

Aggiornamento Of Asian Catholicism In World Christianity

David Mesquiati De Oliveira

(Professor, Religion Studies, Pontificia Universidade Católica De Campinas, Brazil,

Abstract:

Background: The Second Vatican Council propelled an *aggiornamento* of the Catholic Church. Simultaneously, it coincided with a shift in the center of gravity of Christianity toward the Global South. Drawing on Peter C. Phan and the field of World Christianity, this article examines the multifaceted reception of Vatican II in Asia, a continent marked by profound religious plurality where Christianity is often a minority. This brief reflection highlights the challenges posed by Asia's cultural and religious diversity and shows how, through the agency of local churches, it has contributed to a dynamic, polycentric Christianity. The central proposal is to explore how conciliar principles were creatively embodied through a "triple dialogue"—with the poor, with cultures, and with religions—that became the axis of mission and a "new way of being Church" in Asia. This threefold methodological and pastoral framework has guided evangelizing praxis in pursuit of integral liberation, authentic inculturation of the faith, and respectful coexistence within a context of deep religious and cultural plurality.

Materials and Methods: The article employs a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical methodology, based on a literature review and a theological-historical analysis of the "reception" of the Second Vatican Council in Asia. It uses the lens of World Christianity studies, especially the work of Peter C. Phan, and John O'Malley's concept of the Council's "trajectories." Sources include scholarly literature, Vatican II documents (*Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Ad Gentes*, *Nostra Aetate*), and a document of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC).

Results: Vatican II was received dynamically and creatively in Asia, with the FABC acting as a catalyst for collegiality and contextualization. The "triple dialogue" emerged as the central axis of mission, fostering liberation theologies and processes of inculturation and interreligious engagement. This led to the development of a "hyphenated" identity (Asian-Christian/Christian-Asian), challenging Eurocentric narratives.

Conclusion: The *aggiornamento* in Asia has been a process of "re-creation" and "creative fidelity" in dialogue with Vatican II, resulting in the emergence of a distinctively Asian and Christian identity that is essential for the Church's future in the region.

Key Word: History of Religions; Vatican II; World Christianity; Asia.

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I. Introduction

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) marked a decisive moment for the Catholic Church, propelling an *aggiornamento* and an unprecedented openness to dialogue with the contemporary world (Phan, 2018). Parallel to this conciliar renewal, Christianity underwent a profound demographic and cultural transformation, with its center of gravity shifting from the Global North to the Global South – especially to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This shift, not only quantitative but qualitative, gave rise to the field of World Christianity, which recognizes the diversity and polycentrism of the Christian faith, challenges Eurocentric narratives, and values non-Western expressions of belief (Irvin, 2008; Chung, 2025). As Tang and Anderson (2012, p. 3) observe, "Christianity in the twenty-first century is predominantly a non-Western religion," with approximately two-thirds of Christians living outside the West.

According to Phan (2018, p. 15), "the term World Christianity suggests not only the global geographical expansion of Christianity but also its cultural, theological, and institutional diversification. It is no longer a monolithic Christianity exported from the West, but multiple Christianities emerging from local contexts, with their own voices, perspectives, and contributions."

This article proposes to analyze the multifaceted "reception" of the Second Vatican Council in Asia which, as Phan (2018, p. 84) notes, was "particularly significant for Asia, the cradle of the great world religions, where Christianity is often a minority and where interreligious dialogue is not an option but an existential necessity." The study examines how the Catholic Church interpreted and applied the conciliar guidelines with relative autonomy, thereby fostering the emergence of a distinctive Asian-Christian identity. The article follows

Phan's emphasis in highlighting the contemporary situation of Asian Catholicism after Vatican II. Yet the author warns against essentializing the continent: "Asia is not a monolithic reality but a continent of contrasts and pluralities, where any generalization must be made with extreme caution" (Phan, 2018, p. 37).

The central proposal of this study is to explore how conciliar principles were creatively embodied through the "triple dialogue" – with the poor, with cultures, and with religions – becoming the central axis of mission and the "new way of being Church" in Asia (Chia, 2018). The analysis seeks to reveal the emergence of a dynamic, polycentric Christianity that not only responds to the "signs of the times" in a plural and interconnected world but also forges an Asian-Christian identity with local contours. The Asian experience thus emerges as a "theological laboratory" that offers valuable perspectives and contributions for a global understanding of the Catholic Church in the twenty-first century.

II. Material And Methods

This article adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical approach, grounded in a literature review and a theological-historical analysis. It involves no primary data collection or experimentation. The focus lies on the interpretation and contextualization of concepts and historical developments of Catholicism in Asia.

