

The Emerging Challenges to the Church in Asia and their Implications to Christian Education

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Introduction

The world is progressively becoming interdependent with interlocking interests and concern. The destiny of Asia is inextricably bound up with global developments. So also will the evolutions in Asia, where more than half of humanity lives, will have their repercussions on the rest of the world. There is a growing awareness that humanity is facing many threats and perils. They are as varied as the uncertainty of food resources and the risk of famine, the proliferation of nuclear arms, unemployment, the pollution of the atmosphere and the ocean. The fragility of the ecosystem may well have been responsible for arousing the awareness of the interdependence of problems. These problems can be averted only through resolute efforts and measures taken on the international level.

Although these threats to life are global, they also have local manifestations. In one place, the threats may be viewed as violation of justice, in another, a menace to peace and still in another as the abuse of land, sea and air posing a hazard not only to humanity but to the whole of creation.

There are formidable challenges facing Asia at the present moment of its history. Here are some of the dominant trends and socio-cultural processes in the Asian continent seen against the backdrop of global developments. The variety of situations, however, in the religious, cultural and social realms of the whole region should always be taken into account while studying these dominant trends.

The Process of Modernization of Asia and the Emerging Need for the Centrality of Culture

Asia today finds itself in a rapid process of modernization. We find at work, in varying degrees, elements of tradition hand in hand with forces of modernization. Some of the components of the so-called modernity are science, technology, industrialization, fast means of communications, urbanization, new educational, political and economic systems. These have profoundly influenced traditional cultures, and even more deeply, they have brought about transformation in attitudes, values and consciousness of individuals and groups. For modernization implies a new relationship to time, to nature and society.

One of the consequences of the process of modernization is the relegation of the cultural dimension of life to the background. The economy has been the all-embracing and dominant factor in human and social life. But because of the adverse consequences that this situation has brought about, the need to put culture back to its rightful place was put into bold relief.

The culture of a people, it must be noted, expresses its spirit, its collective unconscious. Just as the trees of the forest help preserve the soil from erosion, so does the cultural roots of a people give a sense of identity and strength to withstand the oppression and exploitation of the powerful. It is in this cultural perspective that Mahatma Gandhi¹ stated:

I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any, I refuse to live in other people's house as an interloper, a beggar or a slave.

Culture is the living embodiment of the experience of a people transmitted from generation to generation. It is the uniquely specific way of a people's knowing, feeling and perceiving reality and interacting with it.

The *Puebla Documents* commenting on the *Gaudium et Spes* formulation of the meaning of culture describe the same as: "the specific way in which human beings belonging to a given people cultivate their relationship with nature, with each other, and with God in order to arrive at an 'authentic and full humanity.' It is the shared lifestyle that characterizes different peoples around the earth and so we can speak about a 'plurality of cultures'." (GS, 53; EN, 20) (*PUEBLA*, 386)

Even for economic development in the years to come, one will have to take into serious account the culture of the people from which stem values, motivation and attitudes. There are indeed great challenges in the

¹Mahatma Gandhi cited by Felix Wilfred in "Asia on the threshold of the 1990s, Emerging Trends and Socio-Cultural Processes at the Turn of the Century," FABC Papers No. 55, p. 22.

area of culture. Considering its central importance, efforts should be directed towards responding to this situation. A two-fold initiative seems necessary for the cultural reconstruction of Asian societies.

Something new is springing from the multifaceted and complex Asian socio-political and religious situation. The traditional cultural should re-arrange itself and dynamically assist at the birth of a new Asia. Instead of lamenting the disintegration and decline of the past cultural heritage - which would presuppose a very static view of it - moral and spiritual resources should be drawn from it and injected into the stream of present socio-cultural life and process. This can only happen through a conscious and sustained cultural intervention, i.e., through education, in particular, mass media communications, conscientization and the like. The socio-economic process is doomed to be mindless without this necessary humanizing role of culture and will bring about an anti-human subculture.

In the cultural reconstruction of Asian societies, religions as an animating force of culture have an important role to play. This role can be played effectively in the complex situation today when the various religious traditions are in dialogue with each other. To be able to make its own contribution, each religious tradition needs to re-interpret itself anew against the background of today's Asian situation.

