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TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS IN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

The Controversy over Benedict XVI's Lecture at Regensburg University

When Pope Benedict XVI delivered his lecture on faith and reason in Regensburg on September 12, 2007, his intention was obviously simply to make a nostalgic visit to the university where he had previously lectured as a professor. The worldwide attention that the passage referring to Prophet Muhammad received in the media and especially in the Muslim world must have taken the pontiff by surprise. After all, the critical remark made by the pope, i.e. that Muhammad had resorted to force in spreading Islam was done by quoting the Byzantine Emperor Michael II Palaeologos who lived at the end of the fourteenth century. Muslims were further hurt by the allegation that, whereas the Christian concept of God excluded any use of force in the name of religion, since that would be against reason, the Islamic idea of God could imply that God could act beyond and against reason. The lecture, which concentrated on the theme of the relation between faith and reason, was intended primarily for a rather restricted circle of professors and students at his former Alma Mater. The worldwide coverage and the strong reactions in the Muslim world that his remarks on Islam caused were not foreseen at all. Obviously, the pope had not taken into account that criticising the Prophet Muhammad in an academic lecture could cause such repercussions. In several Muslim countries people took to the streets and protested against this insult to Islam and its prophet, some churches were burned and in Somalia a Christian nun was killed.

Benedict XVI responded quickly to the damage that had been done by unintentionally offending the Muslim community. On September 25, 2006 the pope invited the ambassadors from twenty-one countries where Muslims constituted a majority and from the Arab League, accredited to the Holy See, to an unprecedented meeting in Castel Gandolfo to explain to them that the Catholic Church deeply appreciated and profoundly respected Islam and that, as pope, he intended to continue engaging in dialogue with Muslims. Benedict XVI reiterated that the Catholic Church wanted to continue establishing bridges of friendship with the adherents of other religions, showing particular appreciation for the growth of dialogue between Muslims and Christians.

On October 12, 2006 a group of 38 Islamic scholars from Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia, the Arab Emirates, Iraq, Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan, India, Malaysia and Indonesia, addressed an open letter to the pope in which they

pointed out mistakes they had detected in his presentation of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad in the pope's lecture. They refuted the accusation that Islam had been spread by "fire and sword" and denied that the concept of *jihad* could be interpreted in Islam to mean "holy war." They further denied that Islam condoned the use of force in converting people to become Muslims. At the end of the letter the authors, nevertheless, confirmed their readiness to continue the dialogue between Muslims and Christians, because they are numerically the strongest religions in the world and therefore, have a special obligation to work for peace and understanding.

Benedict XVI's visit to Turkey (November 28 to December 1, 2006) was therefore overshadowed by apprehension and negative prognostications that, in the aftermath of the Regensburg speech, the pope would be not be welcome. But the pope was surprisingly well received during his visit to Turkey. He himself expressed repeatedly his high estimation of the Turkish people and their religious traditions. He thus succeeded in healing the wounds caused by his earlier critical remarks with regard to the prophet and to Islam in general. From the Turkish side, Ali Bardakoglu, the head of the Directorate for Religious Affairs, pointed out in his speech during a meeting with the pope that "Muslims condemn all types of violence and terror," a remark that could be seen as a reference to the pope's remarks at Regensburg, without, however, addressing the issue directly.

"De-establishing" and Re-establishing the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue

The strong reactions to the speech in Regensburg have shown that the pope had been given poor advice—or no advice at all—when he made his critical remarks on Islam and its prophet. On March 11, 2006—only a few months before giving his lecture in Regensburg—Benedict XVI had dissolved the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) by merging it with the Pontifical Council for Culture, headed by the French Cardinal Paul Poupard, who had no record of having any competence in matters of religious dialogue. The former president of the PCID, Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, an expert in Islamic studies who had worked in North Africa as a missionary and had taught at the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies in Rome, was sent as papal nuncio to Egypt and the Arab League. When the pope ordered the merger, his move was accompanied by speculation as to how far dissolving the PCID was simply part of streamlining the organisation of the Roman Curia or whether it implied a change in the theological assessment of the position and role of the other religions in the history of salvation. Recalling the document *Dominus Jesus*, published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in August 2000, when Benedict XVI was still prefect of this congregation, some observers were of the opinion that this was precisely the case. It seemed to be

consistent with the theological assessment of the other religions in *Dominus Jesus*, namely viewing them as mere cultural phenomena, expressing the human desire and endeavours to reach out for the Divine. These endeavours, however, do not have a truly theological quality, and are thus in no way equal to the Christian faith, where faith in a theological sense can be found in the response to divine revelation. There was general agreement that, by dissolving the PCID, the pope had changed the course of interreligious dialogue with other religions by integrating interfaith dialogue with intercultural dialogue, and thereby distancing himself from a more theological and spiritual dialogue.