The study is configured as an analysis of the reception of the Second Vatican Council in Asia, informed by the field of World Christianity. Drawing especially on the work of Peter C. Phan, it investigates how Asian churches interpreted and implemented conciliar directives, contributing to the emergence of a distinctive Christian identity in the region. This perspective challenges Eurocentric narratives and foregrounds local Christianities, with attention to voices from the Global South, as underscored by Soojin Chung (2025).

Reception is understood not as passive acceptance, but as "re-creation," "invention," and "creative fidelity to tradition in light of the contemporary situation" (Phan, 2018). The study also follows John O'Malley's (2012) proposal to think in terms of "trajectories" as developments less explicitly anchored in direct conciliar norms. Operationally, reception refers to the application (or not) of explicit conciliar directives (e.g., liturgical reforms), whereas trajectory encompasses the broader consequences of the conciliar event—its "spirit"—and its historical unfolding.

The analytical corpus includes: a) Peter C. Phan's historical-theological synthesis (*Asian Christianities: History, Theology, Practice*, 2018); b) contributions from scholars in World Christianity and Asian theology (John Parratt, Edmond Tang, Allan Anderson, and Edmund Kee-Fook Chia); c) documents of the Second Vatican Council – *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Ad Gentes*, and *Nostra Aetate* – treated as the normative corpus of the *aggiornamento*; and d) a document of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), key to understanding the "triple dialogue" and the formation of an Asian ecclesiology. The FABC is considered a relevant organizational innovation and an effective instrument for implementing conciliar reforms.

Methodologically, the study proceeds through thematic and comparative analysis: (1) critical reading and coding of themes (reception, trajectory, contextualization, interreligious dialogue, inculturation); (2) cross-referencing magisterial sources and scholarly literature; and (3) situated interpretation of cases in light of the World Christianity paradigm. Emphasis is placed on Asian Catholicism in its cultural, religious, and socioeconomic diversity, with examples from East and Southeast Asia (China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, and the Philippines).

Limitations and scope: Because it relies on secondary sources and official documents, the study does not claim empirical exhaustiveness; possible selection and language biases are acknowledged. Even so, the chosen strategy is appropriate to elucidate how Asian Christianity, in a polycentric and dynamic key, responded to the "signs of the times" in the postconciliar era.

III. Result

The relationship between the Second Vatican Council and the Church in Asia, viewed through the lens of World Christianity studies, points to a set of significant transformations and developments that have shaped an Asian Catholic identity. The principal results may be categorized as follows.

The dynamic and creative "reception" of Vatican II in Asia

Vatican II was not merely accepted passively by Asian churches; rather, it was a "reception" characterized as an "event" of "renewal" that began at the periphery and moved to the center, from the bottom up, in contrast to the notion of a gradual, imposed reform. It functioned as an instrument that endorsed the protagonism of the continent's cultures as legitimate vehicles for expressing the Christian faith. As Parratt (2012, p. 13) observed, "Asian Christianity is not a foreign transplant but a faith that takes deep root in local traditions and experiences, offering unique perspectives on the person and message of Jesus Christ." The most influential conciliar documents in Asia included *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Ad Gentes*, and *Nostra Aetate*, which were received as signs of openness and as opportunities to advance dialogue along multiple axes.

The catalytic role of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)

Founded in 1970, the FABC emerged as the most important organizational innovation of the Catholic Church in Asia and the most effective instrument for energizing and dialoguing from the local level in continuity with the Council's teachings. The FABC serves as a pan-Asian forum for episcopal collegiality and the contextualization of the faith, enabling Asian bishops to articulate a unified voice on issues affecting the continent. Its documents and general assemblies consistently emphasize the need for a Church "of the poor," "inculturated," and "in dialogue" with Asian cultures and religions (Phan, 2018).

A central concept here is the "triple dialogue," which constitutes the axis of Asian mission. This framework became the FABC's core theological and pastoral methodology, representing the synthesis of the "new way of being Church" in Asia. This threefold approach guides evangelizing praxis in pursuit of integral liberation, an authentic incarnation of the faith, and respectful coexistence.

Preferential option for the poor and contextual theologies: liberation theology

The preferential option for the poor – an imperative reinforced by Vatican II—propelled the development of liberation theologies with Asian characteristics. In India, Dalit Theology identifies Jesus with the "untouchables," interpreting the cross as a symbol of the "dalitness" of God and of liberation from injustice. In South Korea, *Minjung* Theology arose out of experiences of suffering and political oppression, identifying Jesus with the *ochlos* (the multitude) and his mission with liberation from *han* (accumulated resentment and pain). In the Philippines, the Theology of Struggle focused on Christian praxis as active engagement in transforming oppressive social structures. These theologies emphasize "truthfulness to reality" (Sobrinho, 1996) and the pursuit of salvation that embraces all dimensions of human life. Taken together, they point toward integral liberation.

