

THE ASIAN PIVOT OF ROMAN CATHOLICISM

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Abstract

This paper offers a complicated, bittersweet analysis of the Asian pivot of Roman Catholicism. Catholicism is experiencing a profound sense of estrangement in the West and has initiated a journey toward the East. This century, that has been labelled for good reasons the Asian Century, marks the beginning of this journey, which has an unclear, uncertain destination. Asia in fact may reveal itself to be a hostile new home for Catholicism.

Keywords: Roman Catholicism; Pope Francis; bourgeois Christianity; West; Asia.

INTRODUCTION

When Pope John Paul II was elected, I was in Saint Peter's Square with tens of thousands of people, and I remember the general surprise about the first non-Italian pope in five centuries. Only those unfamiliar with the grip that the Italian Curia maintained on the structure of the Roman Catholic Church (henceforth, Church), including her head, could think that after a Polish pope would come another non-Italian pope to succeed John Paul II.¹ And yet it happened: one pope from Germany succeeded one pope from Poland. And then another from Argentina succeeded the one from Germany. Today, nobody thinks anymore that the pope must be Italian, or European; on the contrary, the successor of Pope Francis is expected to come from Africa or Asia. It is not that Roman Catholicism (henceforth, Catholicism) is becoming global: it was already global centuries ago. It is, to use a theological expression, that the Spirit no longer leads the Church toward the old and recent lands of Christian civilization, Europe and North America, but toward the new lands of evangelization. The Church is no longer extending her influence to the former western colonies of Africa and Asia; she is moving her center of gravity to those ex-colonies. Catholicism is moving east. This is

¹ The Curia is the bureaucracy that administers the practical affairs of the Holy See (the state) and the Roman Catholic Church (the religious institution).

not my guess; it is a statement with papal approval. “The future of the Church is in Asia,” Pope Francis told Philippine Cardinal Tagle in 2015.²

This shift is not only a theological or ecclesiastical phenomenon. As one of the world's largest transnational institutions, the Catholic Church remains a significant actor in global civil society and an interlocutor of states, international organizations, and local communities. The relocation of Catholicism's demographic and pastoral center toward Asia raises broader questions about religion and global politics: the interaction between religious universalism and nationalism, the governance of religious diversity, the regulation of conversion, the place of religion in secular states, and the future of religious diplomacy in an increasingly multipolar world. Understanding whether and how Catholicism becomes Asian is therefore also a way of understanding the changing relationship between religion and political order in the twenty-first century.

The time of the Church is geological; the time of the world is chronological. For this reason, to expect that the Church becomes Asian in the Asian Century is like expecting that the Church should have embraced science in the sixteenth century. The Church has her own times. That said, if the future of the Church is in Asia, the Asian Century is part of a journey that will bring the Church to a new land of promise. This century, that has been labelled for good reasons the Asian Century, may or may not be the era in which Catholicism assumes an Asian face; certainly, it is the century in which this shift from the West to the East will be recognized. If it is recognized, however, the shift necessarily implies not only a migration of the Church and her missiological and theological centers to the East but also a reaction to such a migration in the West. When Constantine moved the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome to Constantinople, he did not know that he was consigning the former to centuries of decadence and the latter to a millennium of splendor. Will it be the same for Catholicism? I use the word ‘reaction’ and not ‘implication’ because I want to signal the active forces that will be liberated in the West rather than a simple, passive implication of an action on the inert body of the West.

My argument is that Catholicism in the West will be busy for the rest of the century disentangling itself from bourgeois Christianity in the same way the Church disentangled herself from her association with the Roman Empire. At the same time, Catholicism in the East will be busy discovering the abysses of its political irrelevance.

In this paper, I counterintuitively start from the West, and then I move to the East. The reason for this unusual path will become clear to the readers in the course of the story.

A few words on terminology: ‘political’ must be understood in general terms, as the role of Christians as individuals and the Church as a social institution in the polis—in the public life. East and West are signposts and do not represent entities. Sometimes I use Christianity for Catholicism, not in the sense that Christianity is the same as Catholicism, but in the sense that Catholicism is part of Christianity. Tradition with a capital T is the apostolic tradition, the primary source of Catholic theology; tradition with a lowercase t refers to lineages or schools of thought. As usual, the Church is female.