It came as a happy surprise, therefore, that Benedict XVI reconsidered his decision to dissolve the PCID. On May 27, 2007, the Vatican Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone announced that the PCID would be re-established as an independent dicastery. Cardinal Bertone stressed that re-establishing the PCID should be seen as an expression of the importance attributed to interreligious dialogue by the Vatican. Re-establishing the PCID was generally viewed as a rare instance in which the Vatican had learned from a mistake and was ready, in humility, to correct a decision that had not been functional and was responsible for mistakes such as the speech of the pope at Regensburg. On June 25, 2007 Benedict XVI appointed Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, one of the most experienced Vatican diplomats and at the time of his appointment an archivist and librarian in the Vatican, as president of the PCID. The appointment of Cardinal Tauran was generally favourably received and interpreted as a sign that the Vatican was ready to start dealing with other religions in a new and more competent way.

Controversy over the Directory of the Protestant Church in Germany on the Relation between Christians and Muslims

In November 2006 the Evangelical Church in Germany published a document giving guidelines on the relationship between Christians and Muslims with the telling title "Clarity and Good Neighborly Relations: Christians and Muslims in Germany." The 120-page paper is intended to replace other more conciliatory statements regarding the attitude towards Islam by the Evangelical Church, in order to respond to the changed situation due to the many terrorist attacks by Muslim extremists in recent years, the general debate on the necessity and usefulness of interreligious dialogue and other controversial topics concerning both Christians and Muslims. On the one hand, the authors of the paper intend to offer advice for continuing the work of establishing "good neighbourly relations" between Christians and Muslims by encouraging the continuation of dialogue. On the other hand, the authors feel it is their task to state clearly the many controversial issues that interfere with establishing peaceful relations. To achieve this purpose, they feel it is necessary to delineate the Christian identity in its integrity and to indicate the existing differences clearly. The noble aim of

mutual respect should not lead to an attitude of false tolerance, which would lead only to a loss of identity on both sides. Bishop Huber, the president of the Protestant Church in Germany, expects

> that the three million Muslims living in Germany who live in a Western society, are ready to respond to certain critical questions regarding their traditions and culture as well as interpretations of the Muslim faith, in order to foster a fruitful living together in accepting a common canon of values.

The critical points in the paper deal with the question of how Muslims in Germany feel about the system of parliamentary democracy and whether they see insistence on introducing *shariah* law as a necessary precondition for living in accordance with the Qur'an. Another critical problem concerns religious freedom and the right of conversion, which is a fundamental human right in the Western tradition but is unacceptable in Islam. This Evangelical paper further states very clearly that mission remains an essential obligation for all Christians, notwithstanding their readiness to engage in dialogue with members of other faiths. The position of women in Islam is another area where there are differences between Islam and Christianity that have repercussions in the understanding of marriage: forced marriage of under-age girls, domestic violence, as well as the problem of mixed marriages between Christians and Muslims.

Muslim organisations in Germany responded very negatively to the Protestant paper. A scheduled meeting between representatives of the leading Muslim organisations in Germany with representatives of the Evangelical Church in Germany was cancelled. The main objection by the Muslims was that the paper reconfirmed that missionary activity is a central objective, which led them to conclude that, when Protestants engage in dialogue, they are actually intent on converting the others to Christians. The Muslims also point out that by insisting on clarifying the Protestant position and identity the Protestants leave no room for discovering the points the two religions have in common.