Efforts must be exerted to overcome the situation of contradictions and structural dualisms which the existence of two worlds in any country creates. There is a need for "healing at the root" of the growing social and economic disparity giving to a hedonistic culture of luxury, on the one side, and a culture of want and destitution, on the other. A human and equitable socio-economic development can only be the foundation for the emergence of a holistic cultural framework. It is hoped that in the years to come movements for cultural regeneration will emerge and spread all over Asia.

Science and Technology with their Social Implications in Asian Context

Another important factor which should be taken into account in the creation of a modern Asia is the imperative of linking science and technology to social justice. It is now a fact that in our times science and technology have come to acquire a political and social dimension. To what purpose the marvellous achievements of human ingenuity should be directed does not any more rest with scientists and technological experts. Much of the scientific research and technological innovation today is pursued for goals of industrialization and militarization and for expanding military-industrial complex. Given the situation of hunger, disease, illiteracy, etc., it is imperative that political powers in our societies and the international order take up the question of science and technology in

relation to resolving these basic questions. In this vein, it is a hopeful sign that movements are springing up in Asian countries which are making science and technology serve for the benefit of the marginalized in society.

The demand for a science and technology with human face and social concern will get further strengthened in the years to come. This trend will share the objectives of the ecological movement which is putting more pressure on science and technology to be developed in line with environmental concerns.

Ecology and Impoverishment

The ecological question as a global issue concerns the environment of our planet and its future. The so-called greenhouse effect and the rise of temperature linked to it have their repercussions in low lying Asian countries. There are then environmental dangers posed by the greenhouse effect, acid rains, nuclear energy waste, and the like.

What is of immediate concern is the pressing question of the *daily threat to survival* posed to the lives of the marginalized peoples in Asian countries. This threat to survival derives from the abuse of natural resources. The overwhelming majority of Asian depend for their livelihood on the products forest, land and sea. Now these resources of nature are being more and more diverted today to answer the needs of a market-oriented economy and industry. This type of economy has severely ruptured the life-supporting base. Therefore, the marginal groups in Asian societies, such as tribals, fishermen, poor peasants, not only do not benefit from the present model of development, but they are even the ones who pay the *cost* of such development which make use of the resources meant for their survival, but from which they do not benefit at all.

In the years ahead, a distinctively Asian approach to the environmental question needs to be developed.

Educational Responses to the Challenges in the Present-day Asia

The role of education for the cultural reconstruction of Asian societies is most significant. One of the most important contributions of the Church in Asia is its service in the field of education. There is a need to discern the signs of the times in order to clarify the identity and role of Christian educators in Asia.

Moving towards a New Humanism in Asian Education

The Vatican II documents speak of a new humanism that has stemmed from the importance of the scientific and technological mentality of our days. Now the scientific and technological problems are closely related with human problems as well. The understanding of these relationships,

the attempt to clarify and define them serve as the basis of the new humanism. Pope Paul VI, in his *Populorum Progressio*, spoke of "the search for a new humanism which will enable man to find himself anew by embracing the high values of friendship, prayer and contemplation." Incidentally, these values most aptly converge with the Asian values.

This new humanism directs science and technology towards service to the individual and to society with utmost respect for human dignity and rights.

Moreover, this new humanism is a *humanism for all*. Vatican II states that in the new humanism "man is defined before all else by his responsibility to his brother in the court of history." (GS, 55). Thus this new humanism must include in its program the promotion of every person without any distinction of social classes, creeds, races, nationalities, sexes.

The new humanism will also try to extend efficaciously the sharing of material and cultural wealth in an ever widening social strata. But this does not imply mere accumulation of goods and services even for the benefit of the majority. Not even the availability of the many real benefits provided in recent times by science and technology, the computer sciences, in particular, bring freedom from every form of slavery. There is a better understanding today of an authentic human development. "Development, which is not only economic, must be oriented according to the reality and vocation of man seen in his totality, namely, according to his interior dimension." (SRS, 28) This emphasis on man's interiority is again an Asian characteristic trait. Education or the access to moral and cultural values is still seen as the most decisive factor in the social advancement of peoples.

This new humanism is not closed in upon man but is open to the Transcendent. In fact, its clearly Christian lineage is most apparent.