THE SITUATION IN THE WEST

The rise of the West, in the sense of Europe and its ex-colonies in Northern America, occurred in parallel with the transformation of the old monarchies into national states. Catholicism had a long, amicable relationship with monarchies and suffered the emergence of national states. The reasons for this suffering

² When Pope Francis made a pastoral visit in the Philippines in 2015, he reportedly said to the Philippine Archbishop Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle that there was hope for the Church in Asia and that the future of the Church was in Asia.

were many, but they all come down to one single point: the autonomy of the Church. A Church that depends on the state to exercise her spiritual powers is always on the verge of being unable to do so.

The late antiquity and medieval worlds were ruled by a sophisticated relationship between altar and throne so that both received authority from Christ and both operated for the good of Christianity. There was a division of labor in place: the pope was in charge of the sacred matters, the king of the mundane matters. The king was not nonreligious: in fact, he received his legitimation from God through the mediation of the Church. He was not the sovereign of the profane space of society; he was the administrator of the temporal matters, the matters that were not directly sacred and therefore under the jurisdiction of the pope and his priests. The temporal matter was not independent of religion, and it was orientated to a religious end. Eventually, the institute of the kingship was independent from the Church; I say eventually because it really depends on the period considered but surely under the authority of Christ. To use modern terminology, Christ was the authority, and the king was the administrator, in the same way the king of the United Kingdom is the head of the state, and the prime minister governs the country. Similarly, Christ was the head of the Church, which is His body, and the pope was the vicar of Christ, and as such he governed the Church. This political framework that took form in late antiquity was perfected in the early Middle Ages and reached its apex in the high Middle Ages; it began crumbling in the late Middle Ages.

The emergence of the nation-state posed a necessary problem—that of sovereignty. If the national state is not based on Christ, and therefore on the Bible, the Church, and the monarchy, on what it can be based? What is the foundation of the national state, namely, its sovereignty? More or less, the West answered this question by accepting the proposal of the social contract in the forms proposed by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jaques Rousseau. The passage from monarchy to democracy, however, took centuries. The Church attempted to slow the process in a variety of ways: first, through an alliance with the remaining emperors and kings of Catholic affiliation (Spain, Portugal, Austria); second through a marriage of convenience with the more conservative, eventually reactionary movements; and finally, through a prudent opening to the moderate wings of the republican movement. All the attempts only postponed the inevitable. Step by step, the Church was ousted from power in most European nations and lost her own state, the Papal States, that had survived one thousand years. Pope Pius IX refused to accept the situation. He did not recognize the loss of papal temporal power, and he described himself as “a prisoner in the Vatican.” Not only her head but the entire Church felt imprisoned in a century to which she was extraneous. The pope and his successor forbade Catholics to enter political life.

The acceptance of the new status quo was slow. It is not that the Church finally reestablished a formal relationship with the Italian state, the same state that in her opinion had depredated the Church from her temporal power, only during fascism. The same happened in Germany: the Church and the German state signed an agreement with Adolf Hitler being the chancellor. The Church was not fascist or national socialist; as a matter of fact, most Catholics were antifascist in Italy and against national socialism in Germany. The same popes, Pius XI and Pius XII, who dealt with the authoritarian regimes in Europe before and during World War II (henceforth, WWII) were adamant in their criticism. The fact is that it was objectively easier for the Church and authoritarian regimes to find middle ground than it was for the Church and liberal regimes.

At the same time, however, Catholic thinkers like Jacques Maritain and Henri de Lubac were developing theories to accommodate a less reluctant Church to get engaged with a less authoritarian state. Their idea, in brief, was that the Church should forget temporal power, both direct and indirect (through a Christian party that is heterodirected by the clergy). It was time for the Church to accept the principle of modern democracy and become part of a pluralistic society. Those Catholic thinkers, however, maintained the point that the Church has her spiritual power to exercise. This spiritual power should be exercised because, and this is the core of the argument, without it, the democratic system falls into nihilism. To put

it differently, democracy, and therefore the nation-state, has a political foundation in the social contract. This political foundation, however, is not equal to a moral foundation. The state has no moral foundation of its own. The Church offers this moral, spiritual foundation. The intellectual work of Maritain and de Lubac was received and approved during the Second Vatican Council.