The Growth of Respecting Taboos: Intellectuals Faced with Religious Fanaticism

The growth of religious fanaticism has many facets. One of them is the growing trend to restrict the freedom of expression in mass media, in the arts and in many other areas out of fear of violating the religious feelings or taboos of religious believers of other traditions. This tendency entails a new form of censorship that anticipates certain reactions and simply fears that the religious feelings of members of other religions might be affected. The consequence of this growing tendency is that even justified criticism of dangerous developments within religious traditions, such as violence in the name of religion and the instigation to hatred by fanatic and fundamentalist groups, is avoided out of fear of violent retaliations by such groups. This phenomenon is leading to an

erosion of freedom of expression and of open and honest discussion among members of different religions, and is thus affecting the cause of interreligious dialogue negatively. Other forms of repressive reactions are economic boycotts of the products of certain countries accused of having violated the religious feelings of believers. This was the case, for example, in the aftermath of the problems surrounding the caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad, originally published in a Danish journal, when products from Denmark were boycotted and Danish institutions were attacked in several Arab countries. In Germany, the management of the *Deutsche Oper* in Berlin cancelled the performance of Mozart's *Idomeo*, fearing that the scene where the heads of Poseidon, Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad are displayed might cause violent reactions by Muslim extremists. The opera was finally shown but only under heavy protection by police and several other safety precautions. A further sign of this growing fear of violating religious feelings can be seen in the many attempts to forbid displaying or wearing religious symbols in public for people in the teaching profession, in public transportation and other occupations. For example, a British airline threatened to dismiss a female employee because she was wearing a small cross. Another employee was ordered to stop carrying a Bible in her luggage when flying to Saudi Arabia because that country had banned importing any kind of religious symbol because it is the home of the holy Islamic sites.

A different type of case is that of the French philosopher Robert Redeker who, with his rather extreme statement in the *Figaro* that Mohammed had been revealed in the Qur'an as a merciless war leader, pillager, butcher of Jews and polygamist caused strong reactions not only among Muslim extremists but among peace-loving pious Muslims as well. That Redeker identified Islam with the former Soviet Communist regime can and should be considered a rather sweeping generalization, not supported by any kind of thorough analysis of the actual situation within the Muslim world. But the threats that Redeker received from Muslim extremists and forced him to go into hiding are also overreactions: they not only threaten a philosopher who made statements that went too far but also endanger the freedom of expression—including the freedom to make erroneous statements and misjudgements.

The protests against the knighting of Salman Rushdie by Queen Elizabeth II was another example of how mass demonstrations are organised in the name of religion and conveyed and dramatised by the media. These orchestrated reactions were strongest in Iran and Pakistan. In Iran, an organisation called "Honour to the Memory of Martyrs of the Islamic World" promised 150,000 British pounds to whoever would execute the death sentence against Salman Rushdie that Ayatollah Khomeini had passed twenty years ago. In Pakistan, Idschas ul Haq, the minister for religious affairs and son of the former dictator Zia ul Haq, called the British ambassador and demanded that the British gov-

ernment publicly apologize for the insult paid to the more than one billion Muslims by knighting a blasphemer like Salman Rushdie.

Prohibition against Depicting Animals?

Can we expect a general prohibition against depicting animals and other objects out of fear that adherents of other faiths will be offended religiously? In general, one might welcome a greater sensitivity to violating the religious feelings of others in art and other forms of expression that have been developed. At present, however, we are experiencing a kind of heightened sensitivity that smacks of hysteria and hypocrisy and leads to rather strange phenomena of self-censorship. This year, the Chinese Spring Festival, which traditionally marks the beginning of a new year according to the lunar calendar, fell on February 18. In line with tradition, the new year was to be the "Year of the Pig." Like every year, special cards, postal stamps and other items commemorating the event depicted the "pig" as symbol of the new year. So far, everything was as usual. But this year things were different. The ambassador of a Muslim country who received a New Year's card with a picture of a pig on it, protested loudly and declared his religious feelings as a Muslim to have been violated. In the officially still Communist People's Republic of China, which until recent openly propagated atheism, the national television broadcaster declared that it would refrain from using the picture of "pigs" in connection with the Chinese New Year so as not to offend the religious feelings of China's 18 million Muslims. Should one applaud this strikingly touching sensitivity on the part of the Chinese TV producers? Or should one deplore the fact that age-old Chinese traditions and traditional imagery is being sacrificed because a small minority might take offence? The next step will be that all restaurants in China will be ordered to remove "pig" from their menus—a measure that not even a Communist government would be able to enforce in China where pork is and will continue to be one of the favourite dishes.

From Cultural Relativism to Islamophobia?

