

**RESPECT FOR LIFE IN THE CONTEXT OF ASIA**

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**PREAMBLE**

The Sixth General Assembly of the FABC held in Manila in January 1995 reflected on the Church in Asia as discipleship in service of life. It also reflected on the forces of death operative in the continent with a view to give an effective response to them in service of life. Today threats to life have increased both at the global level and at the level of the Asian continent. They are not merely confined to individual violations but are structural. They are affecting different realms of life, economic, political, cultural and religious. In this context the local Churches of Asia need to reflect on their service to life as part of its mission in the face of multiple threats to life, its dignity, especially to the powerless sections of society. This paper on Respect for Life is in continuity with the understanding of the Church in Asia as discipleship in service of life. It focuses its reflection on respect for human life, its dignity and its promotion in the face of a growing culture of death at the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In **Section I**, the paper deals with the contemporary situation in which life is being threatened in multiple ways, which covertly and overtly devalue and destroy the sacredness and dignity of human life.

In **Section II** the paper surveys and examines the resources of cultural and religious traditions of Asia on the value and dignity of human life without ignoring their shadows. This would help also to foster a culture of life in the face of the growing culture of death. Service of Life today has to be a project of dialogical cooperation.

In **Section III**, the paper examines the Christian sources of the Bible, the Church and its theological and moral traditions regarding the gift of life and its sacredness and preciousness and our obligations of respect, care and protection and promotion of life.

## **SECTION I: ASIAN CONTEXTS: EVER-INCREASING THREATS TO LIFE**

The 7th Plenary Assembly of the FABC has indicated important signposts with regard to the family ministry in the light of which we would like to look into various human life issues in a more “holistic” way, “both in depth and in breadth” in the varying contexts of Asia. Accordingly, we hope in this section to “take into consideration the comprehensive understanding of a culture of integral life”. Thus, in this Paper, we will “include but also extend beyond our usual concerns about abortion, euthanasia ...etc.”(Cf., “The Asian Family Towards a Culture of Integral Life”, The Final Document of the 8th Plenary Assembly of the FABC, 17-24 August 2004, Daejeon, Korea, Section III, No: 116).

In the Asian context, increasing threats to life in their variety seem to indicate that a culture of death characterizes the continent. There are socio- cultural factors that diminish and weaken respect for life and support a culture of death.

**1.1.** In some countries of South Asia, hierarchy of castes together with the nefarious practice of “untouchability” are an anti-life force. They function as a force of segregation and exclusion and are a form of racism. Caste hierarchy grades people into high and low and grades human dignity into high and low. This means human life of lower castes is at a discount. Hierarchy of castes is totally antithetical to human dignity and the intrinsic worth and sacredness of all human life. The great flaw of social hierarchy of castes is that it ranks human beings and hence also human dignity and human life. It is anti-human and anti-life. It perpetuates and promotes a culture of death. The daily atrocities perpetrated more easily and with impunity against *dalits* in India and other South Asian countries is a confirmation of this. Hierarchy of castes is an ideology of power. This ideology in theory and practice with the practice of “untouchability” is not only anti-life but also anti-human. Caste culture is a shadow of death, which must disappear through the light of the Gospel of life.

### **1.2. Culture of Patriarchy against the Value of Life of Woman, the Girl Child and Life of Girl Child in the Womb.**

**1.2.1.** Culture of patriarchy with its gender bias against the dignity and life of woman, girl child and negating her life even at foetal stage in the womb is a matter of grave concern for all of us who are concerned with dignity and sacredness of all human life of man and woman. It is a major factor in

degrading and devaluing the life of woman, girl child in many Asian situations. The girl child is not welcome at birth, nay not even in the womb of the mother. Instead in India, some communities celebrate the birth of a son, and not the birth of a girl child. Hence care, protection and promotion of life for women and the girl child are still of low esteem in many situations of Asia. The nefarious and criminal practice of female foeticide, especially in South Asian countries, is on the increase in spite of laws against the practice.

**1.2.2.** The discriminatory treatment of the girl child and preferential treatment of the boy child in the areas of nutrition, health care and education are well known. Whether poverty or HIV-AIDS, the woman and the girl child are the worst sufferers. The feminization of poverty or feminization of HIV-AIDS means women and girls are the most numerous victims of these evils.

**1.2.3.** The culture of patriarchy and gender bias diminishes and denies respect for the dignity of woman and the girl child and their life. The life and dignity of woman and the girl child are at risk at all stages of life. The culture of patriarchy and gender bias is antihuman and anti-life.

**1.2.4.** Though violation of their rights and dignity is a daily occurrence in our gender biased societies, there are movements committed to fight against these threats and protect and promote their dignity. This is a sign of hope. The Church in a dialogue of collaboration becomes a sign of hope for life and dignity of woman and girl child. It is called to work for the dignity of every human being, man or woman, boy child or girl child and affirm the sacredness of all human life. Pro-life movements in the local churches can play a significant role for the dignity and sacredness of all human life in the broader and inclusive sense.

**1.3.** In a multi-religious Asia, we are faced with growing religious fundamentalism, cultural nationalism, terrorism and violence. These phenomena lead to denial of human dignity, fundamental freedom and wanton killing of innocent lives. Religious fundamentalism and cultural nationalism in some countries of Asia have become fertile ground for denial of human dignity and human rights besides leading to violence. All forms of fundamentalism and extremism are anti-human and therefore anti-life. In the face of these forces, value of human life of those who do not satisfy the demands of the fundamentalist ideologies become enemies and victims whose dignity, rights and the value of life are considered disposable. It means human dignity, basic freedom to determine one's life, freedom to choose, religious and cultural freedoms are denied. What denies human dignity and freedom is anti-human and anti-life.

**1.4.** There are, besides, other forms of religious fundamentalism and extremism, militancy in some Asian countries. Militancy with a political agenda often takes to violence and resorts to acts of terror killing of innocent people. Shedding of innocent blood is totally unacceptable. It is downright atrocious and immoral. Hence militancy of this kind is anti-life.

**1.4.1.** There is a growing phenomenon of terrorism today. Some try to understand it as an inevitable reaction of desperate situation of *desparados* in the face of long-standing injustice and oppression. Some may try to justify it for this reason. But terrorism as we have known it is totally unacceptable because of its path of destructive violence and killing of innocent people. This is happening in South Asia as seen through serial blasts in public places like markets, railway and bus stations destroying innocent people and property that serves the common man. Terrorism and militancy of the kind mentioned above are acts that make for a culture of death. Hence we can say that all forms of terrorism that shed innocent blood are antihuman and anti-life. All religions worth the name and the whole of humanity can never accept the logic of terrorism and all of them reject and condemn it. As we shall see below, all religions set great store by all life, especially human life.

**1.4.2.** Some countries of South Asia, which have adopted a state religion, are the countries open to fundamentalism and extremism. They resist a pluralistic ethos of the people in many Asian countries. People of other religions in these countries become aliens and strangers whose dignity and rights are not respected and they are treated as second-class citizens. They become easy targets for denial of human dignity, human rights and right to life.

**1.4.3.** One country in South Asia, which has adopted Islam as a state religion has enacted a Blasphemy Law according to which those who violate it are given death sentence. What is worse is the misuse of the law by vested interests against innocent citizens, especially those who belong to minority religions. This has led to frequent violations of human dignity, human rights and therefore right to life and its protection. Hence there is an urgent need for equity and the rule of law as part of democratic governance.

**1.5.** Today in the context of globalization of neo-liberal market economy, there is an increasing and invasive commercialization and instrumentalization of human life.

**1.5.1.** This model of economy focused on the market, accumulation of capital and maximizing profit facilitates everything for profitable commerce. In market economy commodities are not only produced and sold but also persons like workers become commodities for sale and trade. It leads to treating people like commodities in the market. Exploitation of migrant workers as a source of cheap labour is a blatant violation human dignity and human rights and a threat to human life.

**1.5.2.** The great temptation of the dominant market economy is to consider human persons and human life as potential for commercialization for profit. Ethos of commercialization of life in the context of the present kind of globalization is a veritable threat to the dignity and quality of life. This is an area for a prophetic stand on the part of the Church on behalf of human dignity and human life.

**1.6.** In the context of globalization, marked by aggressive competition and culture of growing consumerism, both drug abuse and drug pushing have threatened some communities, especially youth. It is a big threat to the economy of our countries because drug trade banned legally by Asian countries, survives on the sly as a black economy. While it emasculates the youth, money needed for buying drug leads to violence. Those who take to drug trade do so for easy money making. Militants and terrorist organizations make use of drug trade to earn money in hidden ways and use the money for buying of arms. In some parts of Asia, such as North East India, this is a source of social disruption and militancy. Such a situation cannot be pro-life. Drug use and drug trade have become veritable threats to life. In countries affected by drug abuse and drug trade, the Church has a prophetic role to play in service of life.

