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Identity, Diversity, and Dialogue. This is the global theme for WSCF in 2009. 
In this issue of PRAXIS, we explore this theme in the context of the Asia-Pacific region. Diversity is a gift in our region and from this reality, we develop our identity knowing that within us and our communities, we have and live with people of different religions, nationalities, ethnicities, languages, class, race, gender and sexuality. The complex intersection of these attributes means that we do not have, as individuals, a single identity, but rather multiple identities. In recent years, the resurgence of identity politics and the assertion of religious identities have led to tensions and conflicts in many communities around the world. While identity politics may not be the primal cause in many of these conflicts, it is nonetheless important to understand the nature of these conflicts as we embark into a process of dialogue to resolve these conflicts.

In this issue of PRAXIS, we explore some of the critical issues related to this theme from an inter-faith lens. In the section on Perspective, we featured an article by Chandra Muzzafar, a leading Muslim scholar, entitled, “Religion and Identity in a Globalized World.” Chandra explores the historical roots and contemporary justification of the rise religious identity in the Asian context from a Muslim perspective. He begins his presentation by stating that identity itself is complex and religious identity is just but one among a variety of attributes than an individual or group identifies. He links the global resurgence of religious identity to failure of good governance, globalization, global hegemony of US and its allies, and reaction against the secularization of societies. In conclusion, he assert that it is possible to have a universal and inclusive identity approach to religious identity by acknowledging the difference and celebrating the commonalities of the fundamental principles and universal values of each religion. He adds that, “the time has come for us to assert that neither God nor the Truth is the possession of any one community.”

The section on Biblical Perspective written by Kim Hye Rann-Cragg entitled, “An Asian Focus on the Socio Cultural and Political Implication of Sexuality,” brings to fore an Asian feminist perspective on sexual identities. In her paper, she explains the problematic Judeo-Christian dualistic understanding of sexuality, dividing the spirit (divine) and the body (secular), associating the former to men and later to women that of which is sexual and inferior. Hye Rann invites us to critique this interpretations by saying, “Enough is enough! We cannot afford not to ignore the church’s misogynistic and patriarchal legacy: ‘the suspicion of the body, a distrust of pleasure and passion, a fear of intimacy.’” Furthermore, she examines that despite negative biblical interpretations of female sexuality, the etymological understanding of sexuality in the bible is holistic and non-dualistic. In comparison with Hindu and Islamic traditions, there are positive references to homosexuality and sexual minorities than that of the Judeo-Christian traditions. She therefore advocates for overcoming the dualistic view of sexuality to holistic and holy.

Finally, we share with you in this issue, the stories and news from the region, the life and struggle of the SCMs, the experiences of the SCMers. I also want to highlight the proposal in the Senior Friends Space, which aims to create a flat form for SCM Senior Friends called NESPAC or Network of Student Christian Movement Senior Friends in the Asia Pacific.

Let us celebrate God’s gift of diversity and identity as we strive for a just and peaceful world.

Shalom to All!

Necta Montes Rocas
Regional Secretary
Before I discuss the theme, it is important to reflect upon the concept of identity itself. In broad terms, identity is the condition of being a specified person or thing characterized by certain attributes. These attributes it is assumed would identify that person or thing with other persons or things that share similar characteristics while distinguishing that person or thing from yet other persons or things that do not share most or some of those characteristics.

Thus, a Hindu would be identified by his religious beliefs and practices which distinguish him from say a Christian who would subscribe to beliefs and undertake practices that would be different from those that characterize the former. While there may be a distinct Hindu or Christian identity manifested through beliefs and practices and perhaps buttressed by tradition and heritage, one should also acknowledge that some of these beliefs and practices may evolve over time and, in the process, transform the meaning and content of one’s identity. Equally important, in spite of differences in doctrinal beliefs and practices, the various religions share certain common moral values and ethical precepts. This in a sense challenges the notion of exclusive religious identities.

Besides, one’s religious identity is not a person’s only identity. There is no such thing as a singular identity. A person professing the Sikh religion in Malaysia, for instance, is also part of the larger Indian Malaysian community. She may belong to a particular profession, may be a member of some women’s organisation, may even be active in a certain political party. Each group that she is part of endows her with a specific identity. Taken together, it means that our Sikh lady has multiple identities of which her religious identity is one.

Religious Identity as a Global Phenomenon

In almost all religious communities today there appears to be greater awareness of, and commitment to, one’s religious identity than in the past. Among Muslims, a number of episodes in the last twenty years seem to indicate that segments within the community have become more conscious of their Islamic identity and more determined to defend it. The worldwide protest against the British writer Salman Rushdie’s Satanic Verses in 1989 for instance which had caricatured the Prophet Muhammad and his family was a clear indication of how strongly Muslims felt about the Prophet’s honour and the religion’s sanctity. A couple of years later Muslims in some parts of the world expressed their outrage
Religion and Identity in a Globalising World

CHANDRA MUZAFFAR

at some of the disparaging comments made by another writer, the Bangladeshi, Taslima Nasreen, about certain verses in the Qur’an. In 2006, Muslims everywhere were incensed by cartoons that appeared in a Danish newspaper that depicted the Prophet as a perpetrator of terrorism. Other mainly European newspapers and magazines republished those offensive cartoons provoking Muslims even further and inciting some of them to resort to acts of violence. A year later, Pope Benedict XVI linked Islam to violence in a lecture in Germany which again prompted Muslims to vent their anger against not only the Pope but also the West in general. Come 2008 and a Dutch film denigrates Islam by regurgitating the allegation that the religion promotes violence.

Whenever the Prophet or Islam is attacked, Muslims respond by re-asserting their religious identity. I shall return to this observation later. There are other perhaps more critical events that have also served to enhance that sense of identity among Muslims. The usurpation of Palestinian land by the European Zionists and the subsequent dispossession of the Palestinian people which has continued unabated since 1948 is for Muslims in every nook and cranny of the planet an affront to their dignity and their identity. The occupation of Kashmir by Hindu India since 1947 is also perceived by many Muslims as a challenge to their identity as a religious community. The massacre of Bosnian Muslims by Serb ethno-nationalists in the mid nineties was yet another episode which thrust to the fore Muslim identity consciousness.

The sufferings of Muslims in Chechnya at the hands of the Russians have also had some impact upon the global Muslim community or ummah though on a somewhat lesser scale. The invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 by the United States and the continuing presence of US led NATO forces in that country is for the ummah an example of how Western global military hegemony threatens its integrity and its dignity. However, more than Afghanistan, it is the illegal, illegitimate Anglo-American occupation of Iraq since March 2003 which Muslims everywhere view as an attempt to dominate and subjugate a strategically located Muslim country in order to control its oil and its wealth. There are of course other conflicts too—in Mindanao, in the Philippines; in Southern Thailand; and in North Western China, to instance—which have also, in a limited sense, increased Muslim identity consciousness.

For a significant segment of the global Christian community, religious awareness seems to have increased as a result of the proselytizing activities of evangelical groups. A big portion of whom are perceived as the Christian Right. Many of these groups are not only faithful adherents of the forms and practices of the religion but are also devout advocates of some of the doctrines of the Christian Right such as the belief that the triumph of Israel over its neighbours is a prerequisite for the return of the Christ after which the whole of the Middle East and the whole world will embrace Christianity. In this mission to christianize the world, Islam and Muslims are viewed as a stumbling block. It is not surprising therefore that important segments of the Christian Right endorse the annexation and occupation of Palestine just as they support the occupation of Iraq and NATO’s preponderant military role in Afghanistan.

However, the political dimension of Christian Right thinking is perhaps not as significant as the spread of evangelical Christianity in parts of Asia, including Northeast Asia and Central Asia, Eastern Europe, certain areas of Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. In fact, evangelical Christianity in its present phase with its roots in the United States is perhaps one of the fastest growing religions in the world. Personal and group salvation rather than social transformation is the central credo of this version of Christianity. It appears to be propelled to some extent at least by the attraction that the American ‘way of life’ holds for substantial sections of the global community.

In the case of the Jews, the holocaust was undoubtedly the defining event in the rise of Jewish identity consciousness in the contemporary world. Even before the holocaust, for centuries the Jews as a community had been the constant target of dehumanizing stereotypes and caricatures that only helped to strengthen their sense of identity. Since the creation of the state of Israel, its perpetual conflict with the Palestinian people and various Arab
perspective

states has further reinforced a distinct Jewish identity that has become almost synonymous with political Zionism. Jewish or Zionist identity, it must be emphasised, is not always expressed through the medium of religion. Sometimes religious sentiments are exploited to buttress a narrow, bigoted, exclusive sense of Jewishness. However, more than religion, it is antipathy, and outright antagonism, towards Palestinians in particular and Arabs in general that serves as a powerful emotional bond preserving and perpetuating Jewish identity and Zionist nationhood.

Hindu identity consciousness is also on the rise in India and in other parts of the Indian diaspora. While there are a variety of reasons that explain the phenomenon, the ‘Muslim Other’ in the context of the Indian sub-continent has played a big role in shaping contemporary Hindu identity consciousness. It explains why in the Hindutva movement—the movement for the revival of a Hindu polity in India—the alleged humiliation that Hindus had suffered at the hands of Muslim conquerors and rulers centuries ago, is a major rallying cry for the re-assertion of a Hindu identity. The accusation that hundreds of Hindu temples were destroyed and desecrated in the days of the Mughals and the Nizams—an accusation that some distinguished scholars with a Hindu background have refuted effectively—is often trotted out by certain Hindu groups as the ultimate proof of Hindu humiliation. Rebuilding these temples, a goal of the Hindutva movement, is viewed by many Hindus as the Hindu way of regaining the community’s pride.

As with the other communities, Buddhist identity consciousness has also become stronger in recent times. And like some of the other cases, a conflictual relationship with ‘the other’ appears to be a factor. This is true of Sri Lanka where the majority Buddhist Sinhalese community and the minority Hindu Tamil community (among both the Sinhalese and the Tamils there are also many Christians) are locked in a long drawn conflict which has now produced a militant Buddhist fringe comprising even Buddhist monks who advocate violence against the Tamils. It has been argued that even in Thailand the conflict between Buddhists and Muslims in three of the southern provinces is one of the reasons why Buddhists have become more aware of their own religious identity. The Buddhist sense of identity however is not confined to a specific state. When ancient Buddhist statues in Bamiyan, Afghanistan were destroyed in 2001 on the orders of the ruling Taliban, Buddhists from different parts of the world responded as a single community. Here again we see how a challenge or an affront from outside the community, sometimes persuades a segment within the community to reassert its identity with greater vigour.