That Christian-Muslim relations are strained and that more and more observers are speaking of a growing Islamophobia in the West can be observed when looking at current publications. There is agreement that the widespread cultural relativism that advocated a pluralism of different cultural traditions living peacefully with another has given way to a growing realization that, for most European countries, such an ideal is unattainable and not even desirable. The basic attitude towards Islam has changed. In the early years, when Muslims were immigrating into Europe, the prevailing attitude towards Islam had been an awareness of culpability towards the Muslim world which had been subjected to Western colonialism, which, combined with a strong sense of mission to bring Western cultural values and achievements to the backward Muslim nations, had offended Muslims worldwide.

This attitude of "self-flagellation" on the part of Europeans who felt guilty for past sins has drastically changed. There has been a kind of backlash against the diatribes of a growing "Anti-Occidentalism" on the part of Muslims who accuse the West of being to blame for all the ills in Islamic nations and especially for the dismal fate of Muslims living in Western countries. The Western response is to point out to these Muslims that, because they live in the West, they can take advantage of many of the achievements of Western technology and natural sciences, and that they need to learn some of the Western universal values such as democracy, respect for human rights and reason as well. There is a growing consensus among European governments that immigrants have to respect the basic values and rules of their host countries. Especially with regard to Islam, there is less and less readiness to respect the Islamic traditions that run counter to European customs and values, for the purpose of making these Muslims feel accepted and comfortable. On the contrary, there is the sober assessment that much of what Islam is propagating is incompatible with European values, at least as long as Muslims refuse to adapt their way of life and faith to square with the surrounding dominant culture (*Leitkultur*).

The message for Muslims, therefore, is clear: Adapt or leave! Politicians on the extreme right, such as Louise Frevert, a member of the Danish parliament and a member of the Popular Party, are calling Islam "a cancer which should be surgically removed from the body of society." We come across similar political rhetoric in the UK from people such as Nick Griffin, head of the British National Party who calls Islam "a perverse and maleficent religion propagated by people from South-East Asia," referring to immigrants from the Indian subcontinent who constitute the dominant Muslim group in the UK. In France, the extreme right, represented by Jean-Marie Le Pen,, associates Islam in a similar vein with a certain ethnic race, i.e. Muslim immigrants from North Africa. Islamophobia has been described by the British NGO Runnymede Trust, among others, as "an attitude considering Islam as a monolithic bloc, impervious to any change, due to its barbaric, irrational, primitive and sexist ideas cut off from other cultures, and besides violent, aggressive and menacing." Several observers see the "Muslim menace" in the demographic fact that in most European states the birth rates are diminishing, while Muslim families are very fertile and have many children. In an alarming fashion, they speak of the "demographic suicide" the European nations are committing while ignoring the dire consequences of the growth in Muslim immigration combined with the fertility of Muslim women. Some of these alarmists are already talking about an emerging new continent "Eurabia," with the *muezzin* calling the faithful to prayer from the balcony of St. Peter's in Rome.

For their part, Muslims deplore the growing discrimination they are facing in many European countries. Muslims experience many difficulties when applying for jobs that are often closed to them because they are Muslims, even if

this is not openly stated in view of the many anti-discriminatory laws in European societies. The same often holds true when they are looking for lodging and are refused by landlords because of their Muslim appearance.

Two Muslims Receive Nobel Prizes

It would be wrong to speak of a general climate of Islamophobia as the prevalent attitude in the West with regard to Islam. The fact that two Muslims were awarded the coveted Nobel Prize last year proves that this is not true. For his contribution towards providing poor people with access to banking and credit at low rates, Mohammed Yunus from Bangladesh, the founder of the Grameen Bank, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. For his literary skill and his courage in touching on the difficult topic of the Armenian genocide, the Turkish novelist Orham Pamuk was given the Nobel Prize for literature in 2007 as well. Officially, the jurors did not mention that the recipients were Muslim, but it was, of course, a well-known fact. One would probably not be wrong to assume that their distance from current Islamist groups, prevalent in Turkey as well as in Bangladesh, played a role in awarding them the prizes.