Dialogue with cultures: inculturation

Dialogue with cultures was mediated by inculturation of the faith, understood as the incarnation of the Gospel in local cultures, in order to overcome the perception of Christianity as a foreign faith. Phan defines it as a mutual and continuous process that affects the entire community.

Dialogue with local cultures was operationalized through inculturation, understood as the embodiment of the Gospel in local cultures, becoming an instrument aimed at overcoming the perception of Christianity as a "foreign faith." Phan (2018) defines it as a mutual and ongoing process that affects the entire community.

The historical "Chinese Rites Controversy" illustrates the complexity and challenges involved in discerning between what is cultural and what is religious. The Asian Church has sought to distinguish what is purely cultural from what bears religious connotations incompatible with the Christian faith, thereby permitting the adoption of practices that express filial piety and respect for ancestors in an inculturated manner (Phan, 2018).

Dialogue with religions: interreligious dialogue

The third element of the triple dialogue is dialogue with religions – an essential undertaking given Asia's profound religious pluralism. *Nostra Aetate* provided the theological framework for this dialogue. Asian theology has explored the "seeds of the Word" and the action of the Spirit within non-Christian traditions. This perspective has contributed to overcoming exclusivist views, promoting more inclusive and, in some cases, pluralist approaches, grounded in a pneumatology that recognizes the Spirit's activity beyond Christian boundaries.

Contextual Challenges and the Emergence of a Hyphenated Identity

The Church in Asia has been profoundly shaped by external challenges such as immense geographic, demographic, linguistic, and ethnic diversity; economic poverty; varied political regimes (including communist and military governments); rich cultural heritages; and pervasive religious pluralism. Internal challenges have included the legacy of colonialism, the minority status of Christianity (except in the Philippines and Timor-Leste), ecclesial diversity, migration, and the rise of Pentecostal and Evangelical churches.

According to Tang and Anderson (2012, p. 7), "in many Asian countries, Christians represent less than 5% of the population, which poses unique challenges to Christian identity and to Gospel witness." This minority condition, coupled with the historical perception of Christianity as a "foreign religion" associated with Western colonialism, requires deep reflection on the inculturation of the faith and interreligious dialogue. As Bautista and Lim (2009, p. 4) state: "Christianity in Asia often bears the stigma of being a "Western religion," imported by missionaries and colonizers. Overcoming this perception and demonstrating the relevance of the Christian message to Asian cultures and traditions remains a central challenge for the churches of the continent".

In response to these factors, the *aggiornamento* in Asia resulted in the emergence of an identity marked by the region's cultural characteristics. This new way of being Church transcended the imposition of Western

identity and mere accommodation, seeking an identity in which “Asian-ness” and “Christian-ness” could mutually flourish. An Asian-Christian is recognized as culturally and religiously Asian and culturally and religiously Christian, engaged in the triple dialogue in the service of the Kingdom of God.

The Contribution of World Christianity Studies

The field of World Christianity studies, with its focus on the voices of the Global South, has been crucial for understanding these outcomes. It challenges monocentric narratives and legitimates non-Western expressions of the faith. Pioneers such as Gerald H. Anderson and Andrew Walls highlighted indigenous agency and the “translatability” of the gospel, which have led to “indigenous cultural liberation and renewal.”

Research in World Christianity points to the need for self-determination and for narratives that arise from believers in Asia, Africa, and Latin America themselves. This amplification of marginalized voices, as advocated by Soojin Chung (2025), is vital for World Christianity to continue serving as a “subversive corrective” to Eurocentrism and as a driver of ecclesial renewal worldwide.

IV. Discussion

Asian Christianity has advanced in articulating the Christian faith through local cultures and through a critical reading of the regional context. The documents of Vatican II were received with inventiveness and “creative fidelity” (Phan, 2018, p. 19). This dynamic positions Asian Catholicism not as a passive recipient but as an active agent in shaping Christianity’s identity.

The churches of Asia embraced Vatican II in a manner that inverted the usual center-to-periphery logic of reforms, moving “from the bottom up” (Phan, 2018, p. 25). The Sri Lankan Jesuit theologian Aloysius Pieris (2019) argued that Vatican II was a “crisis-generating” council and one of “renewal,” rather than “reform.” This perspective is fundamental for understanding the agency of the Asian churches.