From our reflections on rising identity consciousness in five religions, we may be able to draw some tentative conclusions about the phenomenon. Most of the time, a community or a segment of a community becomes more conscious of its religious identity when it is under some form of attack from outside. This is especially so when the attacker is the religious other. The attack may come in the form of an insensitive remark or a book that disparages the community in question. Or it may express itself through actual physical conquest and occupation followed by massacre and oppression. In general, conflict between religious communities—though the conflict itself may have little to do with religion per se—heightens identity consciousness on both sides. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, on the one hand, and the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict, on the other, attest to this irrefutable truth.

Sometimes it is not an affront or an assault from outside that intensifies one’s sense of religious identity. Our analysis has shown that religious proselytization can also increase identity consciousness. When proselytization is associated either directly or obliquely with state power, the nexus between religion, identity and state becomes stronger. In a world where global power is a reality, the link between a particular religion and global power may endow the former with a universal identity of sorts that manifests itself through culture, literature and other such channels of expression. Thus, Christmas, largely because of Western global dominance, has become a universal celebration that transcends Christianity, and yet endows that religion with an international character and identity.

However, neither external challenges to a community nor the power of a global hegemon nor the proselytizing zeal of a religion provide a complete explanation for the rise of religious identity consciousness in recent times. There are larger trends that have been unfolding over decades that have also helped to strengthen religious identity consciousness. The reaction against the secularization of society especially in various parts of Asia is one such trend. When countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia, and India and Pakistan, freed themselves from colonial bondage, their ruling elites sought to fashion the social order on models derived largely from the West—models of social transformation which were essentially secular in the sense that they did not reflect in any way worldviews and visions embodied in the great religious philosophies that these Asian societies were heirs to. More specifically, the Philippines dedicated itself to a laissez faire market economy more akin to what its former colonial master the US pursued, while Indonesia in 1945 and for at least a decade and a half after that, flirted with ideas from both socialism and capitalism, ideologies that grew out of the womb of a secularizing Europe in the nineteenth century. The ruling elite in India led by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, an outstanding intellectual in his own right, experimented with
Fabian socialism while the founder of Pakistan, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, was committed to a form of social democracy which in its articulation was more European than Islamic since it made no reference to values and principles of justice and equality drawn from Islam’s own rich heritage.

Though the ideas that these elites espoused were rooted in ideologies that had evolved in another socio-cultural environment, it was their inability to address the fundamental challenges facing their people that eroded their credibility. It was because they failed in many instances to eradicate mass poverty, to reduce the gap between the have-a-lot and the have-a-little, and to curb corruption and greed at the elite level, that the people began to lose faith in their secular ideologies and outlooks. To make matters worse, a number of these elites became authoritarian and oppressive, often displaying utter contempt for the people’s feelings and aspirations. Consequently, the people’s confidence in their leaders plummeted dramatically. They knew that what their leaders professed invariably contradicted what they practised!

Religious resurgence in India, Pakistan, Indonesia, parts of rural Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand has a lot to do with this: the betrayal by the elites; their inability to deliver; their failure to live up to acceptable standards of governance. In other words, if whole sections of Hindu society have begun to identify with the Hindutva movement in India since the early nineties; if young Muslim men and women have become enthusiastic torch-bearers of Islamic movements in Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia since the eighties; if a segment of Thai society equates its aspirations with a conservative brand of Buddhism today; if Christian conservatism has been getting stronger in parts of the Philippines for more than two decades now, it is partly because justice, freedom and equality remain pious platitudes in some of these societies and the basic tenets of good governance have been violated with impunity.

There is perhaps another reason why the tendency to identify with religion has become stronger in a number of societies. It is linked in a sense to secularism as an ideology. Because secularism conceives of progress and change in materialistic terms, and because development—even when it has been successful—appears to be estranged from religious values and principles, a lot of Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs and others with religious roots feel that there is something missing in their lives, that there is a spiritual vacuum within that has to be filled. That secular development and the secular lifestyle creates a spiritual vacuum, and that it cannot quench the perennial human thirst for the sacred and the transcendent, is a view that is gaining currency even in the West. In fact, scholars such as Daniel Bell, Charles Taylor and Fred Dallmayr, among others, have argued that this is one of the reasons why there is a religious resurgence in the US and in other parts of the Western world.

It appears therefore that the secular revolution which has brought a great deal of good to humankind, has also provoked a religious reaction, a desire to re-establish one’s religious identity, to re-connect with the transcendent and the sacred.
There is another current and contemporary revolution that is also contributing, willy-nilly, to the strengthening of religious identity. This is the process of globalisation. Since the flow of labour across national boundaries has intensified as a result of globalisation, and hitherto religiously homogenous societies have become heterogeneous, individuals and families are now forced to accept the reality of multi-religious neighbourhoods. While in some instances this has encouraged people to reach out to the religious other, it has also made many others more conscious of their own religious identity. It has led to a renewed emphasis upon religious rituals and practices that distinguish one religious community from another. To put it differently, the reinforcement of one’s religious identity is, in some cases, a response to globalisation.

Globalisation is impacting upon religion in some societies in yet another sense. Since lifestyles and various forms of culture and entertainment are easily and rapidly transmitted from one place to another through satellite television and internet and other modes of communication, religious communities which adhere faithfully to certain time honoured ways of conducting inter-gender relations and dressing, feel threatened by this aspect of globalisation. They are reacting to the challenge by insisting that the state or religious authorities or both adopt tough measures to curb these “undesirable” foreign influences. Such calls are heard in parts of Hindu India as they are heard in parts of Muslim Indonesia. Indeed, because these influences via globalisation’s new technologies are so pervasive and penetrative, protecting pristine religious values has become part and parcel of the political agenda of a number of political parties in Asia. It is only too apparent that such agendas buttress a religious community’s fidelity to its identity.

The Muslim Concern for its Islamic Identity

While the above factors may help to explain why identity consciousness has increased in all religious communities, it is true that Muslims as a whole seem to be more concerned about, and attached to, their Islamic identity. Compare for instance Muslim reactions to films or books that denigrate our religion or our Prophet to Christian reactions to similar attempts to defile their religion. Neither The Last Temptation of Christ nor The Passion of the Christ nor the Da Vinci Code elicited the sort of mass anger that we witnessed in the Muslim response to the Satanic Verses or the Danish cartoons or the Fitna film. Of course, we know that Muslims, more than other communities, have been consciously targeted for a much longer while and in a much more systematic manner by the West. If anything, Islamophobia which has a thousand year history behind it, is getting worse. The objective realities confronting the ummah, as we have seen,—Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan—have also heightened Muslim identity consciousness. While all this is granted, there is perhaps another reason also why the majority of Muslims tend to be very conscious of their identity.

The Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad endow Muslims with a feeling of oneness, of unity. Apart from a belief in the Oneness of God and in Muhammad as God’s messenger, they are also held together by religious practices such as the daily prayers with Mecca as the kiblat, the zakat (the wealth tax), the annual fast and the hajj (the pilgrimage). These beliefs and practices furnish Muslims with their sense of identity. At the level of religious sentiment, this notion of identity is global and transcends all other identities. As a sentiment it appears to be much stronger than what exists in other religious communities.

It is becoming increasingly evident that within this notion of identity, the pivot is the Muslim attachment to the Prophet. Though it is loyalty to God that is the essence of Islam, in reality it is the Muslims’ profound love for Muhammad that unites and inspires the ummah. This is why any attempt by anyone to demean and denigrate the Prophet evokes an immediate response from Muslims all over the world.

It is unfortunate that sometimes the response assumes a violent form. Resorting to violence in defending the Prophet and Muslim identity is antithetical to what Islam teaches and what Muhammad himself stood for. The Qur’an advises Muslims to counter lies and slander about God and the Prophet in a civil and courteous manner. Even when the
Prophet was attacked physically while disseminating the message of Islam, he maintained his dignity and composure and did not retaliate. This is why those who justify defending Muslim identity through violence are in fact guilty of betraying the Qur’an and the Prophet himself. It is not just on the question of violence that some Muslims undermine the Qur’anic message. Sometimes they interpret Muslim identity in terms that are so narrow and bigoted that it conveys the erroneous impression that Islam is a dogmatic religion that is insistent on unquestioning compliance with rigidly prescribed forms and symbols. In such circles, a Muslim woman’s identity is equated with her attire and her headgear when it is her modesty and her character that should determine who she is and what she is. There are Muslims who regard the beard as the defining characteristic of the identity of a Muslim male. Here again, what is needed is a more profound understanding of identity anchored in a person’s character and his values rather than a superficial obsession with appearance per se. Similarly, there are some Muslims who argue that male-female interaction or interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims or partaking of a meal in the home of a non-Muslim even if it is halal, will compromise one’s Muslim identity. These are advocates of an ‘uncontaminated’, ‘unadulterated’ Muslim identity that they feel is the religion’s only bastion in a world teeming with challenges that threaten the integrity of the faith. It is this sort of thinking that tarnishes the image of Islam and diminishes the dignity of the Muslim.

What explains such narrow thinking on Muslim identity? Why is such exclusive, somewhat parochial thinking gaining more and more adherents these days in Malaysia and in a number of other Muslim countries? We have already provided part of the answer in our analysis. Foreign occupation of Muslim lands, Washington’s hegemony and the subsequent control over oil in Muslim countries and the oppression and slaughter of Muslim children, women and men, have, as we have observed, made Muslims more conscious of their identity—a consciousness that is being directed towards exclusive forms and practices since such forms and practices make one more safe and secure in a situation where one feels more threatened and besieged. If anything, secularisation and globalisation, as we have pointed out, have also compelled a lot of Muslims to fortify their linkages to their identity. Again, the actual expression of identity has been through channels that are narrow and exclusive for the reason that we have cited. Then there is the failure of governance in so many Muslim countries with its adverse impact upon the people that has also persuaded some of them to turn to Islam as the solution. This in turn has led to a strengthening of Muslim identity consciousness which is manifesting itself through predictable forms and symbols that aim to enhance one’s sense of security and confidence.