Founding of an Muslim National Organisation in Germany

The celebration of Maulid, the feast of the birthday of Prophet Muhammad, which fell this year on March 30 and thus coincided with the Christian feast of Good Friday, was celebrated by a central gathering of Muslims from all over the country in Cologne in April 2007. This event, which brought thousands of Muslims into the big hall of the Cologne Arena, was used by the leading Muslim organisations in Germany to found a new national central organisation for all Muslims in Germany. Members of the newly founded *Coordinating Council of Muslims in Germany* (Koordinierungsrat der Muslime) include the *Turkish-Islamic Union of Religious Institutions* (DITIB), which closely cooperates with the Turkish Government organisation for religions, the *Central Council of Muslims in Germany* (Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland), the *Muslim Council for the Federal Republic of Germany* and the *Union of Islamic Cultural Centres*. The new organisation is supposed to represent the interests of all Muslims in Germany and to function as the only partner for contacts in the political field. Details of the organisational structure still have to be worked out, but they intend to establish branch offices in the different federal states. The founding organisations expect that additional members can be recruited from local Muslim communities or other Muslim institutions. The presidency of the new organisations should change every six months. The Central Council of Muslims assumed this role for the initial period.

In the past, Muslims living in Germany were divided into several groups which claimed to be entitled to defend the general interests of all Muslims living in Germany. The inability to speak with one voice to defend the interests of the

German Muslims and to deal in a coordinated way with political institutions has been seen as an obstacle both Muslims and by those who wanted to deal with the Muslim community. It has to be seen if the newly founded *Coordinating Council of Muslims in Germany* will actually become the sole and only spokesman for all Muslims in Germany. The powerful organisation *Milli Görus*, for example, is only an indirect member because of its membership in the *Central Council of Muslims in Germany*. Critics point out that only 15% of all Muslims in Germany are members of Muslim organisations and communities, whereas the great majority of the 85% of approximately 3.3 million Muslims is not organised at all. The members of the Ahmadiyya Movement and the Alevites are not recognised as Muslims by the official Muslim organisations.

There are also reservations among politicians. Lale Akgün, the Muslim expert in the Social Democratic Party in Germany, expressed his fear that the new organisation represents a rather conservative brand of Islam, not truly representative of the majority of Muslims living in Germany. Reservations against the claim of the new organisation to speak for "all Muslims living in Germany" were also made by Wolfgang Schäuble, the Interior Minister of the Federal Government, who pointed out that only those Muslims connected with mosques and Muslim organisations were represented by the new organisation. Schäuble invited the unorganised liberal or secular Muslims to form their own organisations in order to make their viewpoint heard. Speaking for the dialogue forum which the Federal Government had started last year, Schäuble insisted that he would invite Muslim participants from all Muslim groups in the country. He thus made it clear that he would not accept the condition that only members proposed and supported by the Central Council of Muslims in Germany would be allowed to attend.

Buddhist Attitudes towards Other Religions

The "Seventh Conference of the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies" took place on June 8–11, 2007 in the study centre of St. Virgil in Salzburg. The conference was attended by seventy people from different European countries who are engaged in different ways in Buddhist-Christian dialogue and encounter. The topic chosen was of special interest, because it constituted a change of perspective of sorts, since in most of these conferences the central theme and focus have been the Christian way of viewing other religious traditions. A first overview of Buddhist attitudes towards other religions was given by Kristin Kiblinger who teaches at Winthrop University in the USA. Her contribution was followed by John Makransky, who teaches Buddhism at the Jesuit University Boston College. He addressed the question: "Buddhist Inclusivism: Is Buddhism the Superior Way?" It was a challenging contribution, because it described the dilemma of, on the one hand, being open to the position of a theological pluralism and, on the other, of being convinced that the Dharma alone can free one from suffering and bring one to full

enlightenment from all transient reality, which is at the basis of the Buddhist claim to superiority. Insight into the position of Buddhist pluralism was then given by Kenneth Tanaka, professor of Buddhism at the Musashino University in Japan, who concentrated on the question: "Can Buddhism Accept Other Religions as Equal Ways?"