Pieris (2019) draws a clear distinction between “reform” and “renewal” in the ecclesial context. For him, reform is understood as a process originating at the center (the Roman hierarchy), often imposed upon the periphery, and tending to unfold gradually and smoothly. The Council of Trent, for example, is seen as having opted for institutional reforms.

Renewal, by contrast, begins at the periphery and moves toward the center, “from the bottom up.” It is a turbulent and often violent process that compels the institution to pass through a “dark corridor of dissension and confusion” (Pieris, 2019, p. 24). He classifies Vatican II as a “crisis-generating council” because it was convoked with the intent of a “new Pentecost,” aiming at a pastoral renewal that required attitudinal and structural change throughout the Church. A crisis-generating decision not only slightly modifies the constitution (as in a reform) but redefines the institution’s self-understanding, as with the decision to redefine the Church as the People of God (and not merely a hierarchy), which produced an identity crisis among the clergy.

Vatican II is viewed as the first council since the Council of Jerusalem to adopt crisis-generating decisions. The Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) constituted a “caesura”—a radical rupture—from the culturally narrow past of Jewish Christianity. In a similar way, Vatican II was expected to forge a comparable rupture with Euro-ecclesial domination.

From the standpoint of local agency, renewal requires that the process be sustained at the periphery. This insistence means that context (“Asianness”) is not merely a location but a factor that determines the Church’s self-understanding and mode of being; it constitutes the legitimization of the peripheral context.

Another point is that the “reception” of Vatican II by Asian Catholicism was essentially “pastoral” rather than “dogmatic.” This aligns with Pieris’s vision of renewal, according to which Vatican II focused on “practical pastoral policies” (dogmata) in response to the signs of the times, rather than on doctrinal reformulations (dogmas in the modern sense).

One of Vatican II’s ad extra crisis-generating decisions was the redefinition of the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation, thereby relativizing the Church in relation to the Reign of God. Asian bishops and theologians adopted a regnocentric mode of being Church (centered on the Reign of God), rather than an ecclesiocentric one (centered on the Church as institution). This priority of the Reign of God provided the basis for the “triple dialogue,” constituting the Council’s trajectories.

John O’Malley’s (2012) proposed “trajectory” approach, which encompasses developments less explicitly grounded in direct conciliar norms, is crucial for understanding the depth of Asian adaptation. The methodological tool of “trajectory” enables one to move beyond proof-texting or the literal application of documents in order to grasp the broader implications and fundamental orientations set forth by the Council.

Trajectories allow the identification of developments that were set in motion by the Council but cannot be easily traced to a specific provision in any single document. Examples include the evolution of official teaching on the salvation of non-Christians and the question of “mission to the Jews.” Trajectories typically relate to the deeper questions that run through all conciliar documents and manifest the intertextuality of the

conciliar corpus (“Issues Under the Issues”). These core issues include: change and continuity; center and periphery (collegiality); and rhetoric/style.

In analyzing trajectories, scholars ipso facto engage hermeneutics. The trajectory concept makes it possible to rehabilitate the expression “the spirit of the council,” understood not as an ephemerality but as a consistent and verifiable reorientation communicated through vocabulary and themes that cut across all the documents. The concept of trajectory also proves useful for evaluating, for example, the “new Catholic movements” that emerged after Vatican II.

The distinction between reception and trajectory is highly salient. The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) “triple dialogue” belongs more to the extension of the Council’s trajectories than to its strict reception. This expansion of reception, in the sense of trajectory, enabled the Catholic Church in Asia to develop a “new way of being Church.” By focusing on liberation, inculturation, and interreligious dialogue, the FABC manifests a process of reception in the expanded sense of trajectory.

Moreover, the FABC stands as a model of collegiality and contextualization within World Christianity. Its nature as a “voluntary association of episcopal conferences,” lacking juridically binding force yet grounded in “collegial responsibility and ecclesial solidarity,” has permitted crucial flexibility for contextualization. The organization of its “nine offices” across diverse areas of Christian life evidences a comprehensive approach to operationalizing innovative initiatives, emphasizing the local church as the “active subject of mission.” Papal support—for instance, Pope Francis’s message on the occasion of its 50th anniversary—validates its importance within the landscape of the world Church, where unity is envisioned as “polyhedral” and requires “different modes” of proclaiming the Gospel (Baybado Jr., 2023).

The reinterpretation of Jesus and of Christology in Asian cultural terms is a vital dimension. Parratt (2012) explores several approaches, such as Keshab Chandra Sen’s “divine-humanity,” which sought to express Christ’s nature in Hindu categories, and Vengal Chakkarai’s understanding of Jesus as Avatar, viewed as a divine manifestation that continually incarnates in history. These approaches demonstrate the quest for a Christology that is not only faithful to tradition but also profoundly meaningful to Asian minds and hearts, employing local concepts and symbols to express the universality of Christ.