This argument of the spiritual foundation of the state was articulated in the first half of the twentieth century and can be considered exhausted at this point. It may be that the state has no foundation of its own and that without the spiritual support of the Church, it falls into nihilism. But it seems that late modern societies are fine with being nihilist. Another option recently offered by the French philosopher Chantal Delsol is that late modern societies are repaganizing themselves. In this case, the foundation of the state is spiritual but not Christian. Finally, the sex abuse scandals have burned a great deal of the Church's moral authority. In all these options— nihilism, paganism, and lack of moral authority—Christianity no longer has spiritual power to exercise, and the Church has become irrelevant in the public arena.

The expression “bourgeois Christianity” needs to be defined at this point. But before that, I need to explain the concept of “form of Christianity,” which stands for the historical form that Christianity takes in the different eras. The principle of Incarnation requires that the divine plan for humankind takes historical form. However, the question remains about whether the historical forms of Christianity are one or several. In Catholicism, there are, broadly speaking, two theses: for some, the historical form of Christianity is one, namely the medieval society, the perfect society as it has been called. Accordingly, the efforts of the Church as a social entity and of Christians as individuals is to go back to Christendom, the perfect, medieval Christian society. For others, however, the divine plan for humankind takes different historical forms in different eras. Thus, there was the early Church, the persecuted Church under the Roman Empire, the perfect society of the Middle Ages, and now bourgeois Christianity, the form that Protestant Christianity has taken in modernity and Catholicism in the last couple of centuries.

The disentanglement of Catholicism from bourgeois Christianity stands for the acknowledgment of the end of the bourgeois age. In the same terms that Augustine, in the fifth century, separated the destiny of the declining Roman Empire from that of Christianity and the mundane history of empires and civilization from the sacred history of humankind, the Church today separates her destiny from that of the collapsing democratic regimes that have brought the middle class to power. A long arc of history, initiated with the trading activities of a protobourgeois class in the sixteenth century and celebrated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by artists and authors, reached its peak sometime in the nineteenth century and then entered a crisis. Now one witnesses its end. Bourgeois Christianity, established first in the Protestant states of northern Europe, migrated to North America, celebrated by monumental thinkers like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, reluctantly embraced by Catholicism, and fueled by the movements of social gospel and social justice all over the world, comes to an end. The pontificate of Pope Francis can be seen as a kind but firm goodbye, not to the West but to bourgeois Christianity.

And yet, bourgeois Christianity is a polysemic phrase. For some, the statement “the disentanglement of Catholicism from bourgeois Christianity” does not mean the end of the bourgeois age but rather the end of the alliance between the middle class and Christianity. Here the problem is not the crisis of the bourgeois order in the West but the corrupting effects of it on Christianity. The Australian theologian Tracey Rowland has expressed this dissatisfaction with a domesticated Church in the following terms:

Today, for example, it is fashionable to be concerned about the environment, so some Christians are more than happy to talk about the Church's ideas about environmental ethics but they will go very quiet about other Christian teachings. Newman had quite a lot to say about this problem and he called it the tendency of Christians to promote the religion of the world or the religion of the age rather than the undiluted Christianity

of the gospels. The German authors speak of a “bourgeois Christianity”. They do not mean literally a Christianity of middle class people, but a Christianity that is narrowed down to something that won’t challenge the upward social mobility of members of the middle class – a Christianity that won’t cause social embarrassment. (Melbourne Catholic, 2021)

The accommodation of the Church to the middle-class values went too far: it is time—and these are the two options historically available to the Church—to rediscover her evangelic, eventually disturbing mission in the world, or separated herself from the world. The former is the option of the Franciscans in the eleventh century and all the social movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the latter is the option of the Benedictines in the fifth century. In first approximation, the first option is Pope Francis’s option, the second is Benedict XI’s option.