**1.7.** Asia is known for her sense of harmony. All the great Asian religions and cultures clearly teach the harmony that exists between human beings, nature and God. Thus, from ancient times, there had been royal decrees and state ordinances to protect nature, in most of Asian countries. Thanks to such far-sighted measures of our ancestors, Asia still can afford to boast about vast areas, which are still untouched by human greed. Moreover, some of the natural resources of Asia are still intact. But unfortunately, due to globalization of market economy, today, the threat of greedy exploitation of our Asian natural resources as raw materials and the wanton destruction of our natural environments due to pollution, are fast negating the age-old sense of Asian harmony. The long-term ecological balance is sacrificed for short-term economic gains in the systematic and sometimes unbridled destruction of our Asian forests and water resources. The disturbance or the destruction of environment clearly affects human beings and their very lives, in a negative way. The green house effect, pollution in our cities, and even natural calamities (such as droughts and floods) are clearly the consequences of the disturbance of that harmony with nature. The last named consequences can in turn negatively affect soil productivity, and thus, the agricultural efficiency of rural peasants is significantly reduced. Air pollution and inefficient waste management are major problems and they cause many illnesses, especially respiratory, particularly for the urban poor families, often heralding their death.

**1.8.** We also recognize the growing bio-ethical and other specific issues that touch humanity's reverence for life in a negative way, in different parts of Asia:

***1.8.1. Abortion***

Among the most common attacks on human life in the Asian contexts are the many abortions procured in our Asian countries. The statistics available for individual, particular countries in Asia with regard to abortion are shocking. Sociologists and other experts in human sciences tell us that one of the main factors that have contributed to these high figures of abortion has to do with the problems of widespread poverty and destitution in our part of the world. That is to say that in order to reduce what some families perceive as "yet another burden to the family", many of our peoples resort to abortion. The perceived "threat" of rising population by the respective governments, also, encourages people to procure abortions. The failure of some types of

contraceptives, too, forces our people to resort to abortion. Then, there are those pregnancies that take place due to violence or rape, which many Asians seem to believe, can be occasions for procuring “legitimate” abortions. Opposition to all forms of abortions is surely a loud, eloquent way in which the Churches in Asia can be prophetic today. It is in this sense that the local Churches have to be courageous and tireless in proclaiming that human life, from the moment of fertilization till death, is sacred, and that abortion is “an abominable crime” (Cf., *Gaudium et Spes*, 51).

### ***1.8.2. Euthanasia***

Although euthanasia is not yet as commonly practiced in Asia, as it is in the developed countries, we have to admit that it is fast becoming common in some parts of Asia, especially in some developed Asian nations and in almost all of our urban/cosmopolitan Asian cities. While the value of respect for elders and the sick still hovers over our personal consciences, the anti-life mindsets and attitudes like individualism, over-sensitivity to pain and other utilitarian values which have become part of the consumerist culture of the contemporary globalized economy seem to be gaining acceptance gradually in Asia. Consequently, euthanasia is readily embraced as an easy solution to suffering, pain and incurable sicknesses in some parts of Asia today, thus, abandoning the compassionate care for the terminally ill till their death.

### ***1.8.3. Genocide***

In some parts of our Asian conflicts between ethnic, racial or religious groups, some of the war tactics adopted, at times, amount to annihilating entire areas or peoples. Both certain Asian governments and militant groups are at times guilty of adopting military tactics that amount to genocide. This is surely a crime against humanity.

### ***1.8.4. Murders and Assassinations***

Due to personal or political reasons, a lot of murders and assassinations of important political personalities take place regularly in Asia. The fact that in some of our Asian countries, the politicians are the very guardians and patrons of the under-ground criminal gangs make such killings not only easier today, but also allow them to let go unaccounted for. In some of our cities, a small amount of money paid to under-ground criminals would make sure that an opponent is eliminated. In such case, human life has become a cheap commodity to be disposed of with the whims and fancies of others, especially, the powerful.

### ***1.8.5. Terrorism***

Terrorism is a characteristic of most of our developing Asian nations. While we acknowledge that normally terrorism has complex political, economic, cultural, social and religious roots and causes, we also note with grief that in most of these cases of terrorism in Asia, foreign powers are involved, in the form of promoting such terrorist acts either to destabilize the respective Asian countries politically, or to promote a certain type of political or economic ideology in those countries. To our knowledge, most of the

weapons are ‘imported’ from outside Asia. Moreover, it is pathetic that the international efforts to curb terrorism are selective, often depending on political lineage and ideological affiliation. While certain types of fundamentalisms surely cause and promote terrorism, one cannot also ignore state-terrorism or socio-structural terrorism in our part of the world. The built-in violence of most of our unjust Asian social structures which keep the poor masses in desperate situations for life, seem to be a catalyst for terrorism in most of our countries (Cf., *Populorum Progressio* 30, 31; *Centesimus Annus* 52). In Asia, as elsewhere, there seems to be an ever-readiness to brand certain types of activities as “terrorism” and condemn them accordingly, while there seems to be a glaring reluctance even to call certain other similar activities as acts of “terrorism”, often due to political and ideological reasons. But reason tells us clearly that no terrorism can be justified, for all forms of terrorism are anti-human, and therefore, anti-life

#### ***1.8.5. Suicide Bombing***

Modern terrorism is often accompanied by suicide-bombings. In some parts of Asia, like Iraq, the Middle East and Sri Lanka, this is one of the common forms, which claim human life, regularly and indiscriminately. Degrading poverty, outrageous injustice and fanatical indoctrination are the stimulants that propel many Asians to volunteer to be suicide-bombers. This is surely an alarming degradation of human life. As the Church consistently teaches, a good end does not justify the use of evil means because the end is in the means.

#### ***1.8.6. Capital Punishment***

From ancient times, capital punishment has been quite common in Asia, too. Just as the Church tradition did for ages, most of our Asian religions and cultures, too, approved capital punishment. In some of our countries, we still have this form of claiming a human life, in the name of social order or common good. Surely, one needs to understand the practice of capital punishment in our part of the world within the wider frame of Asian cultures and ways of thinking. Sociological studies in some Asian countries have clearly shown that “rewarding” and “punishment” are still effective ways of Asian functioning in most of our countries, for the simple reason that most of our peoples are still shrouded with what is called “a shame culture” as against “a guilt culture”. While we would admit this very Asian trait of social existence, we cannot ignore the value inherent in each and every human life. As such, along with recent Church documents, we need to question seriously whether we need to continue with this sort of a punishment that robs a person of his/her dear life, and we need to find more efficient ways of curbing crime and violence in our societies, than through the implementation of capital punishment (Cf., *Evangelium Vitae*, 56; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2266). (Cf., The statement of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines on the abolition of capital punishment entitled “From justice that kills to justice that heals”).

## **SECTION II : ASIAN CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS AS RESOURCES IN THE PROMOTION OF RESPECT FOR LIFE IN ASIA**

As increasing globalization and advances in science and technology bring about changes in peoples' perspectives, ways of life and relationships, it becomes more and more imperative to reflect on our Asian heritage and affirm the fundamental value of life and human dignity rooted in our varied cultural and religious traditions of Asia. Hence in this section we present a concise summary of some of the views of Asian religious and cultural traditions on Respect for life. They are surely resources for Churches in Asia in their efforts to promote respect for life.

### **2.1. Respect for Life in Hinduism**

Here we survey the classical Hindu literature concerning the Hindu tradition of respect for life. For this we must know the type of texts we refer to. The classical Hindu tradition is known in two forms namely *sruti* or the canonical scriptures of the Hindus and *smrti* texts, mainly writings on law (*Dharmasutras and Dharmasastras*). The *sruti* texts include the *Vedas, Brahmanas, and Upanishads*. The *smrti* texts include *Puranas* and *Mahabharata*. Both show a consistent stance of respect for human life, especially for the life of the foetus or more properly for the life of the unborn.

In *Rg Samhita*, VII.36.9, the deity Vishnu is known as the preserver of life and the "protector of the infant-to-be." The embryo needs special protection because of the moral inviolability and physical vulnerability of the embryo. Abortion (*bhruanahatya*) defies the attitude of protection of the unborn and is considered as one of the heinous crimes in *Atharva Veda* (cf. VI.113.2; VI.112.3). In *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*, the slayer of the embryo is classed among the vilest.

Respect for the unborn is also affirmed in *smrti* tradition. *Visnudharmasutra* condemns the killing of pregnant woman and the killing of embryo. Some considerations and privileges granted to pregnant women are noted in *Dharmasutra* (ViDS V.132) and *Manu Smrti* (IX.283). The Law of Manu prohibits offering of ancestral libations of water to one who harmed the embryo or its mother (MnS V.90). *Yajnavalkyasmrti* II.236 speaks of imposition of heavy fine for the abortion of embryo of a female slave. The law books may make a distinction between high and low caste or between slaves and nobles but whatever be the social status of a person, abortion is morally a heinous crime. Respect and protection for the pregnant woman is clearly prescribed in the *Mahabharata* (XIII.107.50).

In Hindu dharma social and moral values are closely intertwined. Thus, some of the social injunctions have moral dimensions and moral injunctions have social consequences. Abortion is listed with transgressions that imply strong moral condemnation such as being unchaste, thieving, killing, killing one's parents. One can conclude that in classical Hinduism, the unborn enjoyed a moral status deserving respect and protection and that abortion was generally considered morally reprehensible.

In *Susruta Samhita* a seminal medical work speaks of "Foetus Astray," the possibility of aborting the foetus. Here it is not a case in which dharma of respect for the unborn is neglected but rather it is a case in which one has the duty to save the life of both the mother and the embryo but it may happen that both cannot be saved. In that case, abortion is permissible as a last resort to save the life of the mother.