There is a need for a renewal in education which takes into account this new humanism. Education, in its broadest meaning, is the integral development of the human personality. Education, when formulating its aims, mapping out its objectives, programmes and methodologies, centers all and bases all on the concept of the human person.

A renewal in education is needed to prepare the young for a flexible and responsible response to the rapid, profound and far-reaching changes in social, political and international relationships. Asia today is a continent in great ferment, in the gestation manifesting remarkable vitality and dynamism. The youth of Asia and of the world will live in the next millenium as citizens of a global village where what would be prevalent is instant communication and information, mutual interdependence of members of a single human family who are responsible for the finite resources of our planet.

It is of little use preparing pupils for a world that is already passing into history. Parents and teachers must look beyond today, set their eyes into the future and try to get a glimpse of the emerging new order.

The Role of Christian Educators in the Renewed Concept of Education

Pope John Paul II, addressing a group of educators said: "You are fulfilling one of the most important and delicate tasks for the future of the Church and society." And he continued to say that the first and essential duty of culture, in general, as well as every culture is *education*. Education, in fact, consists of man becoming more and more human, of his ability to "be" more, rather than to "have" more, and consequently through everything he "has" and "owns", of his ability to "be" more and more fully human. He ended his discourse telling them: "You are the builders of the person's dignity."

The Second Vatican Council gives specific attention to the vocation of an educator. Every person who contributes to integral human formation is an educator. But teachers have made integral human formation their very profession.

Every school and every educator in the school must strive to form strong and responsible individuals who are capable of making free and correct choices, thus preparing young people, especially, to open themselves more and more to reality, and to form in themselves a clear idea of the meaning of life. Each type of education, however, is influenced by a particular concept of what it means to be a human person.

The Document of the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education on *Lay Catholics in School: Witness to Faith* states that in today's pluralistic world, the Catholic educator must consciously inspire his or her activity with the Christian concept of the human person, in communion with the Magisterium of the Church. (*LCS*, 18)

The Christian concept of the human person includes the defence of human rights, the dignity of the human person as a son or daughter of God, made into His image and likeness. It also attributes to the human person the fullest liberty, freed from sin itself by Christ. Likewise, every man or woman has a most exalted destiny which is the definitive and total possession of God Himself through love. (*LCS*, 18)

Christian education calls for establishing the closest possible relationship of solidarity among persons through mutual love and the building of community. It also calls for the fullest development of all that is human, for our Creator has made us masters of the world. Finally it proposes Christ, the Incarnate Son of God and Perfect Man, as both Model and means: To imitate Him is for all men and women, the inexhaustible source of personal and communitarian perfection. (*LSC*, 18)

The key to the true upliftment of men and women, to make them more fully human is none other than the mystery of the Incarnation. Pedro Poveda, a recognized humanist and educator, had pointedly marked this truth when he said:

The Incarnation, when we grasp its full meaning, the Person of Christ, his nature and his life give us the surest way to become holy, enabling us to reach true holiness being at the same time truly human in the real sense of the word.²

Education for Cultural Reconstruction

Education in the Asian context must foster the appreciation, evaluation and promotion of the rich cultural heritage, and deep spirituality of Asian peoples. There is a need to formulate an educational plan as an expression of the new vision of the Church's role in Asia and of the new spirituality which is authentic, holistic and relevant to the Asian situation.

In the Final Statement of the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC in 1990, we find a call to respond to the aspirations of the peoples of Asia with the spirituality of those who put their complete trust in the Lord. This is the spirituality of the powerless, of the *anawim*. It consists in the virtues promoted by active non-violence such as renunciation and simplicity, compassion and solidarity with the poor, meekness and humility. These Gospel values resonate deeply with the cultures of Asia. According to the Asian Bishops, this spirituality expresses the Asian peoples communion with God, docility to His Spirit and their following of Jesus. With it, the disharmonies in our Asian world are challenged and a spirituality of harmony is developed, moving away from images of exterior organization, power or mere secular effectiveness to images of simplicity, of humble presence and service.

This spirituality prepares for inter-religious dialogue, a faith and hope in the Lord of history, a sense of wonder at his mighty work, a hunger for the saving message and invites all to share in the ultimate goal of human striving - the inner life of God. With respect to the inter-religious dialogue, which has a special urgency in the Asian world, it is important to note that "inter-religious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission." (RM 55).