On the second day, several cases of interfaith relations were treated. Perry Schmidt-Leukel of Glasgow University gave an overview of Buddhist-Hindu relationships. He started with an early Buddhist critique of Brahmanism and then described the expressions of mutual hostilities, which was followed by the phase of reciprocal inclusivism. He ended with a look at modern developments. David Scott from London took up the topic of Muslim-Buddhist relationships which is seldom treated and therefore provided many insights. The situation and development in Buddhist-Christian relationships was treated by Andreas Grünschloss who teaches at the University of Göttingen. The last contribution in this context was given by Nathan Katz who spoke on Buddhist-Jewish relationships, again a topic which was of high interest, because of its special character and the interesting implications it had. A highlight of the conference was the contribution by Paul Knitter of New York, who presented a comparison between Buddhist and Christian attitudes towards other religions. Knitter posed four seminal questions: 1) Are the many religions a problem or a blessing? 2) Do the many hold anything in common? 3) Among the many does one excel? and 4) Does "many" mean "any"? In his conclusion Knitter showed what Christians can learn from Buddhists and vice versa.

As in former conferences, too, young scholars were given the opportunity in the evenings to present their research projects in the field of interreligious dialogue and to elicit responses and advice from the many experts among the participants. T pay tribute to the special character of the venue of the conference, the conference included a special cultural programme in Salzburg at the end of the conference with a visit to cultural sites in Salzburg and concluded with the attendance at a concert with works by Mozart and Schumann in the Mirabell Schlossgarten.

Chinese Government Activities in the Field of Interreligious Dialogue

For years the Chinese government has been faced with the constant international criticism that its policies violate religious freedom and that religious believers are persecuted and imprisoned when they exercise their constitutional right of freedom of religion. In defense against these accusations, the Chinese government points to the revival of religious life within all religions in China, insisting that they are free to engage in religious activities, as long as they stay within the guidelines prescribed by government regulations and laws. For a few years already, the Chinese government has taken the initiative by organising international encounters between members of different religious traditions.

For this purpose, the State Agency for Religious Affairs (SARA) founded an Association for Cultural Exchange that assists religious groups in organising international conferences. Among these initiatives was the "First Buddhist World Forum" which was held from April 13–16, 2006 in Hangzhou, on the island of Putuoshan. Organised by the Chinese Buddhist Association, the theme of the conference, which was attended by Buddhists monks and scholars from many countries, was "A Harmonious World Begins with in the Mind." The various contributions to the conference focussed on the contribution Buddhism can and is making to foster unity and peaceful cooperation in society by encouraging social responsibility and caring for social welfare. The most important contribution Buddhism can make, however, is by its teachings and guidelines in the area of working for peace in the world. That Chinese government agencies were actively involved in planning and conducting the forum was shown in the choice of the central topic with its focus on harmony, a central issue of the present government. Foreign observers also lodged the criticism that the 11th Panchen Lama, a puppet of the Chinese government, was allowed to contribute, whereas both the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa Lama were barred from taking part and contributing to the conference. The impression thus created, i.e. that the conference had been manipulated by the government, worked against the intended goal of the Chinese government to show that there is religious freedom in the PR China.

Much along the same line as the conference on Buddhism was the International Forum on the *Daodejing* (*Tao Te Ching*), which took place April 22–24 in Xian and April 26–27 2006 in Hong Kong. The theme of the forum, "Constructing a Harmonious World through Dao," again reflected the influence of the Chinese government in promoting its own central political program of "Constructing a Harmonious Society." The conference, which was held at two different venues, in Xian and Hong Kong, was attended by more than 500 participants from all over the world, among them representatives of Daoist priests, many academicians and other interested people. The contributions during the conference dealt with the possible contribution Daoism could make in the cultural field, in working for peace in the world and especially for the preservation of the environment, and even for modern management, as well as health care. The exhibition on Daoist scriptures, especially editions of the *Daodejing* in various scripts and from many countries, demonstrated the extraordinary influence the modest but extremely powerful writing attributed to Laozi has exercised in the course of time. The power this little book is still able to exercise became obvious at the recital, organised in Hong Kong, where more than 13,000 people took part in reading the text on April 26, 2006. The aim of the forum was to show that Daoism is a universal teaching that is part of the religious-cultural heritage of humankind. The conference was organised by the Chinese Daoist Association and the government-run Association for Cultural Exchange.