Even in the case of mixing of castes called (*varnasamkara*) abortion is not permitted to avoid the birth of the child of *pratiloma* union (marriage between high and low caste, in which the woman belongs to a higher caste) and to avert family dishonour.

A study of the texts of *Caraka Samhita*, especially of the philosophical section called *Sarirasthana*, shows that the physician would not attend to the body except in the perspective of the spirit. Two traditions may be distinguished. The major tradition would speak of the descent of the spirit into embryo at the conception itself. Conception coincides with the descent of the spirit in the womb; thus, from the beginning the embryo is the spirit-matter composite that constitutes the human person. In this tradition it is not possible to draw a distinction between human being before “ensoulment” and human person after “ensoulment”. Hence, there is no distinction to permit abortion in the first stage of embryo.

In the minor tradition as seen in *Garbha Upanishad* a later “ensoulment” of the embryo at the 7<sup>th</sup> month is mentioned. Here there is ground for the distinction between human being and human person. However, there is no distinction to allow abortion at that stage of human being. The overriding evidence of the classical texts as a whole speaks in favour of according the status of human personhood to the unborn throughout pregnancy with consequent implications for the impermissibility of abortion, except in extreme circumstances.

The belief in *karma* and rebirth strongly entrenched in the Hindu psyche from earliest times militates against abortion. According to the belief, when one comes into the world the effects of actions of a previous birth called *karma* (which could be good *karma* or bad *karma*) begin to be operative from the beginning of human life and mature through pre-natal and post-natal life of the person. Abortion snaps the process of maturation of *karma* in the life of the human person, and the unfolding of *karma* comes to a standstill. *Karma* theory does not abrogate dharma and free will. Hence one cannot think of abortion as a possible effect of *karma* as something determined or unavoidable. Abortion, according to the classical Hindu view, cannot be considered an instrument of *karma* because of a consistent negative judgment on abortion as clearly reprehensible.

Social and religious reasons may be adduced for the protection of the embryo and condemnation of abortion. One of the reasons for protection of the life of the embryo is the obligation to produce offspring to perpetuate the family, the community, to sustain social economic stability within the caste framework. In Hindu society bringing forth children is not just a duty of individual parents but it is a social duty, a demand of dharma to maintain numbers in society and its stability by perpetuating the line of the family. Hence this duty and avoidance of abortion are not private matters but demands of social dharma.

The obligation to produce offspring meant, in a patriarchal Hindu society, a preference for males or sons. Sons are needed to perform the priestly and other domestic rites, specially the religious rite of *sraddha* for the deceased parents. The desire for sons is referred to as *putrasanthanam*. This affected the attitude towards women. The role of women is to be mothers and wives, that is, to bear children and rear them. The preference for sons has grown into an oppressive subculture of patriarchy of Hindu society, in particular. The differentiating valuation of birth of girl child and boy child and the cultural conditioning for the expectation of sons in Hindu society have moral implications that need to be discussed and assessed.

The spirit and practice of *ahimsa* would also go against all practices of anti-life. *Ahimsa* (non-violence or non-injury) a cardinal virtue of Hindu tradition forms together with *satya* (truth) the basis for the religious culture of Hinduism. This virtue enters the mainline Hinduism owing to the influence of the two heterodox religions of the Indian subcontinent, namely Jainism and Buddhism and comes to be considered the supreme virtue and the guiding principle of life. This virtue influences the Hindu ethos of respect for all life, especially vulnerable life forms such as embryo. *Ahimsa* revitalized by Mahatma Gandhi also promoted reverence for all life forms. In *Chandogya Upanishad*, *ahimsa* is associated with and depicted as a mode of life towards all beings – *sarva bhutani*.

The virtue of *ahimsa* has both negative and positive aspects. It is a negative precept, which enjoins non-desire to do injury to others or other living beings and as a positive precept it means being well disposed towards all. Since abortion meant injuring or destroying the seed of life, it flew in the face of the Hindu genius of reverence for all life (for all beings).

Reverence for life, for human life, especially the vulnerable life like that of the embryo becomes one of the central values to be considered in population ethic. Without the basic respect and reverence for life and its sacrosanct character from conception there can be no quality of life criterion as a valid legitimate concern in population ethic.

## **2.2. Respect for Life in Jainism**

Jainism has excelled others in its special regard for life. Even to the extent of exaggeration, so to speak, reverence for life is a special feature of Jainism. Thus we find that:

-Jain monks are seen treading their paths with a broom. This is to avoid any insects from being crushed and killed by feet

-We find Jain monks cover their mouths and nostrils with a piece of cloth. This is to prevent insects that fly in the air from being sucked into the mouth while breathing and get killed

-There are hospitals for care of insects, birds and animals. Animals injured or found sick are referred to these hospitals for medical care.

-The Jain attitude to life took such extreme steps that for some time agriculture was a problem. For digging the ground may risk injury to worms that live in the soil. Snails that slowly crawl on the surface also may get killed. Hence digging or sloughing the soil was not favoured.

The starting point of Jain tradition, just like that of Buddhism, is the experience of distress in human life. Buddhists call it *dukh*, the Yoga tradition of *Patanjali* calls it *kelsh* or affliction. In Hinduism, its equivalent is *maya*, and even *karma*. Common to these traditions is the awareness of the inadequacies of empirical life and the deepest cravings of life faced with these afflictions. They experienced an urge to be free of these negative experiences, and to attain freedom of the inner realm, call it soul or by some other designation. Jainism, along with Buddhism, accepts *karma* as the mysterious power responsible for suffering in human life.

In Jain philosophy there is no place for a Creator who created the world or a First Cause. The universe is eternal. Changes in the universe are due to internal dynamics. It runs on alternating cycles of advancement. This is called *utsarpini* and

retrogression is called *avasarpini*. Each cycle has a significant teacher called *thirthankara* – the one who has ‘crossed over’ the ocean of fluctuation-marked empirical life. There have been, according to tradition, 24 such teachers. The last one is the best known, namely, Mahavir.

Jain worldview is dualistic, like that of Samkhya. Here *jiva* (life) is eternal, the prime principle in this dualistic perception. *Ajiva* (non-life), though eternal, is non-sentient. *Jiva* acts and is affected by acts. The karmic substance that remains within stimulates this. *Jiva* is a knowing self. Every object is an agglomerate of *ajivas*, with at least one *jiva* enmeshed in it. Thus even stones have such *jivas*. Plants, trees, etc. do possess two *jivas*. Animals are endowed with three *jivas*. Jains are permitted to eat things having two souls, not more. So they can drink water, milk, and eat fruits, nuts, and vegetables. Eating three-souled objects is forbidden.

*Ahimsa* (non-violence) is a basic law in Jainism. Chief of all Jain vows pertains to *ahimsa*. Non-injury is an English rendering of *ahimsa*, rather a negative term. But the positive content is respect for life, affirmation of life, allowing every living being to live, respect for the right of living beings to live. *Ahimsa* is based on the assumption that all forms of life possess *jiva*. There is therefore imposition of restraints upon the adherents not only from physically injuring any sort of living being, but also the rejection of psychological and intellectual violence.

The late Acharya Shri Tulsi, head and supreme spiritual leader of Jainism who initiated a laudable movement called ANUVRAT, a movement offering pedagogy for the practice of non-violence once said: Violence is not a new problem. It has been there for thousands of years; it is part and parcel of human nature. Therefore it is not possible for everyone to live non-violently. One way leads to complete violence, another to complete non-violence. The former is harmful for both individuals and society. Lord Mahavir suggested a new way. He said, ‘If you cannot give up violence altogether, at least don’t willfully kill men, animals etc.’ Anuvrat does not demand more than this, even though it aims at much more. The goal is to avoid unnecessary killing of even the smallest being. Both from the ecological and healthy society’s points of view, Anuvrat of Non-violence is extremely important. In this view, respect for life becomes a fundamental imperative for humanity.

### **2.3. Respect for Life in Buddhism**

Respect for nature is as fundamental to Buddhism as is compassion. And just as liberation from delusion depends on our having compassion for all sentient beings in the universe, so too does it depend on our having respect for the natural world which governs and conditions all of our lives. To live, human beings must use the things of nature. All around us we can see life and the amazing process of life. Life is everywhere and everywhere it speaks to us if we will but listen.

Buddha taught that the Dharma realm and the mind are one, that the foundation of the phenomenal universe is mind. The foundations and the sources of all of life are deeper than the conditions, which produce any of its particular manifestations. A mayfly lives for one day, but after it dies it will be reborn in another form of life according to the results of its *karma*. A human being comes to and goes out of this earth, but the *karma*, which his mind and body accumulate, will cause him to be reborn again. A seed dropped on the ground may lie dormant for a hundred years, but as soon as conditions are right, it will germinate and grow into a

plant. Life is produced by causes and conditions. When causes and conditions are ripening, life will come into being.

When Buddha became enlightened under the Bodhi tree, he saw that the deepest truth in the universe is the fundamental emptiness of all conditioned phenomena. In his moment of awakening, he saw that all phenomena arise dependent on each other and that all of them are inherently interconnected. All natural events conform to the law of dependent origination. From the small to the large, from the intricate details of a single snowflake to the raging fury of a great storm, all things in nature conform to the law of dependent origination. Our lives are not the result of a single cause, but they issue from a complex confluence of causes and conditions.