Whatever the disentanglement of Catholicism from bourgeois Christianity stands for, the end of an era or an alliance, the sense is that of a growing strangeness between Catholicism and the West as such. Whether the Church will be on the move, a pilgrim Church, a Church that continues her journey within history, leaving behind the bourgeois order in the West, or, alternatively, she becomes inconvenient for the status quo or a nation within the nation, so to speak, a spiritual presence or a form of resistance to the corrupting values of an era, needs to be seen. But Catholicism seems no longer at home in the West as the West is these days. An increasing dissatisfaction mounts in the center and in the periphery of Catholicism for a different engagement with the world, or no engagement at all. Catholicism is becoming homeless in the West. Benedict XVI fought a long and unsuccessful intellectual war to convince the European political class to recognize the Christian roots of the old continent. He lost, and Europe found itself with no roots and Catholicism with no home.³ The estrangement between Catholicism and the West is reciprocal.

And yet the readers are advised to jump not to the logical conclusion: Catholicism is leaving the liberal order. This is not what is happening. Here I borrow an argument from Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce, who anticipated in the 1970s with rare prescience a phenomenon that is now evident to all: the assimilation of communism within the liberal order. (Del Noce, 1978) The end of the Soviet Union and the communist system did not imply the triumph of liberalism, in the terms suggested by American political scientist Francis Fukuyama, but an incorporation of communism within the realm of liberalism. The result, Del Noce explains, is a reciprocal adjustment: a communist-liberal system in which the first brings the Marxian historical materialism, that is, forms of society rise and fall in history, and the second carries the idea of affluent (opulent) society. The combination is cultural relativism and a culture of affluence, or, a hedonistic and individualistic conception of life, completely devoid of transcendent values.

This is more precisely the bourgeois Christianity from which Catholicism needs to disentangle itself to survive. Liberalism is not inherently anti-Christian; it admits the existence of religion and rather applies a politics of containment of religion within certain spaces. Communism is a philosophy of praxis that implies a radical secularization of society and the annihilation of transcendental horizons. The affluent society has defeated the revolution and left it in place only as a form of pure immanentism. At the same time, liberalism has individualized the social spirit of communism and directed it toward mundane, economic satisfaction. The consumer of today’s narcissistic and technocratic society is the direct heir to the defeat of communism, born as a social revolution and degraded to the exaltation of individualistic morality and economic goals.

³ The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union was signed in Nice on December 7, 2000. The charter ignored entirely the Christian roots of Europe.

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The destiny of western Catholicism is to find another way to inhabit the West—another form of western Christianity. I will return to this in the conclusion. This, however, may be a secondary concern for Global Catholicism, that is, Catholicism seen in its geographical wholeness. The main concern is whether Asia can be the new home of Catholicism. As mentioned, the answer to this question will probably take centuries to take form. In the Asian Century, however, one is already able to detect the titanic effort that will be required of the Church to become Asian. Before directly addressing the subject, however, I need to define Global Catholicism.

Christianity prides itself on being a universal religion in the sense that it carries a universal message of redemption: convert to God's love, and you will be saved. At a more practical level, Christianity was already a universal religion in the beginning, at least by the standards of the age. Already in the fifth century, Christianity was spreading from the semidesert islands of Ireland to the almost unknown kingdom of Ethiopia, from the Atlantic coast of Portugal to the eastern lands of the Sasanian Empire. By the eighth century, Christians were in China. The first globalization famously brought Christianity everywhere, in America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. The second globalization established Catholicism in certain areas of the world, sometimes overlapping with, sometimes different from, those of Protestant Christianity. The twentieth-century globalization has simply mirrored the results of a long familiarity of Catholicism with universality.

Christianity is an Asian religion by birth. True, it turned West almost immediately, using the network of Jewish communities established around the Mediterranean Sea as the immediate vehicle of diffusion of the gospel (the good news). Then the Roman Empire became the logical channel of expansion, moving the new religion even further West. In the Middle East, the belligerent antagonism between the Roman and the Parthian first and then Sasanian Empires did not help the cross-border expansion of Christianity. And yet a rich and large Christian community flourished in the eastern section of the Sasanian Empire. Doctrinal controversies, however, unfortunately cut this Sasanian Christianity off from the rest, to the point that its history got lost and was only recently recovered. The same happened with Christian Ethiopia, geographically separated from the Christian mainstream. The real turning point, however, was the rise of Islam. Historians are still debating whether Islam must be considered responsible for the dechristianization of the Middle East; it is without prejudice, however, that the center of gravity of Christianity has moved West.