There is a need for inter-religious dialogue as a way of seeing in our brothers and sisters of other faiths a "ray of that truth which enlightens all men." (NA, 2) This task demands firstly, attaining a deeper knowledge and appreciation of our own Christian faith and secondly, an openness in understanding the religious convictions of others. Together with our fidel-

²Pedro Poveda, *Escritos Espirituales*. Iter Ediciones, S.A., Madrid, 1968, p. 203.

ity to the Christian faith tradition, we are called to respect the genius and the genuine values enshrined in the religious-cultural traditions of other peoples. "Dialogue is based on hope and love and will bear fruit in the Spirit." (RM, 56)

Catholic Schools and Universities in the Asian Region can do a great service in the preservation, enrichment and transmission of the particular culture where they find themselves inserted as well as their evangelization. This, in other words, is the inculturation of faith.

It is interesting to note here what Cardinal Poupard³ said in regard to the Catholic School and the New Evangelization:

The Catholic School cannot be reduced to its educative role, however essential that role may be, for it is a mode of the Church's active presence in culture and an agent of *Catholic culture*" in the heart of our time, directing its efforts towards the complete, harmonious formation of the human person and the good of society in general. The catholic school is a privileged path whereby the message of salvation is incarnated in "*cultural mediation*". Consequently, the local Church must have the courage to affirm at all levels - social, civil, political - its respect for the inalienable rights of parents to educate their children according to their principles and convictions. The local Church will do its utmost to help the Catholic School awaken a "*new religious culture*". What is essential is to train competent teachers, real apostolic workers for the new evangelization, whose cultural path will be a privileged path.

It is important to take into account that for the Church, it is a question of not only of preaching the Gospel in ever wider geographical areas or to ever greater numbers of people. There is a need as well to affect and as it were to upset through the power of the Gospel, the people's criteria of judgment, their values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life which are not in keeping with the Word of God and the plan of salvation. (EN, 19)

Education for Social Orientation

One of the educational aspirations in the Asian context is to discern ways by which education can serve to create a more just and humane world order. Likewise, to search for the ways to form persons who are not merely intellectually and professionally competent, but above all, morally, spiritually and socially committed. Moreover, to evolve new educational strategies as a result of a deeper understanding of the vocation and service of the Church in Asia.

The aforementioned Document of the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education offers valuable doctrine as well on the vocation of Catholic

³Paul Cardinal Poupard, "The Catholic School and the New Evangelization," OIEC Bulletin, September-October, 1991.

educators which includes the work of ongoing social development: to form men and women who will be ready to take their place in society, preparing them to assume their social responsibility working for the improvement of social structures, making these structures more conformed to the principles of the Gospel. (*LCS*, 19)

Today's world has tremendous problems: hunger, illiteracy, human and nature exploitation, sharp contrast in the standard of living of individuals and countries, aggression and violence; a growing drug problem, legalization of abortion, along with many other examples of degradation of human life. All these demand that Catholic educators develop in themselves and cultivate in their students a keen social awareness and a profound civic and social responsibility. They are called upon to guide their students in the examination of basic problems of the world in the light of the Christian faith, prepare them to assert their human rights in decision-making within the social, economic and political community - all in the "centrality of service," as Pope Paul II puts it. Thus they will form persons who will make society more peaceful, fraternal and communitarian. (*LCS*, 19)

In the Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities, Pope John Paul II calls upon the Catholic Universities to include in their research activities, "a study of *serious contemporary problems* in areas such as the dignity of human life, the promotion of justice for all, the quality of personal and family life, the protection of nature, the search for peace and political stability, a more just sharing in the world's resources, and a new economic and political order that will better serve the human community at a national and international level." He added that the "University research will seek to discover the roots and causes of the serious problems of our time, paying special attention to their ethical and religious dimensions." Moreover, he even enjoined the Catholic University, if the need arises, "to speak uncomfortable truths which do not please public opinion, but which are necessary to safeguard the authentic good of humanity." (*ECE*, 32)