People must learn to revere all of life because all of life is interconnected and all of it depends on all of its parts. All life should be seen as having immense value since each and every instance of life is completely unique. Each and every instance is formed from a myriad of causes and conditions and it will never recur in just that way again. This is the reason why Buddha taught his disciples to follow willingly the conditions that arise around them as they probe for the deep centre that is the source of one's being. If people can learn to be like this, then they will be able to face all situations peacefully as they successfully blend their small sense of selfhood with the larger reality of the oneness of all of life.

In Buddha's teaching, the objective foundation for morality is the law of *karma*, and its corollary, the teaching of rebirth. According to the principle of *karma*, our intentional actions have a built-in potential for generating consequences for ourselves that correspond to the moral quality of the deeds. Our deeds come to fruition, sometimes in this life, sometimes in future lives, but in either case an inescapable, impersonal law connects our actions to their fruits, which rebound upon us exactly in the way we deserve.

In Buddha's teaching, the law of *karma* is integral to the very dynamics of the universe. The Buddhist texts speak of five systems of cosmic law, each perfectly valid within its own domain: the laws of inorganic matter (*utuniyama*), the laws of living organisms (*bijaniyama*), the laws of consciousness (*cittaniyama*), the laws of karma or moral deeds and their fruits (*karmaniyama*), and the laws of causality and conditionality (*dhammataniyama*). The science that dominates the West has flourished through its exclusive attention to the first two systems of law. Buddhists would argue that a complete picture of actuality must take account of all five orders, and that by arriving at such a complete picture, we can restore moral and spiritual values to their proper place within the whole.

Closely related to establishing of a valid foundation for morality on the theoretical front, the Five Precepts (*pancasila*) taught by Buddhism are more practical in scope. They help to determine exactly what guidelines to conduct are capable of promoting harmonious and peaceful relations between people. According to the Buddhist texts, these precepts are not unique to Buddhism but constitute the universal principles of morality upheld in every culture dedicated to virtue. These precepts are: the rule to abstain from taking life, the rule to abstain from stealing, the rule to abstain from sexual misconduct, the rule to abstain from lying and the rule to abstain from alcoholic drinks.

The rule to abstain from taking life, which implies the virtue of treating all beings with kindness (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*). Buddhism teaches that one

of the most important qualities we should have as human beings is respect for life. For Buddhism this means not only respect for fellow human beings but for all living beings. Consequently, it is seen as morally reprehensible to kill another being. There is a hierarchy involved in this, however. To kill a human being is a worse action morally than killing an animal. Killing an animal is seen to be more severe than killing an insect. The general approach by Buddhists is to avoid killing or harming any living thing. The Buddhist perspective is that all beings feel pain and suffering, and value their individual existence. Consequently, just as we would not want to inflict pain and suffering on ourselves, so too, we should not inflict pain and suffering on others. It is a simple approach. This does not mean that Buddhists are all necessarily vegetarian. The Buddha allowed his monks to eat meat as long as the animal had not been specifically killed for them.

The rule to abstain from harming living beings, also applies to unborn children. Early Buddhism sees the start of human life as the moment of conception. The 'being' ready for rebirth is known as a *gandhabba*. As soon as the egg is fertilized by the sperm, rebirth takes place: 'when there is the union of the mother and father, and it is the mother's season, and the being to be reborn is present, through the union of these three things the conception of an embryo in a womb takes place'. From the Buddhist perspective, therefore, to terminate a pregnancy at any time would be considered as breaking the first precept.

However, Buddhism does see some moral justification for abortion when the mother's life is threatened. Incidentally, Buddhism does not have any strong feelings against contraception. Prevention of an unwanted pregnancy seems a sensible safeguard. Since it regards conception as the start of life, it would take issue with the 'morning-after' pill.

For Buddhism, to foreshorten someone's life is to break the first precept. Human life is seen as precious and there is something to be gained from each moment, even when those moments are moments of suffering. At the same time, Buddhism is a religion that places a great deal of emphasis on compassion and the alleviation of suffering. A Buddhist approach would be to focus on the alleviation of suffering of persons as they approach death rather than to artificially hasten the inevitable.

The issue of voluntary euthanasia revolves around this question: If someone is terminally ill, does he or she or others have the right to actively hasten the death of such an individual? Buddhism would not have any real moral issue with the practice of administering pain-relieving drugs, which in effect might hasten death. There is a subtle difference of intention here. To bring death quickly is something that goes against the first precept. It is a different matter to alleviate pain with death as a by-product.

Buddhists see two crucial tasks which religion needs to accomplish to respond to the vital problems of our time. One is to help the individual fathom the ultimate truth about his or her own personal existence, to move in the direction of the Ultimate Good, the Unconditioned Reality, wherein true liberation is to be found. The other task is to address the problem of the Manifest Good: the problem of the human community, of promoting peace, harmony and fellowship. Buddha beautifully summed up the urgency of combining these two tasks in a short discourse in the *Satipatthana Samyutta*. There the Blessed One said: "Protecting others, one protects oneself."

The expression "protecting oneself, one protects others" refers to the practice of meditation, which purifies the mind of its defilements and gives insight into the real nature of the world. "Protecting others, one protects oneself," means the development of the virtues of patience, loving kindness and compassion, by which one safeguards others from harm and suffering. A commitment to these two great principles -- *pañña* and *karuna* in Buddhist terms, gnosis and love in Christian terms -- is essential if religion today is to guide humanity from the brink of darkness and despair to the realm of spiritual light and freedom. These teachings enshrine a doctrine and precepts for service and compassion for all living beings- a Buddhist expression of respect for life.

#### **2.4. Respect for Life in Islam**

Islam means "submission to the will of God." By doing so one recognizes God's absolute authority, and reaches an unshakable conviction that God alone possesses all power; no other entity possesses any power that is independent of Him. It also denotes that submission to the will of God promotes peace.

Islam believes that God is one and the same for all human beings, irrespective of what each group calls Him, and accepts all messengers and all prophets sent by God: "Please say, we believe in Allah and what was revealed to us and to Ibraheem (Abraham) and Ismaiel and Ishaq (Isaac) and Yaqoob (Jacob) and his children and what was bestowed to Moosaa (Moses) and Eesa (Jesus) and to the other Prophets from their Rubb (Sustainer). We do not make any difference between any of them and to Him we submit ourselves," (*Sura 2:136*). The following verse of the Qur'an, shows the call for unity amongst all believers in God: "Surely the faithful and the Jews and the Christians and the Sabians, whosoever believe in Allah and the Last Day and do pious deeds, their credit is with their Rubb (Sustainer) and they will neither have any fear nor any grief," (*Sura 2:62*).

Islam in her sacred writings, as a religion also offers peace, social justice and respect for life to every human, regardless of religion. In broad terms both in the Qur'an and Traditions respect for life is emphasized. Life is seen as among the biggest bounty granted by Allah. It is a trust that should be preserved and kept well until Allah decrees that it was time for the return. From the Qur'anic statements it is quite clear that if a person does not have respect for an individual's life he or she cannot have respect for human life per se and if one has respect for the sanctity of an individual's life one will have respect for sanctity of life in general.

The first account of the story of the creation of Adam is presented in the Qur'an in a way that reflects the role of the human being on earth: "And (please recall O beloved Muhammad) when your Rubb (Sustainer) said to the Angels, I am to place My Khalifah (Viceregent) in the earth. They said, will you appoint such one (Vice-regent) who will spread disorder and shed blood into it but we Glorify your praise and sanctify You. He replied, I know what You don't know," (*Sura 2:30*).

The message in this verse is that Adam, Eve, and their children were created to fulfill a rather positive role on earth. It is positive engagement in life that would facilitate the submission of the human being to the will of his/her Lord. In the story of the two sons of Adam one of them threatened to kill his brother before the actual killing took place. The threatened brother responded by saying: "Surely, if you stretch out your hands against me to kill me, then I shall not stretch out my hands

against you to kill you. I fear Allah, the Rubb (Sustainer) of the universe,” (*Sura 5: 28*).

This position represents a passive response that reflects deep respect for life. These stories are included in revelation for the moral lesson that they contain. In other words, the Qur’an was sent to show humanity, the Right Path. Through these verses one gets a lesson for all humanity and that is that the Qur’an declares that killing one person is tantamount to killing all humanity: “Due to this fact we prescribed for the children of Israel that if anyone kills some one without the right of retaliatory revenge of a person (murdered), or for sedition (committing rioting on the earth) is like murdering of the entire mankind ...”(Sura 5: 32). Even in his farewell address the Prophet emphasized respect for life: “Your persons, properties and honour are declared sacred like the sanctity attaching to this day, this month and this spot. Let them not be violated.”

Killing is prohibited and counted as one of the gravest of sins in Islam. In this respect, the Qur’an lays down that whosoever kills a human being (without any reason, like manslaughter, or corruption on earth); it is as though he had killed all humankind. Thus, no killing shall be committed by humans except when there is valid and solid ground to justify it. “Do not kill a soul which Allah has made sacred except through the due process of law” (*Sura 6:151*). This process of law includes the capital punishment in the Islamic law, which is also used in other legal systems.

A Tradition of the Prophet reads: “The greatest sins are to associate something with Allah and to kill human beings.” Immediately after the verse in the Holy Qur’an, which has been mentioned in connection with the right to life, Allah says: “And whoso gave life to a person that is as if he had given life to the entire mankind...” (5:32).