This sentence should be contextualized. The Eastern Roman Empire, or Byzantine Empire, was a Greek civilization mostly based in the Middle East. It was a Christian civilization. Therefore, the presence of Christianity in the Middle East persisted for centuries. The slow but unstoppable erosion of the Byzantine Empire and the passage of its territories to the three caliphates that established the Muslim dominance on those lands, however, relegated Christianity to a secondary presence in the public arena. The Christian presence in India dated back to the fifth century. It survived although separated from the mainstream. The Christian mission in China did not last. Christianity expanded east through Moska, and that was an enduring conversion. That said, at the beginning of globalization, Christianity was mostly a European affair.

When Christianity reintroduced itself to India and China, missionaries came together with soldiers and traders. Here I do not want to retell the story of colonialism; great works already exist on the matter. (Mong, 2016; Casanova, 2023) My point is that Christianity was perceived as coming from the outside. To say it better, today two stigmas affect the perception of Catholicism: Catholicism is not simply the religion of the colonial powers; it is also the religion of the West. It is not an Asian religion; it is a recent addendum that remains extraneous to the uniqueness of Asia. One could object that historically, Christianity was an Asian religion, not only because it was born in Asia but because it has been in Asia since

its inception. Of course, it is not history that really matters in this dispute: it is the growing sense of distance in Asian people from what they perceive as foreign.

Although the ecclesiastical cadres of the Church in Asia in the long period between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries were westerners, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Pope Pius XI predicted the end of the colonial power. He prompted the Church to develop an indigenous clergy that slowly but decisively replaced the western cadres. When decolonization in Asia erupted immediately after WWII, local bishops already administrated most of the Churches in the Asian countries. This means that when the representatives of Hindu or Buddhist traditions meet the representatives of Catholicism, say, in India, they meet fellow Indians. Regardless, the perception of estrangement remains: in most Asian countries, anti-conversion laws are in place, targeting Catholics in particular. Sometimes the laws are exclusively against Catholics (like in the case of Russia); other times, Catholics share their destiny with other Christian denominations (for example, in Nepal). Finally, sometimes Catholics share legal discrimination with other Christians and with Muslims (for example, in India).

Before discussing the estrangement of Catholicism in Asia, it may be worth emphasizing that Asia is not a homogeneous political or religious space. The conditions under which Catholicism operates vary considerably across the continent. In the Philippines and Timor-Leste, Catholicism constitutes a majority tradition and remains deeply embedded in national life. In South Korea, Catholics participate in a pluralistic democratic environment. In India, the Church confronts growing pressures associated with Hindu nationalism and anti-conversion legislation. In China and Vietnam, Catholic communities negotiate different forms of state supervision and regulation. Therefore, references to Asia in this article should be understood as analytical shorthand for a diverse set of contexts united not by a common political regime or religious culture but by their growing significance for the future of global Catholicism. Yet the diversity of Asian contexts does not preclude discussion of a broader estrangement of Catholicism in Asia. The term does not refer to a uniform political or religious condition shared across the continent. Rather, it points a condition in which Catholicism finds itself detached from its traditional Western civilizational and political foundations while not yet fully integrated into the diverse cultural and political worlds of Asia. The estrangement discussed here is best understood as a form of civilizational and political displacement: Catholicism is increasingly centered in Asia demographically, yet it continues to negotiate its place within social and political contexts that have not historically constituted its primary cultural home.⁴

At least three further comments are necessary to clarify the point of estrangement. First, some indigenous priests and, in general, members of the Catholic laity can go back up to five generations in search of the source of their Catholic identity. Their families have been Catholics for a century or more. The sense of foreignness does not originate from a recent conversion but from the doctrines and practices of a religion that developed such doctrines and practices in a western context. The Mass, for example, has a uniform framework that is applied with some degree of adaptation in every Catholic church on the planet. But, and this is the objection, this framework was initially elaborated in the European Middle Ages, then re-elaborated in western modernity, and finally delivered to Asia. It did not help that when Catholicism landed in Asia during the first globalization, it did not connect with the local forms of Christianity but rather forced them to align with the western models. Thus, Catholicism cannot honestly claim to have premodern origins in Asia.

