ but also in the condition of every individual. The paschal mystery representing both the principle of a historical-human foundation and God's saving plan is the decisive foundation of salvation for Christians and people of other faiths.[81]

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[80] Quatra, *At the Side of the Multitudes*, 87.

[81] Quatra, *At the Side of the Multitudes*, 88.

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