The prohibition of killing of children is specifically mentioned in the Qur’an. “Do not kill your children out of fear or poverty as We (Allah) provide them and you, too. Surely their murder is a great wrong,” (*Sura 17: 31*). No child is viewed as unwanted. All children are viewed as gifts from God. Imam Al Ghazalli, a renowned Muslim jurist has said that it is a crime to disturb the fertilized egg of a human being and the crime becomes worse when done at a stage of advanced pregnancy. It is prohibited to terminate a pregnancy unless for medical reasons (e.g. when the life of the mother is endangered).

The following texts affirm the prohibition of killing because Allah has made life sacred.

*“Please declare I shall read out to you what your Rubb (Sustainer) has made ‘haram’ (unlawful) to you that you will not associate anyone with Him, and that you will do good to parents and that you will not kill your children because of poverty. It is We (Allah) who provide you and them, and you should not commit the shameful acts whether open or hidden; and you will not kill illegally the living one whom Allah has made sacred. This has been Commanded by Him to you that you may understand,” (Sura 6:151).*

This is emphasized again “And do not kill any one which Allah has prohibited without just cause. And who so is killed without right, then surely, We (Allah) have given authority to his heirs, but they should not exceed the limits in killing (in retaliation),” (*Sura 17:33*).

Infanticide, especially of females occurred in Arabia during the sixth century. *Sura 81:7-10* says with regard to end times “When...the souls are restored to

their bodies. The infant girl who was buried alive is asked: 'For what crime was she killed?' The records are made known". Allah speaks of those who kill their born or unborn children as losers: "Losers are those who killed their children foolishly, due to their lack of knowledge, and prohibited what Allah has provided for them, and followed innovations attributed to Allah. They have gone astray, they are not guided," (*Sura* 6:140). No one has the knowledge and no one has the excuse to kill these innocent human beings.

The Qur'an also prohibits suicide: "And kill not yourselves" (*Sura* 4:29). And again at another place it says: "Please declare come I shall read out to you what your Rabb (Sustainer) has made 'haram' (unlawful) to you that you will not associate anyone with Him, and that you will do good to parents and that you will not kill your children because of poverty. It is We (Allah) who provide you and them, and you should not commit the shameful acts whether open or hidden; and you will not kill illegally the living one whom Allah has made sacred. This has been commanded by Him to you that you may understand," (*Sura* 6: 151).

Islam believes that the division of human beings into nations, races, groups and tribes is for the sake of distinction, so that people of one race or tribe may meet and be acquainted with people belonging to another race or tribe and co-operate with one another. However, Islam not only recognizes the principle of absolute equality between men irrespective of colour, race or nationality, it makes it an important reality. Almighty Allah has laid down in the Holy Qur'an: "O mankind, we have created you from a male and female." In other words, all human beings are brothers. They all are the descendants from one father and one mother. "And we set you up as nations and tribes so that you may be able to recognize each other" (*Sura* 49:13).

This principle is well exemplified by the Prophet when he said: "No Arab has any superiority over a non-Arab, nor does a non-Arab have any superiority over a black man, or the black man any superiority over the white man. You are all the children of Adam, and Adam was created from clay." Respect for every human being means respect for the life of every human being. Islam teaches that Muslims have to be just not only to their friends but also to their enemies. In other words, the justice to which Islam invites her followers is not limited to the citizens of one's own country, or the people of one's own tribe, nation or race, or the Muslim community as a whole; it is meant for all human beings. On this very important and valuable point the Qur'an says: "Do not let your hatred of a people incite you to aggression" (*Sura* 5:3). "And do not let ill-will towards any folk incite you so that you swerve from dealing justly. Be just; that is nearest to heedfulness" (*Sura* 5:8). Stressing this point the Qur'an again says: "You who believe stand steadfast before Allah as witness for fair play" (*Sura* 4:135). Just dealings and just relations embody respect for people and their lives.

Practically speaking, and ironically enough, in our contemporary world, some Islamic movements and organizations seem to lack a sense of respect for life in sharp contrast to the official Islamic teachings. For these movements and organizations, life is rather cheap and expendable in this world and surrendering one's life for the so-called cause of militant Islam provides entrance to the eternal bliss to be enjoyed, especially by the self proclaimed pious and self-righteous men in the life to come. In many cases, some Muslims [not all] tend to function under an extreme martyr complex. It is also worth noting that the Qur'an instructs that "jihad" (taken only in one of its senses) is a "sacred duty", incumbent on "every Muslim".

There is also a schedule of rewards for those who “dispose of” infidels - which include any non-Muslim, i.e., Christians, Jews, Hindus and others. The same rewards are believed to be bestowed upon all those who die while participating in holy-war campaigns. These practices of Islamic extremists are antithetical to respect and reverence for life expressed in the Islamic scriptures.

Moreover, every year, international groups concerned with the Human Rights issue reports in which they indicate that massive and systematic violations of human rights in quite a number of Islamic countries take place on regular basis. This includes torture, arrest and detention without charge, cruel and unusual punishment, amputation of body parts, and capital punishment for political and religious dissent, sexual abuse and mass violence against minorities. All this would go against other positive official teachings of Islam in the Qur’an.

### **2.5. Respect for Life in Confucianism and Taoism**

Traditional Chinese philosophy is centred on life. Confucianism and Taoism explain the meaning of life in a variety of ways. However, they all take “meaning of life” as the unifying idea behind each of the philosophical systems.

How did life come to be? The Confucian philosophy of life traces its origin to the I Ching or the Book of Changes. According to I Ching, all things in the universe are changing. This process is called I (change). Changes come about because of *yin* and *yang*, the two elements that continuously interact. *Yang* is strength while *yin* is gentleness. *Yang* leads to progress while *yin* causes accommodation. The interaction of *Yin* and *Yang* results in the formation and the existence of things. Existence within heaven and earth is called life (*sheng*). The interplay of *Yin* and *Yang* causes continual changes in the universe and these changes in the universe have a lofty purpose: the begetting of all things (*sheng-sheng*). Although life is divided into different levels, the whole cosmos is one life. It is the great virtue of heaven and earth to bestow and to love life, which is the cosmic virtue or the Tao of Heaven and Earth.

Lao-tzu, the founder of Taoism, teaches that there is a creative principle, Tao, which existed before the world. Tao is invisible, inaudible and intangible, but it is the ground of all being. It is behind and beneath all. It produces and nourishes all. “Out of Tao, One is born; out of One, Two: *Yin* and *Yang*; out of Two, Three: *Yin*, *Yang*, and *ch’i*; out of Three, the created universe.” Tao is the origin of heaven and earth; it is also the Way in which heaven and earth exist.

Chuang-tzu, a master of Taoism, continues Lao-tzu’s idea of a limitless Tao, but he focuses more on the reality of *ch’i*. Heaven and Earth share the same *ch’i* that permeates all the myriad things and that goes forever in cycles. Even human life is derived from *ch’i*.

Life and virtues are closely linked in Confucianism. Indeed, among the five virtues - Benevolence (or *Jen* in Chinese), Righteousness, Propriety, Wisdom and Trustworthiness, that Confucianism teaches, Benevolence is the greatest, because when there is benevolence, there is life. In traditional Chinese medicine, when it is said that the extremities are so numb that they have no benevolence (*pu jen*); it means that they are so numb that there is no life. In the Chinese expression for “peach seed” and “apricot seed”, the character for benevolence is used because of its meaning of “life-giving”. The Appended Remarks of the I Ching says: “The great

characteristic of Heaven and Earth is to produce. Benevolence and production of life are matched together.” Indeed, “Benevolence is production (*sheng-sheng*). Benevolence is the Tao of Heaven and Earth, which is the Tao of production.” Therefore, all things are produced in benevolence, or “the benevolence generates life.”

Life is manifested in degrees. The fullness of life is shown in human beings, since human being is the most spirited part of life. Human being’s heart is the heart of heaven and earth since they share the same Tao, and it is a heart of benevolence. In the words of Chu-hsi, the founder of neo-Confucianism: “Begetting all things is at the heart of heaven and earth, but at the heart of the heart of the heaven and earth is the begetting of human beings. Yet, although human life is complete, within life, human beings and things in heaven and on earth are mutually related, forming a “benevolence of the totality.” If one has developed one’s life, one must further develop the life of the myriad things in the universe. As the saying goes: “One must fulfill oneself and others”.

If benevolence is the Tao, or the principle of love, of Heaven and Earth, what is it that should be loved? All things love their own existence, which they seek to maintain and make flourish, and hope to be naturally kept from any harm. Human existence is life. So all human beings should love their own life. Being rational and free, a human being necessarily has to cultivate this innate loving care for life. This human aspiration for the flourishing of life is called “mind of Benevolence” (*Jen-sin*). The cultivation of the mind of Benevolence is the “virtue of love” (*Jen-ai*). A Confucian classic, Chung-yung or The Doctrine of the Mean, teaches how humans should behave in order to gain happiness. Since benevolence is the distinguishing characteristic of a human person, a human being naturally loves his or her life, the source of this life, the parents who give this life and those connected with this life. When a human being actually does that, he or she will be happy, otherwise he or she will not.