⁴ The growing importance of Asia for global Catholicism is not merely symbolic. The continent is home to approximately 150 million Catholics, representing around one-tenth of the global Catholic population. The Philippines alone counts nearly 90 million Catholics, making it the third-largest Catholic nation in the world, while substantial Catholic communities are also found in India (approximately 20 million), Vietnam (7 million), and South Korea (6 million). Although Catholics remain a minority in most Asian societies, many Asian churches continue to display significant vitality through patterns of religious participation, vocations, and ecclesial growth. These developments do not imply that the demographic center of Catholicism has shifted entirely to Asia, but they do suggest that the future vitality and global orientation of the Church will be increasingly shaped by Asian realities.

Second, the sense of estrangement is not only perceived by non-Christians; the very same Asian Catholics may feel the same way. The title of a well-researched monograph written by Helle Jukka, *Towards a Truly Catholic and a Truly Asian Church*, captures the phenomenon of double consciousness. (Jukka, 2022) It is the struggle Asian Catholics face to remain true to their Asian identity while conforming to the principles and practices of a religion that they perceive as western. Jukka's book is interesting on many levels, including the fact that he does not collect the complaints of the practitioners or the arguments of the theologians but rather compiles the official documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). In Jukka's opinion, "The FABC can validly be considered as the most authoritative representative of the Catholic Church in Asia since the time of the inception of the FABC, which took place after Pope Paul VI's 1970 visit to Manila." (Jukka, 2022, p. 3) The book can be interpreted as an entry into the struggles of the institution to match the traditional sources of Catholic faith (Scripture and Tradition) and their magisterial interpretation to the realities of the Asian continent across religions, cultures, and sociopolitical realities, especially poverty.

Third, the anti-conversion laws are usually justified to protect local individuals from forced conversion. In reality, however, the real scope of these laws is to protect local individuals from conversion in return for benefits. Rich missionaries establish themselves in a rural, marginal area of the country and provide medical and dental services free of charge. This can be seen as an indirect form of pressure: the local poor institute a relationship between the material richness of the missionaries and the spiritual power of religion. However, the penal codes that cover the crime of forced conversion are often and intentionally vague so that the boundary between conversion and forced conversion is difficult to draw. Consequently, conversion is not recommended. Whatever the judgment one may harbor on the opportunity of anti-conversion laws, the effect on Catholicism is immense.

Christianity is a missionary religion. Mission, that is, evangelization, is not a character among others of the Church; the Church is missionary by definition. Before leaving this world, Jesus commanded His apostles: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation" (Mark 16:15). The gospel is salvific: "The one who believes and is baptized will be saved, but the one who refuses to believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16). The act of refraining Catholics from evangelization is not without precedent in the history of Christianity. For example, Islam enforced those laws in certain periods of its existence. (Sahner, 2018) Of course, the particularity of the present situation is that these laws are informed by states that are officially secular. The Church has already recognized that together with evangelization, dialogue must be pursued. Dialogue is a vehicle of mutual knowledge and ultimately of peace. That said, the missionary impulse is rooted in the very core of Christianity. In theory, dialogue is no substitute for conversion; in practice, anti-conversion laws already force Catholics to avoid proselytism and focus only on dialogue. The adjustment to this new situation requires not only a theological effort, which has been in process for some time but doctrinal adjustments that can change the very nature of Catholicism.

It is clear the tendency of some important states to govern religion. The case of China is well known; India is a secular federal state, but anti-conversion laws are an issue managed at the local state, not federal, level.⁵ The same is occurring in smaller states like Bhutan, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. In Nepal, secularism was established in 2015, but anti-conversion laws have constitutional legitimacy. The laws can in turn be seen as the tip of the iceberg of a specific condition: the political irrelevance of Catholicism. I showed earlier that political irrelevance is a recent condition for western Catholicism. And yet these notes are written when the president of the United States of America is Catholic and so are other prime ministers and chiefs of states in Europe. The possibility that the same happens in Asia is close to zero. Thus, the political irrelevance of Catholicism in Asia is and will be total.