This brings us to the second part of the answer. It is doubtful if issues related to the external world of a Muslim—global hegemony and its attendant injustices; the secularisation of society and globalisation; and the adverse consequences of weak governance—would have resulted in the strengthening of exclusive identity consciousness if there weren’t certain forces within Islamic theology and doctrine that lent legitimacy to such an outlook. An exclusive notion of Muslim identity which eschews an interactive relationship with non-Muslims and emphasises that dimension of theology that promotes Islamic distinctiveness has been part of Islamic jurisprudence for centuries. At certain stages of history, this notion of identity was stronger than at other stages, depending upon the inclination of the ruler or the prevailing circumstance and situation. Some scholars have suggested that the theologian who provided the
intellectual rationalization for the growth of an exclusive notion of Muslim identity was the Hanbali jurist Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328). Ibn Taymiyyah had influenced the thinking of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism, an eighteenth century revivalist movement in Arabia for the reconstruction of society, which has emerged as the most exclusive, literalist and dogmatic interpretation of Islam in the contemporary world.

There is no need to emphasise that an exclusive notion of Muslim identity with shades of Wahhabism will be antithetical to the demands of a globalising world in which religious boundaries are becoming more and more porous. Indeed, in a globalising world it is only an inclusive, accommodative, universal vision of Muslim identity which will enable Muslims to work together in a spirit of comradeship with people of other faiths and people who do not subscribe to a particular faith or to any faith at all, for a better, more just and peaceful world. Within every religious community, such an inclusive, accommodative, universal perspective on identity will have to make its presence felt.

National and Global Challenges—and Identity

From our analysis it is obvious that governance at the national level will have to improve considerably to dissuade disenchanted segments of the masses from turning to conservative, reactionary religious movements and political parties to champion their often legitimate grievances related to poverty, widening economic disparities, abuse of state power and corruption. In some societies there are some attempts to address these grievances. What is more significant, in a number of countries regardless of their religious demographics the popular clamour for good governance is getting louder and louder. This is happening in Hindu majority Nepal as it is happening in Buddhist-Christian South Korea as it is happening in Muslim majority Indonesia.

While awareness of the importance of good governance is increasing, there are also groups which are still on the margins of society who are consciously relating some of the principles of good governance such as accountability and transparency to their religious and spiritual philosophies. Some have gone beyond that and are asking searching questions about the very nature of secular, materialistic development. The global environmental crisis has served as a trigger of sorts prompting activists and intellectuals to delve into their own philosophies for visions of balanced social change that cherish the intimate nexus between the human being and nature and, at the same time, urge humankind to exercise restraint in the use of nature’s resources. These alternative ideas on development guided by a spiritual-moral ethic that repudiates greed and selfishness are being discussed and debated in India and Thailand, in Iran and Turkey, in Venezuela and Bolivia. It is an ethic that serves as an antidote to the sort of alienation that spawns narrow, bigoted notions of religious identity.

Similarly, as a counter trend to some of the conservative, reactionary movements opposed to globalisation, groups and individuals in a few countries are now utilising spiritual and moral values from their own religious philosophies as the criteria for embracing the positive and discarding the negative in globalisation. This approach is being applied by some civil society groups in Iran, Indonesia, India and South Korea, especially in the realm of the arts and culture. Though they have little influence or impact upon the rest of society, their rational, even handed approach to globalisation can help to check both blind rejection, on the one hand, and total emulation, on the other, of the globalisation process. This alternative offers an authentic, inclusive defence of a people’s identity. In a sense, some
Iranian films which are rooted in the nation’s Islamic Sufi tradition and yet embody universal themes that appeal to everyone, are an outstanding illustration of this approach to the challenge of globalisation.

From globalisation we now turn to conflicts between different religious groups which we had pinpointed as one of the factors that leads to a hardening of religious attitudes and identities. None of the conflicts we had alluded to—Israeli-Palestinian, Hindu-Muslim in Kashmir, Sinhalese-Tamil in Sri Lanka, Buddhist-Muslim in Southern Thailand or Christian-Muslim in Mindanao, Philippines—appear to be moving in the direction of a just and amicable settlement. What this means is that attempts to assert identity in a negative way as a result of the prolongation of these conflicts will persist for some time to come. This is a pity because religion is not, as we have hinted, the primary cause of any of the conflicts. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict for instance is about usurpation and annexation of land. The Hindu-Muslim conflict in Kashmir is related to occupation and territory. The Sinhalese-Tamil conflict is closely linked to political rights and territorial independence. In Southern Thailand too political participation and the right of self-determination are at the core of the conflict. In Mindanao, the right of self-determination is compounded by the problem of ancestral lands. Since the fundamental issues in these conflicts—which are non-religious—are hard to resolve, the religious identity of the protagonists has become a ‘victim’ of sorts.

With global hegemony which we have identified as one of the causes of the spread of right wing Christian evangelism, on the one hand, and Islamic resurgence, on the other, the situation is somewhat different. There is no doubt at all that Washington helmed global hegemony is on the decline. Resistance to hegemony from the people of Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan; the repudiation of US economic dominance in Latin America; the economic ascendancy of China; and the military reassertion of Russia have in different ways and to different degrees, challenged Washington’s power. The US itself is beset with monumental economic woes which inhibit its ability to dominate and to control the affairs of the world. As US hegemony declines, it would be reasonable to expect aggressive right-wing Christian evangelisation to also recede. Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist groups which have been reacting to evangelisation will feel less besieged and be more prepared to engage with the other. This in turn will have a positive effect upon their notion of identity. Likewise, Muslim groups with a narrow, exclusive view of identity who have sworn to fight US hegemony with blood and fire, like Al-Qaeda, will lose their raison d’etre. Indeed, if Muslim societies do not have to confront US hegemony, it is quite conceivable that reform oriented ideas on women, non-Muslim minorities, and the application of Islamic law in the contemporary setting, will grow and develop since it will no longer be possible for Muslim rulers and religious elites to use the threat of an external power to snuff out progressive thinking on religion that differs from what they subscribe to. It is only when reformist ideas are rooted in the heart and mind of the Muslim that the Muslim’s view of identity will also become more universal and inclusive.

The Complexity of Identity

If overcoming national and global challenges is important in the quest for an
inclusive, universal vision of identity, it is equally important to make the adherents of the various faiths understand that identity is a complex phenomenon. Once that complexity is understood and appreciated, one will be less inclined to adopt a rigid, doctrinaire position on identity which is inimical to a globalising world.

The first and perhaps most pernicious myth on identity that one should endeavour to demolish is that of religious exclusivity, of religious purity. Every religion, the argument goes, should protect its pristine character. It should not allow itself to be ‘contaminated’ by outside influences. Its rituals and practices, its values and principles, are exclusive and unique. They have nothing in common with what other religions have to offer. Most of all, the religion that one is affiliated to has an exclusive claim to the Truth. God is its monopoly. The only way to know God and the Truth is through that particular religion.

These inter-related notions of religion and its identity are found in most religions. It is true that every religion has its own history and heritage. This has to be recognised and respected. Some of the doctrinal beliefs of the various religions are also distinctive. Tauhid (the Oneness of God) in Islam is very different from the Trinity in Christianity. Karma in Hinduism is a totally different concept from Divine Judgment in Judaism. Even religious rituals and practices are dissimilar. Muslims and Buddhists have different ways of performing their prayers. Jews and Hindus have different dietary prohibitions. Marriage and funeral rites are different in the various religions.

Nonetheless, we should acknowledge that in spite of all these differences there are also significant similarities. As we have seen, all religions celebrate the precious bond between the human being and nature. All of them treasure the family as the foundation of society just as all religions seek to foster a sense of community. Similarly, moral leadership is the essence of good governance—two intertwined principles enshrined in all religions. That the means of livelihood should

“Strengthening a universal and inclusive approach to religious identity...is the only approach that will ensure peace and harmony in a world where the religious other has become our neighbour.”
be ethical is a precept found in all our religious philosophies. Religion teaches us that education should seek to develop character and character is the kernel of both individual and society.

There are other precepts and principles that most religions share in common. ‘Do not do to others what you do not want others to do to you,’ otherwise known as the golden rule of life, is one such moral principle. ‘The end does not justify the means’ is another principle that embodies eternal wisdom. The advice to judge a person by his deeds rather than his words is also a shared religious axiom.

If religions share certain fundamental principles, they also share certain basic universal values. Love and compassion, justice and freedom, honesty and humility, responsibility and restraint, peace and harmony are a small portion of the values that all religions cherish. More than that, even in their articulation of the transcendent and the sacred, religions that are diverse as Christianity and Buddhism have something in common.

If people are made aware of the similarities among the different religions, they will begin to realize that their own faith is not as exclusive or as unique as it is sometimes made out to be. There is no need to add that this realization will make them less obsessed with maintaining an exclusive religious identity and more amiable to an inclusive, universal approach towards religion. They will not regard inclusiveness or universality as a threat to their religious identity since inclusiveness and universality are germane to every religion. Through their recognition of our common humanity—the human family is one is an idea found in all religions—all religions embrace the dignity of the religious other.

But that raises a question. If it is possible through faithful adherence to one’s religion to embrace the religious other as a human being, how does one explain the widely held view that the Truth is exclusive to one’s own religion, that God is the monopoly of the followers of a particular religion? Many Jews, Christians and Muslims in particular subscribe to this view. It is the ‘I own God’ credo.

It is a credo that diminishes the universality of God and the inclusiveness of God’s Eternal Truth. How can any one religious community own God and monopolise the Truth? In fact, the Torah, the New Testament and the Qur’an provide ample evidence of a vision of God and the Truth that is diametrically different from what the ‘I own God’ proponents advocate: a vision that is universal and inclusive.

This is why the time has come for us to assert that neither God nor the Truth is the possession of any one community. Since God is the Truth, the Absolute, Eternal Truth, we are all merely humble seekers of that Truth. We may have chosen different paths in our journey towards the Truth. That is our right, our right of choice. I am convinced of the correctness of the path I have chosen but I recognise that someone else may be equally convinced of the correctness of the path that he has chosen. I will not allow our respective choices to be a bone of contention between us. I will walk my path with integrity and humility, ever conscious of that Ultimate Truth and the guidance that God offers the human family.