Compared with Confucian philosophy, Taoist philosophy may appear passive for some, but actually it also actively pursues the propagation of life. For instance, Lao-tzu says that a human being has three treasures --- compassion, frugality and lack of daring to take the lead. Although these appear as passive virtues, he explains compassion as bravery, frugality as generosity and lack of daring to take the lead as the path to becoming a useful person. All these effects are very active in nature. Failure to observe these three is sure to end in death. So it can be seen that Lao-tzu does not seek for death by lack of activity and will. Instead, he emphasizes lack of activity and will to propagate life to the highest level. He seeks not for little life but for the propagation of life to the highest, even to the extent as great as Tao itself. Chuang-tzu says that if one were able to extricate oneself from all forms and colours around him and live in *ch’i*, then one’s life would fuse with the life of the myriad things. One could then circulate unimpeded in the universe and feel at ease in it. For Chuang-tzu, the development of life lies in leaving everything to its own nature and in maintaining their natural simplicity and avoiding harm from what is artificial.

Mencius, who is a close follower of Confucius and who believes that a human being is naturally good and that the principles of moral conduct are inborn, states in his “Principle of non-maleficence” that “a human heart cannot bear to see others get hurt” and that “one should not do a wrong thing, or kill an innocent person

even to gain the whole world”. This principle has an absolute character, not allowing any violation. In the most fundamental Taoist ethical codes called “The Five Commandments of Lao-tzu”, the first is plain and clear: “Do not destroy life!” It is a strong pro-life teaching for respect and protection of life.

## **2.6. Respect for Life in Primal Religions**

Adherents of primal religions in various Asian countries are numerically minorities who struggle to maintain their ethnic and cultural identity. They preserve the richness of their religious traditions in celebrations, myths and proverbs, rituals, customs and codes of conduct. Their beliefs and religious practices are handed down within the family structure among people bound together by community or kinship ties. Although superseded by the major religious traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Confucianism, Taoism and Christianity, primal religions survived to some extent as certain forms of piety and religiosity practiced by members of these major religions. Since there is a vast range of primal religions across the vast continent of Asia, it is not easy to speak of primal religions as if all of them are similar in their beliefs and practices. What follows is a general account of what is observed in general in the different Asian primal religions.

Respect for life in primal religions, particularly in the Philippines, is based on the belief in the sacredness of life in all its aspects. It is largely associated with respect for nature since the Supreme God is viewed as a distant God. The natural order of events is attributed to certain spirits that govern certain phenomena and prevent chaos from prevailing in the cosmos. Nature’s cycles, particularly the seasons and the cycle of agriculture, allow life to go on in an orderly fashion. Thus, the relevant spirits were first addressed before practically any undertaking, or even many ordinary activities.

Respect for nature is manifested in the way the people address other creatures and even inanimate objects. Human beings are regarded to be composed of three or four of the following elements – earth, water, fire and wind. Sometimes, other elements come also into the picture. When a person dies, his or her body returns to the elements and thereby nourishes the earth. This is a cycle of taking and giving. It is considered a great sin to abuse the balance of nature.

Balance is an important concept and categories such as hot/cold, high/low, fast/slow, etc. are used to describe nature, conditions, foods, medicines, and illness. To maintain proper health one needs to maintain proper balance. The life of the individual and the order of society also depend on balancing different forces. It is believed that by maintaining the balance society could insure the ecological system that would continue to provide food, that chaotic wars would not prevail and that the health of the body would be maintained.

Belief in after-life is an indication of the tribal people’s optimism about life despite the limits of this world. The optimism is displayed by the widespread belief that all spirits of all creatures (not just humans) eventually would rise to the highest heaven. The idea that all would reach heaven does not mean that no justice exists in the after-life. Evildoers would descend to the lower- worlds and through sufferings would be purified and by some natural law evolve toward the same place as all other souls. Thus, the ultimate quest is towards heaven, towards the final home, which is the highest heaven, and towards the creator. All will get there some day, but some will take more indirect, difficult paths than others.

There is a belief that the life-substance, which animates a person from birth to death, is different from the personality, which continues to exist after death. The life-substance that enlivens a child who is still in the mother's womb is believed to come from the highest deity. This life-substance is unrelated to consciousness and emotions. Death occurs when the highest deity recalls this life-substance. Returning to the deity, the life-substance is added to a pool of such substances available for reincarnation, but the link between the personality of the deceased and the life-substance comes to an end.

The personality of the deceased survives after death in the form of a spirit. The departed are believed to live in a sphere of their own, which they share with the clan-deities, but they also come to the habitations of the living and partake of the food offerings of their kinsmen. Together with the clan-deities, they bestow substantial benefits on the living. It is considered desirable for a village to have on its land a shrine that contains the sacred symbols of prominent clan-ancestors.

Religion is seen as a system of rites and sacrifices by means of which a community achieves the integration of human actions with the influence of the gods and spirits sharing its environment. Many of the invisible beings are considered neutral in relation to humans. There are no fundamentally hostile spirits. They can be propitiated by offerings and offended or irritated by an attitude of disrespect. The battle of good and evil forces is not part of this worldview.

The internal social structure of some war-like tribes is characterized by the absence of any institutional community organization. Supported only by a bilateral kin-group extending to third cousins, the individual neither recognizes nor enjoys the protection of any village or tribal authority. There is little sense of personal security in an atmosphere of feuds and vengeance killing.

Through myths, legends, rituals and customs, primal religions address common human concerns such as vulnerability and limits of human existence, personal security, and subsistence of the community, relationships and life as a whole. Underlying the tribal worldview is a sturdy and collective sense for integrity of nature and balance between nature and humans that goes with a healthy sense of goodness and sacredness of life and hence respect and care for it.

### **Section III : SOURCES OF CHRISTIAN FAITH ON THE SACREDNESS AND DIGNITY OF HUMAN LIFE AND THE OBLIGATIONS IN THE SERVICE OF LIFE**

Having considered Asian religious/cultural traditions with regard to respect for life in the previous section, in this section, the paper dwells somewhat at length on theological anthropology in the Catholic tradition and its bearing on respect for life. The way we understand the human being relates to the way we understand human life and the respect we owe to it and the moral obligations we have to fulfill in the care for life and its promotion.

#### **3.1 The Contemporary Attitude to the Human Being – a Paradox**

The Second Vatican Council in its Declaration on Religious Liberty, asserts: “The right to religious freedom is based on the very dignity of the human person, as known through the revealed Word of God and by reason itself” (*Dignitatis*

*Humanae*, 2). However, a glimpse through history highlights the fact that the struggle on the part of human reflection, be it philosophical or theological, to articulate an integral understanding of the human person has been neither easy nor always successful.

As the encyclical of the late Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* pertinently observes, the present human predicament arises, as much out of the unique human powers we possess over our environment and ourselves, as of the unique human demands for justice and freedom. In today's world, a great number of people have been deprived of basic needs and denied basic human rights. They resist their rights and needs being ignored and struggle to reclaim them while a minority enjoys the blessings of progress and prosperity. There is a growing multitude of weak and defenceless human beings, unborn children in particular, whose fundamental right to life is being trampled upon and disregarded. (Cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 5).

Human dignity is both exalted and disregarded in the concrete. At the root of this paradoxical attitude, one can perceive an ethical relativism with its manifold expressions. This oftentimes finds expression in a widespread attitude that carries the concept of subjectivity of individual human beings to an unacceptable extreme. At other times, it recognizes as a subject of rights only the person who enjoys full or at least incipient autonomy, and who emerges from a total dependence on the other. Furthermore, there is the not uncommon mindset that tends to equate personal dignity with the capacity for verbal and explicit communication ignoring other dimensions of the human person (Cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 19). Hence there arises the need for an authentic understanding of the human person from the perspective of the Catholic faith.

### **3.2. Catholic Theological Perspective**

Here we would briefly state the Catholic Theological Perspective in whose framework we shall examine the anthropology in the tradition of Catholic faith.

When one speaks of "Catholic Theological Perspective", one is referring to the existential acceptance (Faith) of an event; this acceptance includes both the dimension of content (*Fides quae*) and commitment (*Fides qua*). The event in question is God's self-communication in history, which culminates in the Christ event (Revelation). It further holds that this revelation is embodied and handed down in the books of the Old and New Testaments (Sacred Scripture), and in the life of the believing community (Tradition), in the context of which the magisterium has an authenticating role. These have methodological implications regarding the weight that Sacred Scripture and Tradition have in Catholic theological reflection. This approach, however, involves certain assumptions and assertions, which form part and parcel of the Catholic vision in its basic articulation and perform, as it were, a parametric function in its regard.

Here we refer to the way we understand the Church. The renewed understanding of the ecclesial community in Vatican II situates the entire Church as a community of all the baptized faithful considered the people of God with different ministries. Among them the hierarchical structure and its charism of teaching traditionally called magisterium belong to the very constitution of the Church. The different ministries, both institutional and charismatic, within the Church, are not seen in terms of opposition, but in terms of complementariness. In other words, the

relational understanding of Vatican II situates all the ministries in a participative and interactive ecclesiology. The Church is a community, within which, each category of believer plays a distinctive and important role.

In the first place, the entire Church can be said to be a theologizing community, since the entire ecclesial community is the recipient of the Word of God. It is in this context that Vatican II speaks of the *sensus fidei* (Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 12). There is a sense in which bishops are theologians, inasmuch as the responsibility of furnishing an authentic interpretation of the Word of God has been entrusted to the teaching office of the Church, that is, to the college of bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the bishop of Rome (Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, c. 3 and the Preliminary Explanatory Note). Finally, there is the professional theologian. Professional theologians are situated between a creed and a quest, so to say. Research of its very nature, involves a margin of incertitude and the assumption of a stance. It is the task of the professional theologian to explore new avenues for a better understanding of the faith; their task has an essentially community dimension because theologians are members of an ecclesial community to which they bear a responsibility.