Another initiative by the Chinese government in the field of cultural and interreligious exchange was to host the third conference of the series of Asia-Europe-Meetings in Interfaith Dialogue (ASEM), which was held in Nanjing in June 2007. The previous conferences were held in Bali in 2005 and in Cyprus in 2006. The two-day dialogue was organised jointly by China and Italy and served as a platform for religious and political leaders as well as academics to address the diversity and communality in religious traditions and to discuss how the potential of this religious heritage could be helpful in enhancing mutual understanding in an era of globalisation. That the director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) of the Chinese government, Ye Xiawen, was one of the main speakers again showed the interest of the Chinese government in making use of international conferences to show its willingness to respect religious freedom and the positive contributions religions can make to fostering understanding and peace.

Dialogue Activities in Various Asian Countries

The "Third Assembly of the Asian Muslim Action Network" (AMAN) was held in Jakarta on November 15–18, 2006. The assembly, with the theme "Reform and Resistance in the Quest for Peace," was attended by more than 300 Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, Hindu and Muslim participants, with 180 participants from outside Indonesia. AMAN is a network of progressive Muslims in Asia, seeking to respond in a small way to the many challenges that people in Asia are facing, such as corruption, violence, communal tensions, environmental degradation and the like. In 2000 AMAN held its first assembly in Bangladesh on the theme "Culture of Peace," and in 2003 in Thailand, treating the topic "New Visions of Peace." Among the 23 speakers of the Jakarta conference was also Jesuit Father Tom Michel, secretary of the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC). Chandra Muzaffar, president of the Malaysia-based International Movement for a Just World spoke on oppression and injustice in the Muslim world. Asgar Ali Engineer, a Muslim scholar and activist from India, highlighted the role of justice in working for peace. The many workshops resulted in the final statement "A Framework of Justice and Peace Actions in Asia" which depicted areas of engagement and concrete plans for action in order to develop a civil society free of corruption. More grassroots activities are sought in order to bring about interreligious harmony. The media should be used extensively for this purpose.

In the Philippines, the "Second International Conference of Southeast Asian Muslim Leaders" was held November 22–24, 2006 in Manila. The conference, attended by 150 Muslim leaders from the ASEAN states, addressed the topic "Assessment of Islamic Da'wah and Moderation in the ASEAN Region." Even if the conference was attended only by Muslims, its implications for interreligious understanding and dialogue are great, because the Muslims participat-

ing in the conference represent moderate Muslims from the member states of the ASEAN countries who are advocating a moderate form of Islam free from fundamentalist and radical tendencies. The participants vowed in the end to campaign against terrorism and to establish interfaith harmony by reaching out to the grassroots in explaining the real nature of Islam as a religion of peace and moderation.

In Indonesia, an interfaith peace movement of young people was founded in Tanjungpinang, the capital of the Riau Archipelago province, on April 27, 2007. Muslim, Christian, Buddhist and Hindu youth took the initiative to establish a "Communication Forum of Interfaith Youth" to work for peace and communal harmony. The new movement is supported by the Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest Muslim organisation in Indonesia, and other religious bodies. The Jesuit Franz Magnis-Suseno, rector of the Jesuit-run Driyarkara School in Jakarta, was the main speaker who encouraged the young people in their resolve to work together for peace. Magnis-Suseno reminded the participants that only by respecting the principle "Unity in Diversity," which is embodied in the national emblem of Indonesia and is at the heart of the Pancasila principles, will it be possible to maintain peace in the multireligious and multicultural reality of the Indonesian nation.

The Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference together with the Asian Muslim Action Network and the Southern Institute of Social Sciences (Vietnam) jointly organised an international conference on April 17–19, 2007 on the theme "Multi-ethnic Asia: Peace and Sustainable Development." The conference was attended by some fifty participants from Bangladesh, PR China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Thailand and Japan. The fact that the conference could convene in Vietnam is a sign that the Vietnamese government is relaxing its restrictive control on religious activities. Another rare moment occurred when Tran Hong Lien, directrice of the government-run Centre for Ethnology and Religion in Ho Chi Minh City, a Communist cadre, addressed the conference with a lecture in which she acknowledged the important contribution religious values can make in the field of social stability and promotion of a good life in Asia.

A modest contribution towards religious harmony was made by "Voice of the Age," the Interfaith Radio Program founded in Pakistan last year which celebrated its first anniversary on May 10, 2007 in Lahore. The main attraction of the 30-minute program, aired every Friday at 3:30 p.m. across the Punjab province, is a talk segment in which religious leaders, students and intellectuals discuss everyday issues such as social harmony, education and other topics. Professional actors and media people host the program, which also includes drama and songs.