⁵ In India, anti-conversion laws were instituted in the 1930s and limited to some states "to preserve Hindu religious identity in the face of British missionaries" (Tribuneindia News Service, 2021).

One of the ramifications of the political irrelevance of Catholicism in Asia is persecution. In his book on anti-Christian violence in India, religious scholar Chad Bauman argues that a postsecular framework allows scholars to comprehend Hindu nationalists' mindset, including their double claim that religion cannot be distinguished from politics or Christianity from western secular modernity. (Bauman, 2020) In Bauman's words, "Most Indian Hindu do not naturally perceive a clear distinction between what most Westerns would distinguish as 'the religious' and 'the political.'" (Bauman, 2020, p. 26) He adds that "the construction of Hindutva as normative Hinduism" operates "in competition with Christianity [which is] constructed as part and parcel of the project of Western secular modernity." (Bauman, 2020, p. 20) The first claim allows Hindu nationalists to, among other things, reframe religious proselytism in political terms. The second claim permits them to deny Christians' claim of separation between Christian religion and western modernity. Thus, the Hindu resistance to western modernity is, by default, a resistance to Christianity, and vice versa.

Nationalism is a polysemic word, too. The political forces that work to control religion, like in China, or separate indigenous, majority religions from foreign, minority religions, like in India, and protect the former and disenfranchise the latter, can be interpreted as representing a rising Asian pride. This Asian pride takes several forms, including an intellectual effort to provincialize the West, to paraphrase the title of Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, that is, to contest the western project of universality. (Chakrabarty, 2000) Not only history, but the entire modern apparatus of knowledge cannot be considered a simple application of the western frameworks to nonwestern contexts. Context counts. Although the idea of provincializing the West is an attempt to pluralize modernity and its fields of knowledge, by implication, it is a frontal attack on the western ambition to promote knowledge that has universal significance.

I already mentioned that Asian Catholicism at different levels, including the institutional one, shows signs of frustration caused by the problematic adaptation of western forms of worship, practices, and theological principles within local contexts. I qualified this frustration in terms of an internal discomfort of the Catholic communities in Asia. Behind this discomfort, however, the readers are aware now that a larger trend is at work: the provincialization of western Catholicism is part of a much grander trajectory. Western Catholicism, its Asian critics contend, is built into the very fabric of universal Catholicism. The latter is just another term for the former. A truly Asian Catholicism is a severance from past Catholicism and the edification, from scratch, of a Catholicism in Asia that multiplies the Catholic forms of Incarnation. The idea in itself is in line with the current *Weltanschauung* of diversity and pluralism, but it conflicts with two foundational assumptions of Catholicism. First, the history of Christianity is a continuum that brings the original gospel (good news) to the present day. A new beginning is always a return to the origin and a starting over. Catholicism is a self-reforming, not a revolutionary movement. Second, the universal character of Catholicism is not a derivative of its western origins; on the contrary, the West raises universal calls because it has assimilated the universalist character of the redemptive promise of the revelation. It is Christianity that has a universalistic authority by design. Asian nationalism, in the specific interpretation provided, is a threat to both the value of Catholic Tradition and the universality of the Christian message.

In Europe, the Church was able to build a highly developed altar-throne alliance. Nothing like that is possible in Asia. Catholicism is in need of developing a form of Asian Christianity that is capable of dealing with a situation of political irrelevance. This political irrelevance will be or will be not matched with a hostile environment, like religious (India) or secular (China) nationalism. Another question is the relationship with Asian Islam in the context of global Islam. In the West, Islam is seen as a possible partner in the fight against radical secularism, but in Asia, it can be a partner against Hindu and Buddhist nationalism. However, the dialogue is just in its infancy, and it is worthless to speculate. The form that Catholicism will take in Asia is still unknown for the simple reason that the Church has never been in a situation of total political irrelevance since the celebrated period of the Roman persecutions when Christianity was only practiced by a mere twenty thousand people.