The Church so constituted and endowed with charism and ministries is sent on mission of witness and service to which belongs the service of the Gospel of life.

### **3.3. A Glimpse at the Old Testament Vision of the Human Being and Respect for Life.**

It bears recalling that the Bible, though inspired, is basically a collection of books, and consequently of theologies. For instance, in the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament), one can find a Yahwist Theology, an Elohist Theology, a Priestly Theology, a Deuteronomic Theology and Wisdom Theology, to name but a few. These theologies are different and reflect different concerns and even different cultures, as Israel moved from an agrarian society, to a monarchical kingdom, from an independent state to becoming a vassal of Assyria, Greece and Rome.

#### ***3. 3.1. Respect for Life in the Old Testament***

##### **3. 3.1.1. Creation Stories**

At the very outset, it can be affirmed that the value of human life is clearly affirmed in the Old Testament. The care with which God created human beings is conveyed in the stories of creation in Genesis (cc.1–2). The Priestly account of creation (Cf. Gen 1/1–2/4) stresses the order of God's creative activity and attaches special significance to the creation of human beings. After everything has been in place, God created human beings by a special decision: "Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness" (Gen 1/26). God's purpose is enunciated: "Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" (Ibid.). Only human beings are said to be created in God's image (Gen 1/26-27). God not only prepared the world as the habitation of human beings, but also put all other creatures on earth at the service of human life. "Have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over every living

thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen 1/28). Dominion over creation entrusted to humankind by God is a participation in God’s own caring dominion over God’s creation.

The Yahwist creation story (Cf. Gen 2/5–25) focuses on the creation of the human world and describes God’s creative activity in anthropomorphic terms. God’s care for creation is shown in his personal involvement in bringing things into being. God formed (*yatsar*) the human being out of clay and breathed (*yph*) into his nostrils the breath of life (*nishmath hayyim*). The special bond between God and the human being is established, not only because the human being is a creature of God, but by the fact that the breath of life that made the human being alive, came directly from God. God’s care is shown in His subsequent creations to serve human needs. Thus the psalmist declares: “What is man that thou art mindful of him and the son of man that thou dost care (*pqd*) for him? Yet thou hast made him little less than a god, and dost crown him with glory and honour. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet” (Ps 8/4-7). The human being is free but that freedom has its limits and goes with responsibility.

### **3. 3.1.2. Primeval and Ancestral History**

The fragility of human life is seen in the failure of human beings to obey God’s commandment. Yet even if their disobedience had dire consequences, including banishment, God’s care was not diminished. The biblical writer hints at God’s continuing care in a short note: “And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them” (Gen 3/21).

The vulnerability of human existence is seen in the human struggle to live in harmony with others, within the family, in society and in relationship to nature. God confronted Cain and called him to account for the murder of his brother Abel. “The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground.” (Gen 4/10). Cain’s remark: “Am I my brother’s keeper? (Gen 4/9) displays the attitude of indifference and lack of concern that needs to be overcome so that a life of harmony and respect may flourish in the human community. Banishment was Cain’s punishment, but God spared his life. God’s response to the death of Abel was not to take Cain’s life, but to give another life. Another son was born to Adam and his wife, who exclaimed: “God has appointed for me another child instead of Abel” (Gen 4/25).

God’s power over life and death, His good will for the whole of creation and His opposition to evil are affirmed in the flood stories (Cf. Gen 6–8). The end of the flood signaled a new beginning for humanity and all of creation. Humanity, through Noah, was reminded of God’s original intention and the dignity and role of human beings in the world. God’s demand for an accounting of human life was made explicit. “For your life-blood, I will surely require a reckoning...and of every man’s brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has man been made (Gen 9/5–6). This demand was set in the context of God’s covenant with humanity. “Behold I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living

creature that is with you” (Gen 9/9 – 10). The covenant affirms the primacy of life over death, of goodness over evil. The God of the covenant is a God of goodness and life.

The ancestral history reflects the realities of family life and sibling rivalries that threaten life and bring about death. In this history, human beings remain the subject of God’s solicitude. This message rings out clearly towards the end of the Joseph Story. Speaking to his brothers, Joseph interpreted in the light of faith the events of his life. “God sent me before you to preserve life” (Gen 45/5). The words of Joseph to his brothers before he died, serve as a prophetic summary of God’s caring action for the people of Israel: “God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land he promised...” (Gen 50/25). These words summaries the whole action of God through the Exodus, the wandering in the wilderness and the settlement of the Israelites in Canaan, the land promised by God to them.

### **3. 3.1.3. *The Story of the Exodus and the Wanderings in the Desert***

At a certain point in the life of the people of Israel, God’s care was experienced as deliverance from slavery in Egypt. This caring God is described as one who saw the affliction of the people, heard their cry, knew their suffering and came to save them. “I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them...and to bring them up...to a good and broad land.” (Ex 3/7–9). The Exodus narrative recounts how God effected the salvation of the people through Moses. God’s salvation was experienced, not only by the Hebrews but also, as the biblical writer notes, by “a mixed multitude” (Ex 12/38). The saving action of God in Exodus becomes the basis of His covenant call and challenge. God’s identification as their saving God introduces the Ten Commandments. “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the house of bondage” (Cf. Ex 20/2; Deut 5/6). The commandments affirm the fundamental value of human life in all its aspects and relationships. The commandments are to be seen from the perspective of God’s will to save and to bring people into a community bonded to Him in covenant relationship. From this perspective, the call to respect human life becomes more explicit. “You shall not kill” (Ex 20/13). At the same time, such respect for life is broader, for it includes respect for bodily integrity, family and social relationships, personal honour and property.

The story of the wandering in the desert shows the struggle of the people to live as a community through troubles, sufferings and failures. Through all these, the people were slowly learning the practical demands of the covenant. God’s fidelity was shown in his care for them, protecting them from harm, giving them food on the journey and teaching them how to live as a people of the covenant. “If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples...you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19/5-6). The journey in the desert was a time of formation and purification of the people. The writer of Deuteronomy expresses this insight: “And you shall remember all the way which the Lord, your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness,

that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna... that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut 8/2-3). God was actually shaping them to be His image and likeness “You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev 19/2). Respect for life in the context of the covenant implies respect based on faith and egalitarian principles of community life.

#### **3. 3.1.4. *Prophetic Challenges***

The socio-political development of the people of Israel from tribal groups to a nation was achieved during the time of David who succeeded in establishing one kingdom (2 Sam 5/1-6). Though he was honoured as the king after God’s own heart (Cf. 1 Sam 13/14), David sinned by causing the unjust death of one of his men (2 Sam 11). His story showed the danger and temptation of power. God brought him to conversion through the prophet Nathan (2 Sam 12). Throughout the period of kings in Israel and Judah, the prophets raised their voices against the social injustice and blatant disrespect for the life of the poor and the needy. The prophet Amos indicted those who denied justice to the poor and the needy. He pronounced judgment on those who were selling “the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes” (Am 2/6).

Micah challenged the leaders who were leading the people astray. “Is it not for you to know justice? - You who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin from off my people, and their flesh from their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, and flay their skin from off them, and break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a cauldron” (Micah 3/1-3). The prophet laments the absence of justice and faithfulness. “The godly man has perished from the earth, and there is none upright among men; they all lie in wait for blood, and each hunts his brother with a net” (Micah 7/2).

In the same vein, the prophet Isaiah pronounced the word of the Lord: “The Lord has taken his place to contend, he stands to judge his people. The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?” (Isaiah 3/13-15).

Despite the challenges of the prophets and their call to conversion, the people remained stiff in their forgetfulness of the covenant. Their failure to respect life, to promote social justice and to live in fidelity to the covenant had a fateful consequence. They became prey to powerful nations and were subjected to foreign rulers.

Israel’s story of liberation had a tragic end. Being delivered from slavery in Egypt, they grew to be a nation and a kingdom, but they ended becoming slaves because of their failure to sustain their commitment to the covenant, a covenant that was based on the principles of faith, justice and equity. This tragic aspect of Israel’s story is a constant reminder to us to respect life and to promote justice and equity.

### 3. 3.2. The “Image of God” in the Old Testament

One of the key concepts, which under girds and symbolizes the understanding of the uniqueness of the human being in the Old Testament, is the notion of the “image of God”. For the Old Testament, being in “the image of God”, is not merely a religious overlay on our natural humanity, but should be considered fundamental to our authentic humanity. As a consequence, when one lacks the freedom to be for God and the other, one is in effect, living in contradiction to one’s basic humanity. As H. Renckens aptly observes: “When...the author of Genesis 1 says that man is the image of God, he is indeed truly saying something unheard of. He is attempting to express a truly overwhelming mystery, a mystery which for the Israelite is the source of holy awe of himself and of his fellowman, and which reveals to him that he owes everything that he is and has more to Yahweh than to himself and that in this life, he has a task to fulfill and a responsibility to bear.” (H. Renckens, *Israel’s Concept of the Beginning*, 116).