Given Asia’s status as the “cradle of the great world religions,” interreligious dialogue is an “existential necessity,” not an option. Vatican II’s *Nostra Aetate* provided the theological framework, affirming that the Church “rejects nothing that is true and holy” in these religions. Asian theology has advanced in its understanding of the “seeds of the Word” and of the Holy Spirit’s activity within other religious traditions. This has led beyond exclusivist views toward more inclusive and even pluralist approaches.

Although documents such as *Dominus Iesus* (2000) reaffirmed the “unicity and universal salvific significance of Jesus Christ and the Church” and expressed concern about relativism, Asian practice and theology – together with the engagement of figures such as Pope Benedict XVI in symbolic gestures of interreligious prayer – have demonstrated the persistence and evolution of this dialogue. Asian pneumatology, which discerns the Spirit at work beyond Christian boundaries, offers a robust foundation for this common pursuit of truth and the well-being of humanity.

Peter C. Phan’s reflections on Asian-Christian identity help to explain how the Church in Asia, rather than merely being “in Asia,” has become “of Asia,” with context shaping its self-understanding. This identity represents a significant advance toward a truly polycentric Christianity, in which diversity is a strength rather than a weakness.

V. Conclusion

The relationship between the Church in Asia and the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) unfolded as a rich, creative process. This Asian aggiornamento was essentially pastoral in character, driven by the need to respond to both external and internal challenges across the continent. In most countries, Asian Christianity exists as a minority and is often perceived as “foreign,” which necessitates profound, context-specific adaptation. Asian theologians argue that the Church must be not simply “in Asia” but “of Asia,” with the context shaping its self-understanding and way of being.

Thus emerged a “hyphenated” identity (Asian-Christian/Christian-Asian). This identity transcended the imposition of Western models and mere superficial accommodation, seeking mutual recognition and the flourishing of the distinctive particularity of each people. Strengthening this identity is vital because, as Peter C. Phan has emphasized, the identity of the Asian Church is a matter of “life or death,” and “if the Asian churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future.”

The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) has played a crucial catalytic role, regarded as the “most important organizational innovation” of the Catholic Church in Asia. Since its founding, its explicit objectives have included promoting the apostolate in the light of Vatican II, intensifying the Church’s presence in the integral development of peoples, and fostering ecumenical and interreligious communication and

collaboration. This structure proved an effective instrument for advancing a conciliar agenda attentive to the continent's particularities.

Central to this reception was the “triple dialogue”—with the poor, cultures, and religions—which became the axis of theological and pastoral methodology and the “way of being Church in Asia.” Dialogue with the poor propelled Asian liberation theologies (Dalit Theology, Minjung Theology, and the Theology of Struggle), which reinterpret Jesus from the standpoint of oppression and marginalization. Dialogue with cultures focused on inculturation, seeking the incarnation of the Gospel within local traditions and overcoming the perception of a “foreign faith,” including the reinterpretation of Christ in Asian terms. Dialogue with religions (interreligious dialogue) led to more inclusive approaches.

The theological perspective that emerged privileged a theocentric and pneumatological approach, recognizing the action of the Spirit and the presence of truth in other religions. This deepened dialogue and enabled Vatican II to be received not merely as a corpus of documents but as renewal—as a new Pentecost that began at the periphery and moved toward the center, “from the bottom up.”

The contextual challenges that continue to shape the Church in Asia are vast, including megatrends such as globalization, secularism, widespread poverty, migration, the oppression of Indigenous peoples, threats to religious freedom, and the growth of fundamentalist groups. In response, the FABC proposed a “new spirituality of the New Evangelization,” with ad extra recommendations focused on the Reign of God, mission, communion, dialogue, solidarity with victims, and care for creation.

Finally, the experience of Asian Catholicism—through its distinctive, contextual reception of Vatican II—serves as a “gift” to the Church as a whole. By prioritizing the “voices of the Global South” and the “self-determination” of believers, World Christianity studies and Asian praxis function as a “necessary antidote to Eurocentric theological discourse.” The quest for “permission to narrate” their own stories, and for a Christianity that flourishes in its “asianness” without losing its Christian essence, demonstrates a path of renewal that proceeds from the “periphery” to enrich the global understanding of a dynamic, polycentric Church. This trajectory not only defines Asian Catholicism but also offers a valuable model for the future of the Christian faith in an increasingly plural and interconnected world.

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