Towards a Universal and Inclusive Identity

Once we adopt such an attitude, our different religious identities will cease to be a barrier in our communication and interaction with one another. Since interaction with the religious other is inevitable, given a globalising world, an approach towards one’s religious identity that is both universal and inclusive, will be a tremendous asset. However, for such an approach to succeed, the influential stratum of society should acquire in-depth knowledge and understanding of not only the similarities and differences among the various religions, but also their underlying values and principles. I am not aware of any multi-religious society anywhere in the world where its influential stratum comprises men and women who are immersed in the philosophies of the different religions and are committed to enhancing understanding and empathy among the adherents of the different faiths. It is this lacuna that we should endeavour to overcome through inter-faith, inter-civilisational dialogue which has become one of the urgent imperatives of our age. Genuine dialogue will not only increase our understanding of the other but will also help re-shape our notion of our own religious identity and the identity of our dialogical partners.

Of course, all these efforts to strengthen dialogue will not achieve our goal of evolving a more inclusive and universal approach to religious identity if conflicts involving people of different religious backgrounds drag on, or if a hegemonic power of a certain religious persuasion conquers the land and usurps the resources of the religious other, or if the negative aspects of globalisation fortify a siege mentality among adherents of different faiths. An inclusive and universal approach to religious identity will also be undermined—as we have shown—by the growth of narrow interpretations of religion arising from mass disillusionment with an elite that is incapable of addressing the fundamental needs and aspirations of the people. Bad governance, in other words, is also an enemy of a progressive, enlightened approach to religious identity.

The challenges are formidable. But it should not deter us from persevering in our mission of strengthening a universal and inclusive approach to religious identity. It is the only approach that will ensure peace and harmony in a world where the religious other has become our neighbour.

Chandra Muzaffar is a leading Malaysian intellectual. He is associated with the Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang and runs the Just World Trust in Kuala Lumpur. For details about the Just World Trust, see www.just-international.org.
A Korean mother and her child went to a butcher shop to get some meat. The curious child was asking many questions and looking at interesting things. The owner asked this child, “How old are you?” “I am four,” said the child. Then, “what is your sex?” The child could not understand the question and so the owner changed the question, “Do you have a GoChoo?” Since the child was a boy and understood the question, he answered it with confidence, “Yes, I have it inside of my clothes.”

A three-year old girl was lying on the stomach and touching her vagina with her hands (this girl, when she wants to take a nap during the day, often does this). Her mother observed it and asked her, “what are you doing?” No answer. So she asked the question a bit differently, “what are you touching?” The girl answered, “GoChoo.”
Introduction

To many Koreans such stories as those above are not seen as strange stories. However, when you think critically about these stories, their implication is quite problematic. First, the criterion of defining sex is neither neutral nor objective. The story above contains a sexist view since sexual identity is determined by a man’s sex organ. The second story demonstrates that the girl identified her sexual organ as that of a boy, something which was not taught to her by her mother or by her day care school. In other words, such learning is not acquired from formal or intentional education. Rather it occurs in the social and cultural learning environment. Somehow, this girl, although the mother tried to educate her in a way sensitive to justice issues, learned that everyone’s sexual organ is defined in terms of a male “Gochoo.” This story shows how influential and powerful informal socio-cultural teachings may be. These socio-cultural teachings seem to imply that female identity is an identity that lacks something (a woman does not have penis) which may easily imply that women are inferior to men who have it.

Of course, such understanding is reinforced by such male-oriented “scientific” theories as Sigmund Freud’s Penis-envy psychology. Naming the male sexual organ directly is something people feel uneasy about, and even more so when it comes to naming the female organ directly, something which is regarded as taboo. This kind of cultural bias and assumption implies that the female sex organs are unspeakable, verging on unclean, and in religious terms sinful, therefore, opposite to holy. Misogynistic views often developed from these kinds of devaluing assumptions about female sexuality. The examples in the writings of Church Fathers are many. Tertullian who said, woman and her vagina are “the gate to hell.” Jerome thought that what a woman really hopes for is to become a man. While opposing this kind of misogynistic Christian tradition, Eve Ensler boldly suggests that we should talk about the vagina in public by sharing our experiences of our vaginas. By participating in this communal and political action, as a way of challenging male-biased views on female bodies, we speak out who we are as women as the Subject of our own body rather than the sexual objects.

1. Clarifications on Terms related to Sexuality

It would be useful to clarify terms such as sex and gender as we discuss the implications of feminist thought for our understanding of sexuality. Sex is a biological term that distinguishes between men and women. However, this term is often used to justify the role of women subordinated to that of men. (e.g., women are biologically weak therefore, men must take more difficult (and important) roles outside the home; engineering is an area that only men can do well, whereas cooking and raising children at home is the area that women can manage). Gender is a socio-cultural and political concept that developed after biological determination. In other words, it is a concept that was constructed by social interactions, cultural values, and other factors. This concept emerged from an oppositional understanding that female and male identity. But in the feminist gender perspective, women can have masculinity as much as men can have femininity. (e.g., some women are good at engineering, where as some men are good at cooking).

My understanding is that sexuality encompassing the features of both sex and gender, involves diverse experiences of sexual desire, sexual identity, sexual habit, sexual orientation, and various sexual relationships. In this understanding, sexuality is influenced by class, race, age, social value, cultural tradition, and institution. In short, sexuality is complex, fluid and multi-faceted.

Having acknowledged these terms, what we need to affirm is that sexuality is often taught in a negative or passive way. In educational terms we may talk of it as a null curriculum. This means we teach it by not teaching it. Too often the null curriculum of sexuality merely accepts the status quo. We therefore need to speak out in public. Our silence on the topic of sexuality is also in part the result of its status as ‘taboo,’ i.e., a topic prohibited because it is regarded as bad, dangerous, undesirable, and embarrassing. However, being silent often leads to the perpetuation of current male-dominated views on female sexuality. Again in educational parlance this becomes an implicit curriculum, things we don’t explain or justify in our teaching because they are simply assumed as true and accepted by everyone. Therefore, we must intentionally foster an open environment where we can talk about (female) sexuality and question these assumptions.

It is especially critical to overcome narrow views on sexuality dealing with homosexuality when heterosexuality is regarded as the norm, the desirable form of sexuality. Such a norm leads to compulsory heterosexuality for everyone. It means that we are socially and culturally conditioned and forced to believe that heterosexuality is natural or superior to any other forms of sexuality. Such forces are often at work in our formal and informal educational systems, in the form of socialization and indoctrination and sometimes go further with the use of violence and legal punishment to enforce the norm.

2. A Christian-dualist Understanding of Sexuality

Some of our most fundamental understandings of sexuality are deeply rooted in Western dualism, that is, an ideology that divides the spirit (mind) from the body and assumes that the body is the
inferior of the two. Such dualism is elaborated in the assumption of two worlds, one divine and the other secular. This is accompanied by the oppositional understanding of what is sacred and what is sexual. While separating one reality from the other, sexist dualism is constructed as a way of justifying the domination of men over women. It associates the spirit, the sacred and the reason with men while women are associated with the secular/sexual, the body and emotion. Church father, Jerome, even questioned if a woman has a soul (believing that she does not), and therefore argued that women are doomed to be subordinated to men as they are unable to play any leading roles in society. Of course, in such biased understanding, female sexuality, is devalued and labeled as inferior, dangerous, and disgusting. Women have internalized this dualistic and discriminatory thinking. Furthermore, we have been conditioned to believe that sexuality and sacredness are irreconcilable opposites. Enough is enough! We cannot afford not to ignore the church’s misogynistic and patriarchal legacy: “the suspicion of the body, a distrust of pleasure and passion, a fear of intimacy.”

Those who influenced Christian thought over the centuries, for instance, St. Augustine in the 4th century, Clement of Alexandria in the 3rd century, and Martin Luther in the 16th century strongly supported sexist dualism. Augustine who once was a pagan, having innumerable unhealthy sexual relationships, was converted to Christianity and then “over-repented” for his previous delinquent life denying altogether human sexuality and the human body any place in the Christian life. He is the one who first suggested the connection between original sin and Eve’s sexuality, claiming that sexual desire, especially uncontrollable sexual desire leads us (especially men) to “hell.” He therefore taught the Christians under his care not to have any sexual intercourse even between husband and wife unless it was for the purpose of producing a baby. Similarly, Clement argued, “If a man marries in order to have children he ought not to have a sexual desire for his wife…. He ought to produce children by a reverent, disciplined act of (God’s) will.” Martin Luther of Reformation, while having acknowledged the value of sexuality, regarded women’s body as the tool of procreation, which implies that women’s bodies cannot be appreciated in terms of their sexuality. In these theologians’ understanding, God is anti-sex and anti-women’s body and against sexual activities other than those for the purpose of procreation. Such views have not changed much in the 21st century. The Roman Catholic Church still teaches that the role of sexuality is mainly that of procreation.

3. A Biblical Understanding of Sexuality

We have examined Christian-dualist views on sexuality and found them to be quite negative. Let us then examine the scriptures to see whether we can derive a new biblical understanding of sexuality that can be positive and affirming to sexuality. The Hebrew word yadah means ‘to know’ which is also used to refer to ‘sexual intercourse.’ Hosea describes God’s yearning for knowing us in an intimate loving relation, “I will betroth you to myself, and have to hold, and you will know the LORD.” (Hosea 1:9) When Mary, the mother of Jesus, encountered the angel, Gabriel, who foretold her that she would have a baby Jesus, she replied, I do not know a man, which means, she had not had sexual intercourse with a man (Luke 1:34).

In the Hebrew understanding, knowing is not about a cognitive activity, heavily depending on acquiring objective knowledge. Knowing is about a subjective unity, as for example, the unity which occurs through sexual intercourse. Another insight from the Hebrew understanding is that sexuality (understood as a way of knowing) is not limited to physical realities. Rather it involves emotional, mental, spiritual, and social aspects as well. As argued earlier, “sexuality is influenced by class, race, age, social value, cultural tradition, and institution.” Therefore, to know somebody, to have a sexual relationship with somebody, means to know that person’s class, race, age, social value, cultural tradition and various things including his or her character, personality and upbringing. Such knowing, the nature of sexuality, cannot be possible unless you respect that person in mutual relationship. Such understanding challenges the sexist dualism that reinforces the domination of men over women because genuine meaning of sexual relationship as knowing, opposes one group’s control at the expense of the others.

In spite of many negative biblical interpretations of women and female sexuality as for example in the case of Eve and the snake, the etymological understanding of sexuality in the Bible is far from being negative or dualistic. It affirms sexuality as holistic and non-dualistic. It states sexuality to be something mutual and not oppressive. It proclaims sexuality as something holy rather than as something secular, something that involves our whole being and is part of the very relationship we have with God.