The aforementioned Papal Document speaks also of the particular importance which the Catholic University must give to the Christian spirit of service for the promotion of social justice and the commitment of the Church to the integral growth of all men and women. It states that "the Gospel, interpreted in the social teachings of the Church, is an urgent call to promote the development of those peoples who are striving to escape from hunger, misery, epidemic diseases and ignorance; of those who are looking for a wider share in the benefits of civilization and a more active improvement of their human qualities; of those who are aiming purposefully at their complete fulfillment." (*ECE*, 34)

An education with a social orientation will be an education geared towards peace-building as well. We are all familiar with Pope Pius XII's

motto of "peace as the fruit of justice"; with Pope Paul VI's "Development as the new name of peace". Pope John Paul II in his *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, developed the idea that "peace is the fruit of solidarity." Justice, development and solidarity are different manifestations of order and thus bring about peace which is the "tranquility of order." The goal of peace, so desired by everyone, will be achieved not only through the putting into effect of social and international justice but also through the practice of virtues which favor togetherness and living in unity so as to build in unity by a society and a better world. In the light of faith, solidarity seeks to go beyond itself, to take on the specifically Christian dimensions of total gratuity, forgiveness and reconciliation. One's neighbor is not only a human being with his or her own right and a fundamental equality with everyone else, but becomes the living image of God the Father, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and placed under the permanent action of the Holy Spirit. (SRS, 40)

An education for social orientation, therefore, requires an all-out effort for the development of the whole person - body, mind, heart and spirit. Educators must be filled with the urgency to build the defenses of peace in the minds of their students and to be able to touch their hearts so that with regard to "others", they may become persons marked by a passion for peace, justice and solidarity, especially for the weaker sector of society, in fact, for all of mankind.

Sustainable Development and Value Formation

In view of the unsustainable development that different countries in Asia have reached, there is a pressing need for development among the people the values of sustainable development. There is a need for the education of a new generation of citizens to be truly creative and effective participants in the difficult task of reversing the current destructive results of conventional development.

The media will need to be convinced to feature and write about themes intimately connected with sustainable development. An enlightened media can go a long way towards galvanizing large-scale support for sustainable approaches to economic and social development.

Development in this decade must be based on what is today absolutely indispensable for human dignity: the alleviation of poverty, based on the quality of human resources. This means that it must be based on the education of the people. There is really only one way and that is development with human face, respecting human dignity through education, the giver of real freedom.

There is now an emerging awareness as well, in the field of human rights, of the notion of intergenerational responsibility. For instance, in the case of natural resources in which some are renewable while others

are not, to use them as if they were inexhaustible is to endanger their availability not only for the present generation but above all for future generations.

Increased community-based capacities to think of the world as a multiple set of interactive systems can also help us face these problems realistically. We will be in a better position to use resources in investments that will lead to more far-reaching and permanent solutions. If political will is of the essence, not only in considering sustainable development as a call to action but also in solving underlying problems of illiteracy and ignorance, then a new, informed civic culture must be created for the global community as a whole.

In the formation of the said culture, the following words from *Centesimus Annus* appear to be most relevant and a wise guideline: "All human activity takes place within a culture and interacts with culture. For an adequate formation of culture, the whole man is required, whereby he exercises his creativity, intelligence, and knowledge of the world and people. Furthermore, he displays his capacity for self-control, personal sacrifice, solidarity and readiness to promote the common good. Thus the first and most important task is accomplished within man's heart." (CA, 51)

Environmental Education with a Christian Vision

Through the initiatives of UNESCO, we find developing around the world what has come to be called *environmental education*, which is one facet of *cultural development*.

Obviously enough, cultural development includes such facets as economic, social and political aside from the environmental. However, the focus in environmental education is the need to build peace between people and the biosphere, the environment. This would require again the education of the people.

Environmental education would require a Science education that would equip the students with what is now called a "citizen's science" where the emphasis is on developing an ideal of scientific literacy. One important part of this new agenda is the study of the effects of science, with its attendant technology, on society. It must be noted that science is a human activity depending on human resources, human culture and the genius of individuals and this makes it all the more a must for environmental education.

Science and technology are indeed indispensable for the attainment of the goals of environmental education. Notwithstanding, experience has shown that they can succeed only through an integration of science and culture which leads to a sense of purpose.