Pope Francis's field hospital project may be an attempt in the direction of a new form of Catholicism. According to the pontiff, "The church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle." (Spadaro, 2013) Here the idea is that the Church is out there to serve. On another more recent occasion, Pope Francis argued that "the Church as a 'field hospital,' [is] concerned more with those who suffer than with defending its own interests, taking the risk of novelty, in order to be more faithful to the Gospel." (Wooden, 2022) Basically, the pope is aligning the Church with the poor, marginalized, and powerless. Perhaps aware of the impossibility of an alliance with the political power both in the West and in the East, Pope Francis is moving Catholicism toward a condition of no political power at all.

The option of a poor Church for the poor is embedded in the genetic code of the Church. "For the poor you always have with you," Jesus said to his apostles in the gospel of Mark (16:7). The problem is not doctrinal, but practical. Today, the political irrelevance of Catholicism in Asia is somehow balanced with financial autonomy that is provided through the financial aid that comes from Rome and the other rich centers of western Catholicism. Asian Catholicism is an importer of financial assistance. In turn, this financial assistance is conditional on several elements, including a powerful western Catholicism and its grip on the universal government of the Church. In the absence of one or eventually both conditions, who knows if assistance will continue to be provided.

From a Catholic perspective, the Asian pivot has very little to do either with a long downturn or tendential decline in power of the West or the rise of Asian countries as global superpowers. The Asian pivot is unrelated to globalization and deglobalization, geopolitics, and an alleged, renovated centrality of the Asia continent. It also has nothing to do with the decreasing power of the Church in the West or with potential ecclesiastical aspirations for power in the East. As a matter of fact, it is still unclear if Asia will be the promised land or hell on earth. The Asian pivot is the plastic representation of a centrifugal force within Catholicism. It responds to a sense of growing estrangement from a place that was home and the search for an alternative outside the West. The Asian pivot is about embarking on a journey of self-discovery with themes of taking risks, uncertainty, and discovering one's true home. The expression refers to a millenarian institution that is at a crossroads in her life and is prepared to lose what she has for what she might gain.

The Asian Century is the time for Catholicism to resume the journey and switch from the paradigm that regards the Church as a rock (Matthew 16:18) to another in which Christians reside on earth "as foreigners and strangers" (Leviticus 25:23). This switch, of course, will be both pursued and contrasted within the very same Church, and it can be a success or a failure. There is nothing teleological in the history of Christianity except that the Church is provisional, a twofold spiritual-physical construction that covers the arc between the two comings of the Lord. The Asian Century is the symbol of this journey. In the West, the movement is bringing Catholicism away from bourgeois Christianity. In the East, the movement is introducing Catholicism to an unknown condition of vulnerability. Asia is not a geographical entity but rather the symbol of a change of perspective, or better, the possibility of a change. Whether Asian Catholicism will be a unicum, a constellation of Asian local Churches, or as it is today, an extension of the universal Church, remains to be seen.

I mentioned that the destiny of western Catholicism is to find another form of western Christianity. This statement must be taken with caution. True, western Catholicism must find its way but if history tells us anything, western Catholicism will not find its way separately from eastern Catholicism. In the course of history, models of Catholicism elaborated in the West have been transplanted into the rest of the world. It may be possible that the same will happen in the future, in the case that the center of gravity of Catholicism moves East. At that point, models of Catholicism elaborated in the East will be transplanted into the rest of the world, including the West. Another opinion, however, is that Catholicism will become an archipelago of connected local Churches, each firmly rooted in her community, each in a friendly relationship with her Catholic neighbors. Thus, a South Asian Catholicism will be distinct and yet

united with a Chinese Catholicism and an Arab Catholicism in the same way that a western European Catholicism will be distinct and yet united with an eastern European Catholicism and a North African Catholicism. But this is a subject that goes beyond the limited timeframe of the Asian Century.

CONCLUSIONS

The Asian Century names not a resolution but a displacement. Catholicism appears increasingly estranged from the West, where its public grammar has been absorbed into the exhausted forms of bourgeois Christianity. Asia, in turn, does not offer a simple new home, but a space of vulnerability, constrained visibility, and uncertain reinvention. The Asian pivot is therefore neither decline nor expansion, but the unfolding of a centrifugal movement in which Catholicism is compelled to reimagine its form under conditions it has never previously inhabited.

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