4. An Understanding of Homosexuality and Sexual Minorities

In India, scholars have claimed, homosexuality and bisexuality were more prevalent and less stigmatized before the British colonization. Since ancient times, there has been an acknowledgment of homosexual love. In the Kamasutra, the first literary classic on the matter of sex which was written in the 4th century, lesbian intercourse is described in detail, as well as male homosexual intercourse. These were thought of in terms of their being an integral part of human sexual life. The Kamasutra...
further teaches that “the final aim of sexual pleasure is spiritual.... Sexuality is one of the bases of civilization.” As the British scholar, A. A. Macdonell admits, Indian religious traditions have often been more open and profound in their understandings of sexuality (including homosexuality) than the Western Judeo-Christian traditions.

In Malaysia, the pondan, the effeminate gay man, has traditionally been an accepted member of Malay village communities. He was respected for his artistry and was regarded as an important person in such occasions as weddings until fairly recent times.

In Islamic Sufi literature, although the Koran makes negative references toward homosexuality, homosexuality is positively described in terms of the spiritual relationship between God and man. For instance, Abu Nawas and Thousand and One Nights, classical works of Arabic poetry, regard homosexual men and women as respectful people. However tribal these references in the major Islamic and Hindu religious traditions are, they offer a better possibility for re-opening a dialogue with homosexuality than Christian traditions, where there is no single positive reference to it.

How did homosexuality become illegal and intolerable in Islam and Hindu traditions? In the case of India, it was when British imperialism rulers declared homosexuality a crime in the Indian Penal Code. The British colonialists who were stricken with Christian homophobia could not tolerate homosexual people in India. The situation of Malaysia is not so different. The Shariah laws and the Penal Code penalize homosexual people. The rationale behind such punishment is that heterosexuality is natural and normal. Christian colonial legacy was one rationale behind oppressing homosexuality. The other rationale behind this heterosexual discrimination is in part patriarchal traditions, reinforcing a woman’s role as giving birth to a son. An American lesbian feminist poet, Adrienne Rich, calls this heteropatriarchy. In this rigidly conditioned role, there is no place for women’s sexuality, let alone homosexuality. Homosexuality is totally against the patriarchal system which can only be sustained through the procreation of the son who would succeed the father, while requiring women to belong to men and serve their needs. Heterosexual marriage is even viewed as a tool in sustaining this system. “Marriage... gave man control over his wife’s body and reproductive processes” in Western society.

Many homosexual activists argue that the heterosexual patriarchal society where women are exposed to all kinds of sexual abuse, subordinated to men, and objectified as commercial commodities is immoral and irresponsible, unhealthy and undesirable. The critical matter is not to accept either heterosexual or homosexual or single or married as right but to commit ourselves to explore our given sexuality with a faithful partner without using it as tool of violence or control.

Sexual minority people are doubly oppressed by society and by their faith community. Paik Eun-Jung, who did research on the stress of Korean gay Christians, demonstrates that these Christians have faith that God listens to their identity struggles and accept the way they are. It is about recognition of their difference and respect of the identity that is also created in the image of God.

Lesbian women in Asia pointed out that homophobia is rampant even within feminist circles or progressive groups, in part because sexuality issues are often hidden from public discussions. Aruna Gnanadason further urges us to focus public attention on the rights of homosexual women and men, especially when their rights are violated with a misconception of homosexuality causing HIV/AIDS, although there is no link between homosexuality and HIV/AIDS.

Alina Rastam and Tan beng hui in Malaysia takes this human rights approach to homosexuality and sexual minority. The issue of homosexuality and sexual minority is not to choose or judge what is right or wrong. It is about fairness and justice to any discrimination against a person’s dignity and identity. Religion can contribute to practicing human rights because the common ground of every religion is compassion, tolerance, and respect of all beings.

5. Socio-Cultural and Legal implications of Sexuality

In many Asian countries, women’s sacrifices for families are seen as virtues or taken for granted as duties. Forces of giving up her dreams, including career,
“It is especially critical to overcome narrow views on sexuality dealing with homosexuality when heterosexuality is regarded as the norm, the desirable form of sexuality. Such a norm leads to compulsory heterosexuality for everyone. It means that we are socially and culturally conditioned and forced to believe that heterosexuality is natural or superior to any other forms of sexuality.”

Dayanthi Samaranayake shares her male-dominated society’s views on women in Sri Lanka: “when it comes to educating children in poor families, priority is given to males. Widows and barren women are not allowed to come forward when special occasions take place as they are considered to bring bad luck…. They become objects of sexual abuse and easy prey for abusers.”

The situation in India seems worse than Sri Lanka. As a Telegu proverb says, “bringing up a daughter is like manuring and watering a plant for someone else’s courtyard.” This kind of belief justifies such harmful practices as female genital mutilation, early marriages and female feticide or infanticide.

The ethos of sacrifices has heavily restricted the way women can explore sexuality including pleasure. It is a socio-cultural and religious implication that sexual pleasure is regarded as sin, undesirable. However, Christian E. Gudorf argues, the real sin is not to please the partner’s sexual desire in mutual sexuality. In this light, Kwok Bun-Yi in Korea explores the meaning of masturbation as a way that women can embark upon a self-exploration of their sexuality. While quoting a Korean lesbian movie, she argues that masturbation can be “the most peaceful, economical, and clean sexual activity.” By peaceful she means free from inequality visa-vi men. By economical she means free from financial implications. By clean she means free from the danger of unwanted pregnancy and sexual disease. Given its biased view and
misunderstanding, masturbation as a part of female sexuality needs to be discussed further in public.

Women’s sexuality has been economically and socially commercialized and commoditized. P. Bethel Krupa Victor reminds us how the media in India reinforces sexual stereotypes of women as vamps, sex objects, servants of men and passive housewives, and at the same time, lures young men to so-called “sexual talks.” Take any daily newspaper and we can easily notice how women’s bodies are used to sell commercial products in the advertisement (e.g. cellular phones). Women’s bodies that are objectified and commercialized represent a biased concept of beauty as well: a woman with a long hair, big breasts, a big bum, but a thin waist, and tall and slim. Combined with racial features, a Western commercialized beauty of women, a woman with long blonde hair with blue eyes like Marilyn Monroe, becomes the standard. Such stereotyping of beauty is a serious problem because it can be very damaging to women’s self-esteem and self-dignity. This is not just true in Korea or Hong Kong but true throughout the whole world. The cosmetic business and the plastic surgery that derive from such biased beauty ideas prevent women from truly appreciating their different body shapes or facial features. They can also prevent women from exploring their inner beauty and get in the way of developing a holistic sexuality that is not limited to the physical aspect of women’s bodies.

Let us now move on to the legal implications of sexuality. In the case of Sri Lanka, the legal implications of sexuality regarding marriage are clear: women are supposed to belong to men. A woman cannot marry more than one man, while a man can marry up to 4 wives at a time. A woman must be a virgin, while a man may not be. A woman is compelled to give huge sums of wealth to a man as a dowry when they are married, while a man is not, although there in Muslim law there is supposed to be a payment to the woman who enters a marriage as a token of respect. Even this, however, is another example of how women’s sexuality is objectified in society and religion when the amount is calculated in terms of her age, beauty, virtue and social position. It implies that a woman’s value is judged according to how young and good looking she is.

6. Sexuality as Holistic and Holy: Overcoming Dualistic Sexuality

Viewing sexuality as non-dualistic and holistic can be drawn from earth-centred spirituality of eastern religious traditions, which recognize that the body and the spirit are profoundly united and holy. This spirituality is far from understanding the spirit as bodiless, sexless, and mundane. Rather the human spirit is understood as embodied life that is alive, present, and sensuous. The nature of sexuality is “vitality, playfulness, spontaneity, delight, wonder, celebration, procreation, and creativity of all kinds, a profound affirmation of all life.”

Woman in Chinese letters is , literally meaning woman’s sexuality, while man is indicating man’s sexuality. It clearly demonstrates that both identities of woman and man are determined by sexuality. Also, there is no hierarchical domination of men over women in this terminology, while (wo)man in English is derived from the word man that is often used to represent a human being. Another insight from this word, pronounced as sung, according to Lee Eun-Sun, is that in Korean Confucianism is a concept that contains the meaning of human holiness, dignity, and morality configured by the logic of the heaven, the logos of God (theo-logy). In the eastern religious tradition, sexuality ( ) and sacredness ( ), which is also pronounced as sung are interdependent, far from dualistic. Such appreciation and exploration of our Asian wisdom needs to be vigorously discussed. Debrah Haffner, director of the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing, claims, “Sex is a means of grace, a connection to all life. Sin isn’t sexual activity. It is sexual exploitation. It’s sexual decisions that hurt us and others.”

If sexuality most fundamentally lies at the heart of who we are, in short, if it speaks to our bodies, hearts and minds in the most primary and powerful way, then, it cannot lie but only tells the truth, therefore, it is holy. In terms of sexuality speaking the truth, it should set us free (John 8:32), free from the bondage of sexist dualism, from the demonization of women’s body as a way of dominating it from the denial of our sexual identity whether it is heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual, or transsexual.

Lest sexuality be used as a tool or weapon to oppress, it needs to consist of respect, trust, equality, and mutuality. These are no less than the values that we as Christian need to carry on as our sexuality because they are holy things. If we faithfully keep these values, then, we would truly appreciate what St. Paul meant: our bodies are holy temples of the Spirit. (I Cor. 12:12).

Therefore, tasks ahead of us are to explore such positive sources of sexuality and to encourage us to be passionate resource people who can assert, affirm, and celebrate our sexuality and sexual minorities’ sexuality. Such tasks also include resistance to commercialization and commodification of our bodies and sexuality, and to political and legal oppression against women’s dignity and sexuality. It is clear that women are the Subject of their bodies and their sexualities. Nobody can own or oppress our body or no laws can dictate what our sexuality is.

About the Author

Hyeran Kim-Cragg is a senior member of the Korean Student Christian Federation (KSCF). She holds a Th. D. from University of Toronto and is currently working as an ecumenical co-worker from the United Church of Canada at HanShin University as a guest professor. She is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) and is passionate about educating feminist & postcolonial studies and promoting women’s leadership in the church and society.

praxis issue no. 2, may to august 2009 19
We, Anakbayan, League of Filipino Students, Student Christian Movement of the Philippines, National Union of Students of the Philippines and College Editors Guild of the Philippines condemn in the strongest terms the violent dispersal and mass arrests of the youth rally at the Malacañang gates by elements of the Presidential Security Group (PSG) and the Manila Police District – Philippine National Police yesterday, August 19.