A Christian vision of man can enrich and guide environment-related projects and protect them from losing an authentic human direction. Pope John Paul II, in his Message of Peace in 1990, very incisively pointed out that: "when the ecological crisis is set within the broader context of the search for peace in society, we can understand better the importance of giving attention to what the earth and its atmosphere is trying to tell us: namely, that there is order in the universe which must be respected, and that the human person, endowed with the capability of choosing freely, has the responsibility to preserve the order for the well-being of future generations."

If we fail to redirect science and technology to fundamental needs, the advances in informatics, biotechnology and genetic engineering will lead to irreversible consequences detrimental to the future of human life. We cannot take for granted either the increased power of modern technology to re-process, and in many ways destroy, the natural world. Here is a clarion call for an education for a responsible use technology.

Environmental education is envisioned to equip us all in the future to understand the problems, exercise judgment in political decisions about the issues and to see and accept the need for changes in one's personal life that must be made if we are not to damage the very environment on which our life depends.

An environmental education then can be pursued not simply as a secular but as a Christian task. What is important is for the Christian educator to possess a Christian world vision. As Vatican II estates: "The faithful, therefore, must learn the deepest meaning and value of creation, and how to relate it to the praise of God." (*LG*, 36)

In another part of the same Vatican II Document, we find a similar call to the lay faithful, namely, "to illumine and organize the temporal affairs in such a way that they always start out, develop and continue according to Christ's mind, to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer." (*LG*, 31)

An educator with a Christian vision is one who has a positive affirming attitude to life; all human life is made to the image and likeness of the Creator. God not only had his plan when he created life, He has shared his plan with us, brought us into partnership, into covenant with Himself for the gathering of nations into peace of His Kingdom. "This is a sign I am giving for all ages to come, of the covenant between me and you and every living creature with you." (*Gen* 9:12). This all-inclusive covenant is at the heart of stewardship. This harmony which must exist between humankind and the natural world emerges from the understanding of the interdependence of human beings and the rest of creation. This call to stewardship is a privilege bestowed on humankind by God and is therefore a responsibility that cannot be taken lightly. If men and women are

caring and cultivate harmony in all their dealings with each other and the earth itself, then they grow in the image and likeness of God.⁴

The Renewal of Asian Society

The renewal Asian society requires the effort of the whole Church to enter into dialogue and collaboration with the peoples of other religious traditions and other persons of good will. The bishops and priests are called upon to be active in the formation of lay faithful while the latter should take upon themselves as their special responsibility the renewal of Asian society according to the values of the Gospel. They are the primary evangelizers of culture and cultures. There should not exist in them "a pernicious opposition between professional and social activity on one hand and religious life on the other." (GS, 44) This would require a thorough education in the Social Doctrine of the Church together with the formation of their hearts towards a just and compassionate living in present-day Asian society. This will help form Christians who will be "evangelizers of their like - the young evangelizing the young, workers evangelizing workers, professionals evangelizing professionals, government officials evangelizing government officials, families evangelizing families - and will be leaven for the transformation of Asian society."⁵

Education alone cannot solve the problems besetting our world today, but it can play its part of equipping the next generation with more insight, greater competence and deeper motivation than has so far been done. And over and above this, Christian education will help build up the Kingdom of God and work for the renewal of the temporal order which is seen to be central to the vocation and service of Christian educators in Asia.

In view of the far-reaching role that education can play, I would like to end this paper with a quotation from the *Christifideles Laici* which is a clarion call for the presence of the lay faithful in the privileged places of culture, in particular, the world of education:

. . . the Church calls upon the lay faithful to be present, as signs of courage and intellectual creativity, in the privileged places of culture, that is the world of education -school and university- in places of scientific and technological research, the areas of artistic creativity and work in the humanities. Such a presence is destined not only for the recognition and possible purification of the elements that critically burden existing culture, but also for the elevation of these cultures through the riches which have their origin in the Gospel and the Christian faith. (CFL, 44)

⁴Sean McDonagh, *To Care for the Earth: A Call to a New Technology*, Claretian Publications: Quezon City, Philippines, 1990, pp. 122-123.

⁵Final Statement of the Fifth Plenary Assembly of FABC, Bandung, July 27, 1990. (Unpublished)