

Plenary presentation on the theme of the forthcoming WCC Assembly in Busan,
Korea in 2013

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When we meet in the Assembly in 2013 in Busan, Korea, it would be 515 years since the first Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama landed in Asia in my small state of Kerala on the South West coast of India.

The British and the French, the Dutch and the Spanish all followed suit. These momentous events changed the space and time of Asia. The Asian sense of space was colonised and the geopolitical order was radically altered. The Asian reckoning of time, with its hundreds of local calendar systems was gradually replaced by the Gregorian calendar – a Roman Calendar started by the Roman emperor Julius Caesar and reformed by the Roman Pontiff Pope Gregory in the 16th century. Calendars are cultural creations. So are space and time. Asians need to recover their own time, space and calendars.

Let me very briefly indicate some Asian signposts as we deliberate on the Assembly Theme for the next Assembly, and as we spiritually begin our journey to Korea.

1. Asia is the home of ancient religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism and so on. (If you consider Middle East as West Asia, then literally all religions are there).

The philosophical and epistemological systems of these ancient religions and their spiritual practices are really profound, far more profound than we usually suspect.

The Western colonial missionary movement could not convert Asia to Christianity except in a very minor way. But it created a self-consciousness in these religions that continues to show itself until today in negative radical anti-Christian movements as well as in positive openings to the world.

Asia is deeply sensitive to religious values. What Rev. Ebenezer Joseph from Sri Lanka described yesterday is true to most Asian countries.

The Christian Assembly of WCC is an occasion to dialogue with these religions, of course, with love and deep respect, about their sense of social justice, their commitment to world peace and their idea of one human community.

2. Asia is home to the largest Islamic population. Countrywise, Indonesia has the largest Islamic population in the world. Then comes India "the Secular Republic" and then only Pakistan. Asian Muslims used to be rather different from other Muslims in certain other parts of the world, but it seems to begin to change. Inter-religious dialogue is rather easy and fruitful with the traditional Asian religions, but not so with Islam.

3. More than one-third of humanity lives in Asia. The sheer number of 2.2 billion in China and India together can pose a threat to the world. It is certainly an explosive potential for both, good and bad.

The power bookers of present global consumerist economy seems to rejoice in the number, because for them it is over two billion consumers. The more numerous the consumers, the bigger the profit.

4. The Asian countries in general blindly follow the aggressively competitive market economy production-consumption paradigm. For the huge population of Asia, this Western model is neither ecologically sustainable nor spiritually desirable. The Western media highlight India and China as emerging Asian superpowers with the hidden and even vicious suggestion of conflict and war in Asia over fast depleting resources and territorial domination. If Asian countries continue to follow the Western paradigm, war is a natural outcome as we have seen in two devastating world wars and the debilitating cold war.

We should not forget that more than one billion poor people are living in Asia. Also all colours of the marginalised, the Dalits, the Minjung, the Adivasis. With the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the specter of conflict and violence is inevitable in our Asian societies.

A Christian Assembly in Asia should be able to challenge this by suggesting alternate paradigms of justice, peace and life in community.

H.B. Anastasios and Ofelia Ortega set the tone of our discussion, when they spoke during the opening worship about the constitution role of justice and peace for a new order of society.

5. We need to remember that in the first millennium of the Christian era, Asia had the experience of three missionary movements – two Christian and one Buddhist, but all very peaceful.

Chronologically, the first was the Buddhist mission that started from India already in the first millennium before Christ. It literally transformed a large part of Asia through peaceful means. The second one was the mission of St. Thomas the Apostle of Jesus Christ from Palestine to Asian countries, particularly to South India. I am now standing before you as a Christian because of that mission in the first century, A.D.

The third was the great mission of the Church of the East or the Persian Church from Mesopotamia (Iraq) to many countries of Asia.

We may compare these early missions to the 2nd millennium missions to Asia from the West. I believe there is a qualitative difference.

6. The WCC is, by its very nature and calling, committed to Unity. But unity is not a static concept to be arrived at once for all. It is a dynamic, ever evolving, all sustaining unity modelled on the perichoretic unity of the Trinity. Called to be one, we need to prepare the way of the Lord by clearing the paths of Justice and peace. This involves a new order of civilization and a new perception of time and space.

7. Finally, I wish to draw your attention to an important recent book *The Idea of Justice* by the Nobel laureate Indian Economist Amartya Sen. He has challenged a venerable Indian tradition of deontological ethics, of doing one's duty at any cost, irrespective of consequence. In the Indian epic Mahabharata, the divine Lord Krishna persuades his friend Arjuna, the reluctant warrior hero, to take up arms and fight. Arjuna hesitates to kill his cousins, teachers and the rest. But finally he is persuaded in the name of doing one's duty. The ultimate outcome of the war, however, was total devastation. The battle field – symbolically the Indo-Gangetic plain - was flooded with human blood and untold misery, women lamenting their dead and dogs licking human blood. Amartya Sen pleads for an ethic that foresees its long-term consequence for our world.

A Christian Assembly in Asia, true to the mission of Christ, should re-imagine the future shape of the world God so loved. God's own world, and not simply the shape of our Church or Churches.

Once upon a time, the monastic communities in the East and the West exemplified an alternate model of life over against the mainstream madness.

We should be able to challenge what Theodore Roszak calls the "collusive madness" of our present day civilization, with a committed biblical vision of "the justice of the kingdom" and "the new heaven and the new earth where justice dwells".