What happened at the Malacañang gates is an exaggerated use of force against the youth and students. At the moment we reached Gate 7 of Malacañang, elements of the PSG and PNP immediately welcomed us with blows and nightsticks. Some of them were not even in uniform. Negotiations went underway only after they have arrested 20 of our fellow students and 17 of us have suffered mild to serious physical injuries.

They were like rabid dogs hitting many of our fellow students in the face, abdomen, some even pinning them to the ground like common criminals. Those who have fallen were stepped on by the perpetrators like they were putting off cigarette butts. Female students were harassed by un-uniformed elements which held and pulled their clothes off, almost getting them undressed.

Our message is clear: we are enraged over Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo’s corrupt practices and tyrannical rule. Shame on this government who has the gall of lavishing millions for foreign trips and banquets while raking millions in corruption, one after another ever since she came into power.

We want justice! The impunity of state forces in committing violence must be stopped. We want justice and let the callous Arroyo government accountable for the grand malversation of public funds in history.

Let this be a warning to the Arroyo government: she was put into power by People Power, an event she has constantly insulted and desecrated. Now we say, we can pull her down through People Power, again.

Tomorrow, we commemorate Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino’s martyrdom, who said “The Filipino is worth dying for.” Today, we say yes, the Filipinos are worth fighting for.

As we face this tyrant, we the youth, are very conscious and aware that the last nine months might not be the last as Arroyo pushes for term extension. And we are ready to stage a storm again, in the gates of Malacañang and beyond.

Joint Statement of Anakbayan, League of Filipino Students, Student Christian Movement of the Philippines, National Union of Students of the Philippines and College Editors Guild of the Philippines (August 20, 2009)
Dear President,

We are writing with deep concern about the violence against innocent youth and students, on 19 August, in which 17 of the students suffered mild to serious injuries.

On 19 August 2009, a group of students gathered in front of the Gate 7 of Malacañang to attend a mass rally. Although the area of Gate 7 has been designated as “no rally zone” since 2006, it is groundless for the police force to attack unarmed rally participants. We are shocked to learn that many of the students were even attacked in their faces and abdomen while female youth were sexual harassed by some un-uniformed persons. We are disappointed by this behaviour of the law-enforcing agencies. The youths were only asking for an incorruptible and responsible government.

A rally organized in a “no rally zone” is a sign showing the extent of outrage and intolerance of people about the performance of the government and the widespread poverty in the country.

Please be reminded that the Philippine government is one of the signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and a party to all the major Human Rights instruments, including International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Thus, the government is bound to observe all of these instruments’ provisions. Article 19 of ICCPR states that, “Every one shall have right to hold opinions without interference”, and Article 21, “The rights of peaceful assembly shall be recognized.” As the students in the rally site did not threaten public health and morals, the police should never disperse them with excessive arm force. Also, the arrested was held for almost an hour and their legal consultants were barred from checking their well-being. Neither were the detainees explained the Miranda Rights properly during the interrogation.

No civilized government would suppress dissenters by violent dispersal and arbitrary arrest. We urge you to: release the arrested students immediately and unconditionally; and investigate and prosecute the police elements and commanding officer who were involved in the violent dispersal and arrests.

Thanks for your attention and we look forward to your favourable response to the matter.

Yours faithfully,
Irene Koo, Human Rights Section

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Campaign Letter from General Board of Student Christian Movement of Canada

To:
H.E. Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, President of the Republic of the Philippines,
Director General Jesus Versos, Chief, Philippine National Police (PNP),
Hon. Leila de Lima, Chairperson, Commission on Human Rights,
Hon. AgnesDevanadera, Secretary, Department of Justice,
Nieves Conso, Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process,
Mr. Ambery Ligabo, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and
Ms. Margret Sekagya, Special Representative of the Secretary General for human rights defenders
SCM Philippines

World Student Christian Federation - Asia Pacific Regional Office

The Student Christian Movement of Canada (SCM) stands in solidarity with members of the Student Christian Movement of the Philippines, the League of Filipino Students, and other activists who were treated violently and arrested during a peaceful protest against corrupt government spending on August 19, 2009.

The Student Christian Movement (SCM) is an ecumenical network of student collectives engaged in spirituality and progressive social justice issues at universities across Canada. SCM Canada strives to be a healing community, embraces radical ecumenism and interfaith work, acts in solidarity with the oppressed, resists structures of domination, and works for justice in its varied forms and settings.

We understand that the Presidential Security Group (PSG) and the Manila Police District - Philippine National Police used unnecessary, inhumane tactics to end a peaceful, student protest outside of the Malacanang gates in Manila. This involved the use of nightsticks, sexual harassment and undressing of female students, and injury-inflicting body pinning. These actions left 17 students with mild to serious injuries and 20 students are currently in custody.

The purpose of the rally was to denounce and bring awareness to the excessive spending during President Arroyo’s tour to the United States in early August. The dinner bills alone from this tour totalled over $40,000 USD. This excessive spending is clearly inappropriate and demonstrates a lack of regard for impoverished Filipino/as and an unsuitable use of public funds. This same unjust treatment of citizens is also seen in the way the student protestors were treated and in the overall suppression of public critique.

We demand for the release and clearance of any charges for the 20 student protestors and for a transparent investigation of the policing practices used on this occasion and in general. As a signatory to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, we request that the Philippines live up to its stated commitments and ensure a peaceful existence for all citizens, as well as its constitutional guarantee of the right to assemble and freedom of speech (found in Article 3, Section 4 of the constitution of the Philippines).

As the Student Christian Movement of Canada, we believe that efforts to hold governments accountable and to make their spending and actions known are necessary for a healthy democracy and we endeavour to do this also with our own government in Canada. We are deeply saddened by the treatment of our fellow students in the Philippines and offer our deepest prayers and support in the hope that this situation will be rectified and not repeated in the future.

By proclaiming God’s preferential option for the poor and marginalized, we act in solidarity with the oppressed to resist structures of domination and realize justice in this world. (SCM Living Prayer Mission Statement)

As partners in the cause of justice and societal transformation,

Statement passed by full consensus of the elected General Board of the Student Christian Movement of Canada
I met women workers in a garment factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh during the WSCF AP Human Rights Workshop’s exposure program in July 2009. They were facing similar situations with those of Korean women in the 1970’s. They were not receiving salaries commensurate with their long hours of working, and sometimes they are sexually assaulted by managers in the factory. By the way, a very surprising fact I discovered during this visit is that violence toward women garment-workers was a prevalent practice among Korean-owned factories and similar situations exist today among Bangladeshis’ women workers. I felt angered by this situation. Before I joined this program, I was upset about violence done to the minorities in Korea. However, now I realize that Korean are using violence toward other people in foreign countries. From this experience, I formed an identity in my mind not only as a Korean, but as a human being in this world. The anger I felt after realizing the human right situation in Bangladesh was transformed into hope when I shared several topics with the other participants in the Human Rights Workshop. All of my friends in the program have social problems in each of their own country. They seemed to be concerned about both the problem we saw and experience in Bangladesh and their country’s problem. During the workshop, we shared those thoughts and concerns in small groups for some time. At first, I expected that I might learn something big and special in the lectures, but actually it was during the small but precious sharing time that I learned a great deal from. I realized that we all shared small things of our lives and of our countries, most participants felt that they did not care much about this world before coming to the program. If we grow up caring about this world, several values we shared will become enormous. Eventually, I strongly believe these can be big power to resolve a lot of human rights problems in this world.
Why me? This question bothered me every night on this trip, because I did not have enough time to digest the information about Zimbabwe and their story. Initially I thought, as a layperson, I did not exactly fit in the composition of the WCC visiting team, composed mainly of church leaders from other countries and meeting the church leaders in Zimbabwe. As a student worker, I wanted to meet the students or grassroots people in Zimbabwe, however due to the limitation of the time schedule arranged by Zimbabwe Council of Churches, it was not possible.

Almost all the church leaders have so much information about the Zimbabwe country’s situation, its history, politics, economy, and social realities. I observed as they begin their speeches, they often use “We are now......” and they closed by saying “so that we need......”. I understand that as church leaders they have to speak on behalf of church people. In their speech, I struggled to hear the ‘voice of people’. In their salmon there were analysis on every issues and information, their current needs and their future plans. International media organizations like the CNN and BBC have overflowed us with information and analysis about the situation in Zimbabwe, I thought what was needed by the visiting teams was to listen to the voices of the Zimbabwe people who are in churches and on the streets. And so, as I listened to the speeches of the church leaders, I had difficulty recognizing the people voices when they used the word WE.

Fortunately we had a meeting with grassroots people from churches in Bulawayo. Most of them cannot speak English like their leaders. Church leaders translated their stories. They were crying when they were sharing their stories. As I compare the speeches of the leaders, the leaders were angry with their stories while the church members were expressing anguish and pain. Once again due to the translation, I could not properly listen to the people’s voices in the stories.

Our visits were very much focused on meeting with the leaders. This has somehow limited us from understanding the real situation of the people. Officially the purpose of this trip was very clear but I felt that there could be other ways to understand the situation of the Zimbabwe people. Visits to other groups, grassroots people, secular organizations could offer different perspective and voices on the situation in Zimbabwe. For example, home stays with members of the church could help us understand the daily struggle of the people. Meeting with social minorities will enable the visiting team understand the social context.

As I return to Korea and meet with KSCF members, I will share the information and the stories that were shared to me in Zimbabwe. I will write about my experience and share this with other people. Hopefully, with enough information, I can find a way to support the work of the youth and students in Zimbabwe.
The EAP project evaluation and training program was conducted in Amman, Jordan from June 22nd-29th 2009. The main aim of this event was to create an ‘Excellence Team’ composed of individuals from the different regions of WSCF that would serve as an ongoing evaluation and capacity-building team for the Federation.

The Excellence Team members are the following: Youhanna Kamal Shawky, Treasurer of WSCF; Immanuel Kitnan, Asia Pacific Region, Ex-Co member; Hind Farahat, Middle East Region Jordan; Elsy Wakil, Middle East Region Regional Secretary; Brandon Cook, North America Region, Ex-Co proxy; Hannah Satlow, Europe Region, Ex-Co member; Christine Housel, Global Project Manager (IRO); Michael Wallace, WSCF General Secretary; Belkys Teheran, Latin America and the Caribbean Region Ex-Co member; Denise Memel, Africa Region Ex-Co member.

The objective of forming the team is to assist national movements in managing the EAP projects. The team will work closely with the program administration of the WSCF Inter-regional Office (IRO) in order to make the EAP projects more systematic, progressive and beneficial to the movements.

The team will also format the projects and programs of the SCM to suit the requirements of the donor agencies of EAP. The training was held recognizing that the SCM as student organization are in need of skills and capacity to develop and manage projects at the national level. Also, the team aims to address the lapses on project writing, monitoring and evaluation caused by the rapid changes in the leadership of the SCMs. The training devoted a special session on reporting, structured evaluation of EAP project(s) on the basis of the Project Management Cycle. The training was conducted by members of the EAP External evaluators, T W Welch & Partners, Ltd (TWWP).

Commenting on his experience in participating in the training, Immanuel said, “I feel this is a very good move by the WSCF at this crucial time when the Federation is faced with a financial crisis. We know as the WSCF AP region we are highly dependent on the EAP grant, which was virtually finished in 2008. With the hard work of WSCF staff and the officers, we were able to continue with the EAP. This is another move to successfully involve the Ex-Co in the decision-making process of EAP. I personally believe that this team can constructively contribute to the life of the movements in managing the finances and projects in order to help the movements in their ministries.”

EAP is an instrument through which SCMs can take leadership in serving their members and larger communities and through which partner groups, churches and agencies can contribute to the activities of SCMs around the globe.
The WSCF AP Human Rights Justice and Peace (HRJP) Workshop with the theme, “Called to be God’s Instruments of Peace and Reconciliation” was held on July 12-18 at the Hope Training Center in Savar, Dhaka Bangladesh. The Workshop was attended by 30 participants from 12 member movements of WSCF AP and representatives from network members of EASYNET Bangladesh. Participants came from South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Philippines, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The HRJP Workshop aims to mobilize Christian youth to work for human rights, justice and peace in Asia Pacific countries by providing them the Faith motivation, knowledge, skills and framework of analysis for human rights, justice and peace advocacy work. The Workshop methodology and process included inputs from invited resource persons and facilitators who were knowledgeable in the field of Human Rights education and advocacy, group discussions and presentations by the participants on the HR situations in their countries, Bible studies and Biblicothematical reflections on HR issues, exposure programs to areas with groups of people engaged in human rights advocacy, and sessions on developing the participants as Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) and helping them develop HR programs in their national movements.

Invited resource people included, Dr. Faustina Periera, the Director of Human Rights and Legal Services of BRAC, who spoke on the topic Human Rights from the Bangladesh Perspective. In her presentation, she clarified the fine line that differentiate between the concept of ‘human need’ and ‘human rights,’ and that human rights as tools and instruments has translated basic human needs such as food, water, shelter, education as ‘rights’ to be enjoyed by all. Dr. James Dash, country director of Leprosy Mission
The Ecumenical Asia-Pacific Students and Youth Network (EASYNET) organized the National Coordinator’s Training at the Archdiocesan Pastoral Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on July 3-8. The training’s theme was: “Ecumenical Communities: Our Lives, Experiences, and Aspirations.” The six day training programme was attended by 20 delegates including the EASYNET Coordinating Team (CT) members. The National Ecumenical Team (NET) Coordinators who attended the training were: Alison Baroi, Bangladesh; Eric Attique, Pakistan; Niran Fernando, Sri Lanka; Kristina Lydia, Indonesia; Ann Beatrice, Malaysia; Tun Tun, Myanmar; Johanna Dela Cruz, Philippines; Kitty Tsang, Hong Kong; and Byung Chul Pak from Korea.

The objectives of the training were: to deepen the National Coordinator’s biblical perspective and basis of ecumenical youth work and organizing; to provide venue for the NETs to share their experiences and challenges in building ecumenical network and practicing ecumenical cooperation towards mutual learning; to promote the social commitment of the ecumenical youth leaders in building action and international advocacy on social issues; to promote collective spirit and efforts among the NC towards improving ecumenical relations and openness to interfaith partnership; to evaluate and monitor the work of the NET organizing and sustaining through case studies in order to monitor the strength and recurring weaknesses; and to engage the NETs in contextual and collective planning with reference to the ASYG commitment.

Cristina Miranda, newly appointed Regional Coordinator of EASY Net, gave the orientation to the participants on the origin, structure and the significance of EASY Net in Asia and the Pacific and grassroots ecumenism. The national coordinators shared their programmes, issues, plans, and challenges during the report sharing session. Their sharing helped in understanding the situation of the NETs and how each NET is unique in its own context. This session was facilitated and synthesized by Maria Cristina A. Dalope, Executive Secretary for Programmes of Asia Pacific Alliance of YMCAs.

Sunita Suna, Regional Women’s Coordinator of WSCF AP conducted a Bible Study on “Re reading the Bible from the feminist perspectives” from the text Luke 10:38-42. She said, “it’s important to re-read the Bible from feminist perspectives, as our scripture and the male centered theology has not acknowledged the contribution and leadership role of women in the Bible. The purpose of re-reading from different perspectives is to experience liberation and transformation.”

Dr. Yeoh Seng Guan, senior lecturer and senior friend of SCM Malaysia conducted a session on the History and Foundations of Ecumenism. Dr. Seng Guan gave historical facts to understand the need and origin of the Ecumenical Movement or Ecumenism and the prejudices conjoined to it by other groups. He said, however, “Justice remains the heart of the ecumenical agenda. It calls for a spirituality of resistance and a politically engaged spirituality”. He also explained the
ecumenical movement in asia, he relevance in asia. to describe the emergence of ecumenism and its function according to a new social imagination from the ground up. this generation is already out there in the ‘wilderness’ connecting the dots of this new constellation weaving the strands of this web and creating new systems of meaning within this new paradigm with or without the church”.

necta montes rocas, regional secretary of wscf ap conducted the session on “challenges and prospects of ecumenical youth movements.” in her session, she said, “today there is a “crisis” in the ecumenical movement, and the nature of the crisis is manifested in the institutional expression of the movement.” she mentioned the following challenges of the eym, the culture of exclusivity as churches moves towards confessionality and denominationalism; the changing political and economic context of the youth and students; conservatism and the growth spiritual movements, and the challenge of re-vitalizing the ecumenical movement. she emphasized that the ecumenical movement is alive, but is no longer church-led, it has in fact become a lay movement. the characteristics of the ecumenical movements in the 21st century has been affected by the shift of the center of christianity from north to south, and the growing engagement with the orthodox, pentecostal, evangelicals. she also noted the direction of the movement towards wider ecumenism (inter-faith cooperation), and focus on ecumenical spirituality, from human centered to the whole inhabited earth. the workshops on interfaith, migration, peace and reconciliation were facilitated by leonard bonny palma, regional secretary of iycs, adrian perreira, regional secretary of imcs and necta. the workshops groups reflected on their experiences with the communities they visited during the exposure. they did critical analysis of the issues and interlink the different issues and challenges the communities are facing today.

hrjp workshop, from page 25

in bangladesh, emphasized the christian belief that everyone is created in the image of god and all are equal in god. these are two of the most compelling christian teaching that will guide christians in their human rights and social justice involvement.

dr. mizanur rahman, prof of law from dhaka university and director of elcop revisited the hr concepts and related these concepts in the current global situation. he said that global political and economic structures have contributed in the worsening human rights situation in many countries in the region, particularly following the declaration of the ‘global war on terror’ by the us.

facilitator lakshan dias, hr lawyer and senior friend of scm sri lanka, provided the basic input on the history, basic concept and tools of hr, hrds and building scm hr programs. lakshan pointed three important points in the historical development of hr. first, the realization of the need to develop a common framework for the udhr to deal with global human problems is preceded by great human catastrophe, such as world war i and ii. in the course of the development of human rights, the two super-powers (us and ussr) led in the development of specific hr tools that will embody their ideological frameworks, the us and its allies promoted the international covenant on civil and political rights (iccpr), which emphasizes on individual rights, freedom and liberties, while the ussr and socialist block promoted the international covenant on economic and social rights (icesr), emphasizing on the economic social collective rights of people. third, hr concepts and tools are evolving in history as new rights are being recognized by the un. daim bangjoo led a bible study on hr and inter-faith dialogue and necta montes rocas on re-reading the bible from the feminist perspective using the text judges 19. three exposure areas were organized by the local host to provide the participants with concrete experiences of people who are engaged in hr struggles and advocacies in their own communities. the participants were divided into 3 groups to learn about the rights of the adivasis or indigenous people to land and self-determination in tangail, mymensingh; the rights of sexual minorities and sex workers in mymensingh; rights to just compensation by women garments workers in dhaka.

lesley capus, senior friend of scm philippines, conducted sessions on “ecumenical communities: organizing and networking”. he shared some of the important skills in organizing and networking. he said, “community development is meaningless unless it is viewed in the context of the lives, experiences and aspirations of the majority of the people.” he mentioned three key values in community organizing. i.e human rights, social justice and social responsibility. the second session he conducted was on biblical and theological experiences of ecumenical community building where he drew the life experiences of jesus with his community and set the model of jesus as a community organizer. he said, “in the experience of jesus christ people were easily convinced to join his movement because they can identify with jesus. and jesus’ vision was to emancipate the people from their suffering and hapless conditions and to give the life abundantly.”

at the end of the programme the national coordinators met in a sub region for action plan according to their own context.
The National Women Subcommittee of Bangladesh Student Christian Movement organized a Women Workshop on May 14-17 at the Community Health and Natural Family Planning in Mirpur, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Thirty nine (39) women and men from all the units of the movement attended the Workshop. The Workshop aimed to achieve the following objectives: to improve the knowledge and understanding on the basics of gender amongst the participant; to give an overview of gender disparity in Bangladesh context; and to find out the roles and responsibilities of SCM women and men in reducing this.

Invited speakers to lead the session were: Ms. Suchitra Bahera, Lecturer at the Collage of Christian Theology in Bangladesh on the topic, women and men partnership in biblical perspective; Ms. Mohuya Leya Falia Program Manager for Human Rights at the Manusher Jonno Foundation on the topic, gender as a concept and key gender terminology and socialization process; Daisy Roy, former Women Coordinator, Bangladesh SCM on the topic, condition and position of women and men in our society and relationship of power between women and men; Mr. Ranjan Karmaker Executive Director of Steps Towards Development, led the topic, overview of gender disparity in Bangladesh context and its cause and consequences; and Ms. Necta Montes Ricas Regional Secretary, WSCF-AP on the topic, role and responsibility of SCM women and men for reducing the gap of gender disparity.

Monika Biswas, a woman leader in Bangladesh SCM said, “this workshop gave us the light of dignity. We realized our own responsibility to strive for Gender Justice in our society and we have to constantly develop awareness and consciousness of the issue of gender, how is this manifested in different time, period, culture, because the type and form of violence, discrimination and marginalization changes as well.”

SCM SL holds Annual General Meeting and Executive Committee Workshop

The 98th Annual General Meeting (AGM) of SCM Sri Lanka was held on the 28th March 2009 at the Trinity College in Kandy. The Vice Chancellor of Theological College of Lanka and a Senior Friend of SCM India Rev. Dr. Lawrence addressed the delegates on the theme “LET US LIVE” and spoke about the present situation of the country and how the student community should respond. About 70 students from Colombo, Kandy, Galle , Trincomalee, and Hatton units participated in the event along with Senior Friends of the movement.

The Workshop was held at EISD on 7th to 9th May 2009. The new team evaluated the SCM structure, its membership and position of SCM, responsibilities of sub-committees.

Like thousands of others, my faith was challenged at university. The challenge came from two directions. Studying women’s history and feminist legal theory had me wondering why I was still part of the patriarchal church. And the popular student Christian groups on the University of Melbourne campus dismayed me with their conservatism and intolerance. There seemed to be no middle way between atheism and fundamentalism.

Then I discovered the Australian Student Christian Movement (ASCM), a small group committed to an ‘intelligent faith’. It was feminist and queer-friendly, dedicated to social action, determined to relate Christianity to intellectual life. For years, it kept me Christian. So I read Renate Howe’s centenary history of the ASCM eagerly, wanting to know more about the history of this movement that has been such a vital part of my life.

In 1896, when the ASCM (then known as the Australasian Student Christian Union) was established, Australia had only four universities, which were strongly opposed to any religious activity taking place on their secular campuses. Yet those who created the movement believed that Christian students could be agents of change in the university, the nation and the world.

Howe tells the fascinating story of a movement that did inspire many people to be change agents. The ASCM encouraged Christian involvement in Australian and international public life by relating Christianity to the issues of the day. It fostered an ideal of public service that influenced bodies as diverse as denominational missions, the Commonwealth Public Service, university Labor Clubs, and Australian Volunteers Abroad.

It encouraged Australians to see themselves as part of the Asia-Pacific decades before the rest of the country explored that possibility; provided the leadership of later ecumenical ventures including the Australian Council of Churches and the Uniting Church in Australia; and debated issues of war, peace and internationalism, encouraging pacifism after the First World War and subversion of the Draft during the Vietnam War.

While the ASCM initially supported the White Australia Policy as a way of maintaining living standards, and did not officially repudiate it until 1962, it did develop into a movement that challenged Australia’s insularity. Initially uninterested in indigenous issues, the ASCM supported the 1967 referendum and in 1988 ‘celebrated’ the Bicentenary with the conference ‘Strangers in our own land: Racism, Christianity, Justice’.

One of the most important contributions the ASCM made was as a venue for women to exercise leadership. Conferences were always co-educational, then, while men were absent during the First World War, women stepped into leadership positions and stayed there.

ASCM women led worship years before churches allowed it, and movement news in early decades the marriages celebrated between ASCM members provided women the opportunity for ministry as the wives of ministers and missionaries. ASCM women were actively involved in the campaign for the ordination of women.

The ASCM’s formation was inspired by the charismatic American evangelical ecumenist, John R. Mott. From the beginning, the Australian movement had a tense relationship with evangelicalism, deciding not to adopt Mott’s watchword of ‘the evangelisation of the world in this generation’.

The ASCM refused to hold American-style university missions, encouraged liberal biblical interpretation, and supported the modernist side in the modernist-fundamentalist controversy of the 1920s. In 1930 the Evangelical Union split off from the ASCM, a division that has never been healed.

Since the 1960s the ASCM has been a movement in exile, unable to assume that the university is interested in anything that Christians have to say, instead needing to earn the right to speak through its actions. As the traditional churches head into a similar exile, the ASCM may have much to teach them.

Howe’s history is primarily of the first 70 years of the ASCM, rather than its first century. The ASCM continued to change dramatically between 1968 and 1996, but Howe gives those decades short shift.

There are questions I still want answered. How did ASCM become the strongly feminist movement that I joined? How did it become proudly queer-friendly years before the Uniting Church’s sexuality debate made the front pages of newspapers?

Howe describes Other Men Laboured, the ASCM’s 50th anniversary publication, as not ‘forward-looking’. Her own otherwise excellent history has the same flaw. There is little recognition that in the decades following 1968 the ASCM continued to support, nurture and encourage students seeking to live out an intelligent Christian faith.
SCM Pakistan Holds Capacity Building Program for Students and Youth

SCM has always played a vital role in building the Christian leadership in Pakistan. The SCM trains and equips the Christian youth to actively participate in the life of mainstream churches, in ecumenical work and strive for just causes. In the crux of the political and economic instability prevailing in Pakistan, the strong development of the youth is required by which they can be equipped to cope with difficulties arising from these social factors and SCM Pakistan responds to this through the Capacity Building Program.

SCM Pakistan held a week-long seminar on Capacity Building for Students at Ecumenical Centre Khanspur, NWFP on August 3-9. Forty students from all SCM Pakistan units participated. The aims of the Seminar were: to grow in understanding of the word of God to strengthen the faith of students; youth motivation through practical capacity building program; demonstration of leadership skills required for the capacity building; emphasis on the capacity building of the students especially the female students, as they are not given opportunity to lead in Christian and national leadership due to the cultural taboos.

Resource persons invited were: Pastor Saleem Bashir for opening worship, bible study on Capacity Building and session on Community Based initiatives for Development; Mr. Mohsin Zia for Gender & Development; Mr. Suleman Abdiah for Development Approaches & Sustainable Development; Mr. Ezra Shujat for Communication Skills and Qualities of Youth Leadership in present scenario.

Pastor Saleem Bashir said that “when we talk about development, the first thing that we should think about is the change we can bring about in the community. If a person in a family accepts a positive change, it leads him to development. Similarly if the whole family accepts that change, this leads them to development as well. And if the whole community accepts a positive change, the change leads them to community development.”

All the participants said that they benefited from the program and will transfer the knowledge to other Christians.

Training of Trainers of GMKII Leadership System

The Gereja Mahasiswa Kristen Indonesia (GMKII) or SCM Indonesia’s Basic Leadership Training System [BLTS] is a standard system and curriculum that is implemented in every GMKII branch. The system is designed to respond to the need of highly qualified GMKII leaders. The major principles of BLTS can be concluded into three basic concepts: spirituality, integrity and professionalism. In implementing the system, GMKII conducted the Training of Trainers [ToT] of Basic Leadership Training System every first year of the period.

This year, the ToT was held in three areas: the first on 8-10 May in Bengkulu, with participants from eight branches of Regions I, III and XII; the second on 23-26 July in Palu, with participants from 16 branches of Regions VIII, IX, and X; the third on 31 July-2 August in Jayapura, with participants from ten branches of Regions XI, XII, and XV.

The facilitators of ToT are from Bina Darma Foundation, a joint institution founded by GMKII and Satya Wacana University. GMKII also formed a core-team within its national executive committee staffs that co-facilitate the ToT and evaluate the programs and the implementation of the BLTS.

The ToT was mainly focused on leadership training designs and techniques. The participants were trained to make their own training syllabus and plan that will be applied in all GMKII branches. The next ToT will be in Malang this October, attended by branches of Regions III, IV, V, VI and XIII.
Network of Student Christian Movement Senior Friends in the Asia Pacific Region (NESCAP): A Proposal

Senior friends have been an integral part of the Student Christian Movements (SCMs) in the Asia-Pacific region. They have played an important role in the life of the SCMs. They have also been a great source of support, guidance and motivation to the SCMs in the region. Most of the past and present leaders of the ecumenical movement have an SCM background and at some stage or the other they have played, and continue to play, the role of senior friends.

Even though the numbers of senior friends who continue to be part of the SCM and take active part in it are dwindling, a minority of them still continue to remain with it, which is encouraging. There is a need for locating and identifying senior friends in each country in the region to mobilize their support and make them interested in the SCM activities.

The SCMs are at a stage in its history where more and more support and encouragement from its former members, who are now senior friends, are needed, in terms moral, motivational and financial support. The support of the senior friends has become absolutely imperative to revitalize some of the SCMs in region and to sustain the continuity of the national SCM activities.

Very few attempts have been made so far to organize senior friends at a national and regional level. The World Student Christian Federation Asia Pacific Region has been aware of the need for highlighting the importance of senior friends in the life and work of the SCMs in the region. With this in mind, the WSCF-AP is taking the lead to set up a network of SCM senior friends, to be tentatively called, Network of Student Christian Movement Senior Friends in the Asia Pacific (NESCAP).

Initially, NESCAP will be constituted with two senior friends (one woman and one man) from each national SCMs in the region, and with wider discussions and planning, its structure can be expanded. The network will be coordinated by the leadership of the WSCF-AP Region in Hong Kong.

Objectives of NESCAP

- To make national SCMs more aware of the importance and potential of the senior friends and to reconnect with them for the life and mission of the SCMs.
- To encourage national SCMs to locate and identify senior friends and to bring them together from time to time for sharing issues and concerns.
- To create a network of national SCM senior friends.
- To encourage national SCMs to have programs for senior friends on a regular basis.

As one of the first steps, a one day consultation is being planned to be held on the sidelines of the next general assembly of the Christian Conference of Asia at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in April 2010. It is hoped that there will be many senior friends who will be attending the assembly and it will provide a good opportunity for networking, sharing and also initiating the idea of NESCAP with them. Future course of action and activities of NESCAP also may be worked out at the one day consultation.
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<td>October 20 – 23</td>
<td>WCC/CCA International Consultation on Peace, Reconciliation and Reunification of the Korean Peninsula, Tsuen Wan, Hong Kong</td>
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<td>November 14 – 22</td>
<td>Women Doing Theology (WDT) Workshop, Jakarta, Indonesia</td>
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<td>December 1 - 12</td>
<td>WSCF Inter-regional Program on Identity, Diversity, Dialogue (IDD), Chiangmai, Thailand (Tentative)</td>
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