Coming down to specifics, in the Old Testament, the human being is directly mentioned as the image of God only in three passages:

In Genesis 1/26-27, after the creation of living things, God says: “Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female, he created them”.

In Genesis 5/1-3, the writer observes: “When God created humankind, he made them in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them humankind when they were created.”

Again in Genesis 9/5-6, God speaks to Noah: “For your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning; of every beast I will require it and of man; of every man’s brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image.”

All the texts mentioned above belong to the Priestly Tradition. They express the overwhelming conviction of the Israelites that God was supreme over both nature and history. Further, there is inset the realization that the human being, both in his/her own distance from nature, as in his/her relationship with God, has been imbued with a unique dignity as a responsible spiritual being. In other words, God is far above nature, and the human being, in his/her degree, has been lifted out of the plane of nature by virtue of his/her own special relationship with God. God always deals with the human being as a person, not as a thing. “The human being is placed at the summit of God’s creative activity, as its crown at the culmination of a process which leads from indistinct chaos to the most perfect of creatures. Everything in creation is ordered to man and everything is made subject to him” (*Evangelium Vitae*, 34).

Furthermore, in the biblical narrative, the difference between the human being and other creatures is shown above all by the fact that, only the creation of the human being is presented as the result of a special decision on

the part of God, a deliberation to establish a special and specific bond with the Creator (Cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 34). Coming to the third text (Gen 9/5-6), it is to be borne in mind that for the Israelites, blood is the source of life (Cf. Dt 12/23); hence, life, especially human life belongs only to God (Cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 9).

On the other hand, the Yahwist account of creation expresses the same conviction following a different trajectory. The writer speaks of the divine breath that is breathed into the life of man so that he may come to life. “Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (Gen 2/7).

The Book of Sirach, too, refers to the fact that God, in creating human beings, “endowed them with strength like his own and made them in his own image (Sir 17/3). Integral to this understanding of the image of God is not only the human dominion over the world, but those spiritual faculties that are distinctively human with which the human person has been endowed, such as reason and free will. “He filled them with knowledge and understanding, and showed them good and evil (cf. Sir 17/7). As Vatican II in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, puts it: Man alone among all visible creatures, is capable of knowing and loving his creator (Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 12).

This image of God that the human being is much more than mere existence in time, but involves a call towards fullness of life that transcends the limits of time. “For God created man for incorruption and made him in the image of his own eternity” (Wis 2/23). God therefore is the sole Lord of this life (cf. Gen 9/5; Job 12/10; Dt 32/39). The Old Testament regards human being as the image of God meaning that every human being is in the image of God - which is not to be equated with the human dominion over creation, but rather, constitutes the ground of such a dominion which is always a caring dominion (stewardship), and never domination over creation.

Summing up, the Old Testament understanding of the value of life has to be understood: All life is sacred, and as such, to be valued and preserved; but all life does not have the same value or claim for preservation because there is a qualitative difference of human life from all other forms of life. Hence there is a stress on the dignity of human life based on the dignity of human person within the inter-connectedness of all creation.

In the first account of creation, human beings are given authority over the entire universe. Since dominion entrusted to human beings is a participation in God’s own caring dominion, cannot mean domination over creation leading to destructive control but a caring stewardship as God cares for his creation. The human being is called upon to preserve and keep things in their natural hierarchical order, respecting the sanctity of life. Among the different forms of life, human life is the most sacred because it was made in God’s image and likeness; it has the breath of God. This sacredness of life is the basis of its inviolability, which is at the core of the Ten Commandments.

The whole human being is seen as created in the image of God; in other words, the “image of God” is not located in one or another aspect of human nature. The Old Testament presents a holistic vision of the human being. Furthermore, “God placed the first human beings in relation to one

another, each with a partner of the other sex. The Bible affirms that human person exists in relationship with other persons, with God, with the world and with oneself. According to this conception, the human being is not an isolated individual but a person – an essentially relational being, or in the expression of contemporary thought, a "cosmo-theandric" being. (Cf. in this regard, the document of the International Theological Commission, "Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons created in the Image of God", 10).

### **3. 4. The New Testament Teaching**

The primary focus of the New Testament is the proclamation of the Christ-event and the Good News of God's Reign. In articulating this focus, however, the different New Testament writings kept a delicate balance between maintaining the single focus – Jesus Christ, and allowing a legitimate pluralism of expression; each of which represents one of the two facets of the Christian faith proclamation; on the one hand, its uniqueness, and, on the other hand, the multiplicity of ways in which it can be legitimately expressed.

#### ***3. 4.1. New Testament Perspectives on Respect for Life***

##### **3. 4.1.1. The Life and Mission of Jesus**

Jesus exercised His ministry in continuity with the prophetic tradition (Cf. Lk 4/16-30, Mk 6/4). Through His words and deeds He reminded the people of the goodness and kindness of God who is a loving Father (Mt 6/1-34; Lk 12/22-34). He sought sinners and those who had been deprived of access to God's temple. The whole life, teaching and ministry of Jesus confirmed the dignity of human life and each individual person. Jesus said: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly"(Jn 10/10). Jesus proclaimed the ideals of His covenant-community – the Beatitudes (Mt 5/3-12; Lk 6/20-26) and taught His understanding of holiness (Mt 5/17-48). The New Law of Jesus is addressed to the heart of the person, the interior attitude and motivation. This reminds us of the promise of the prophets: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people" (Jer 31/33). Again: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and be careful to observe my ordinances" (Ez 36/26-27).

In his ministry Jesus challenged the religious authorities in their anti-human and anti-life interpretation of the law including the law of the Sabbath. His healing of people on the Sabbath was also a declaration of the God of life. Human person is not for the Sabbath but Sabbath for human persons. When he was going to heal a man with a withered hand, he put a question to religious authorities: "Is it lawful to do good or harm on the Sabbath or to save life or to kill?" (Mk 3:1-6). He cured the man with the withered hand and earned the deadly hostility of the religious leaders.

Jesus announced the new law of love and respect for the human person: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’. But I say to, do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to him who begs from you and do not refuse him who would borrow from you” (Mt 5/38-42). Furthermore, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He makes his sun rises on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust...You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Mt 5/43-45.48).

Jesus’ offer of salvation and call to conversion was addressed to everyone. For Him, every life is worth saving. Jesus carried out His mission in obedience to the will of the Father. “This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day” (Jn 6/39). In the life and ministry of Jesus, respect for life meant overcoming the threats and destruction caused by sin and death. Jesus offered the new eternal dimension of human life. “This is the will of my Father that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up on the last day” (Jn 6/40). Jesus fulfilled the insight of the Wisdom tradition. “God created man for incorruption and made them in the image of his own eternity” (Wis 2/23).

### **3. 4.1.2. The Ongoing Mission of the Church**

How the disciples of Jesus continued His mission could be seen in the Acts of the Apostles and deduced from the Gospels written by the evangelists and the rest of the books of the New Testament. The Church’s proclamation of new life in Jesus Christ is more explicit in the letters of Paul.

The gift of new life came through baptism by which we received the Spirit, making us children of God. “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6/4). Hence, “God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts crying, ‘Abba’! Father” (Gal 4/6). The love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Cf. Rom 6/6). St. Paul reminds us that our body is a “temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 6/19), that we are the body of Christ and every one of us is a member of it (1 Cor 12/27). In the light of these teachings, respect for life takes on a new significance among believers. We respect each other because each is a temple of the Holy Spirit and we are members of the same body of Christ. To live this new life within the Christian community also means being formed anew in the image of our Creator (Col 3/10) and living in love as Jesus commanded, a love that extends beyond the Christian community to the whole of humanity.

### ***3. 4.2. The Image of God in the New Testament***

The image of the human being as created in the image of God is plumbed in all its theological depth by the New Testament. Therein, the image of God is mentioned nearly a dozen times and in three main senses: In the first place, to describe the unique dignity and sonship of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4/4; Col 1/15; Heb 1/3); secondly, to describe the likeness of God into which believers enter through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 8/29; Col 3/10) and finally, to describe the human being's humanity.

The emphasis here is heavily focused on the divine purpose of God for all humanity in Jesus Christ and its embodiment in the believer by means of faith in the redeeming act of Christ through baptism. The transformation of the believer into the image of Christ is accomplished primarily through the sacraments.

The overall perspective of the New Testament in this regard is not primarily directed to the past or even the present of a human individual. The value of life is not determined on the basis of what a person did in the past, or what s/he is doing in the present, but on the basis of what s/he can possibly do in the future. The New Testament is universalistic in this thrust. It admits that every human being has the possibility to become a child of God.

Furthermore, the New Testament view of life has to be assessed on the basis of what God did in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the gift of God to the world. The value of human life is to be measured against the value of Jesus, the gift of God to the world, nay further, against the value of the salvific death of Jesus on the cross.

In the New Testament, there is an instinctive perception that life is good and the human being is called to grasp the profound reason why this is so. In Jesus' own life, we find the dialectic between the experience of the uncertainty of human life and the affirmation of its value. Life's contradictions and risks were fully accepted by Jesus.

The commandment: "You shall not kill" is reaffirmed in all its relentless force by Jesus (Cf. Mt 19/18) and finds expression in the mission of Jesus with the many healings he performed. This is carried further in the need to show reverence and love for every human person – which is the deepest requirement of the commandment to protect human life, the commandment of love of neighbour.

Perhaps it would not be unwarranted to say that, while the primary thrust of the Old Testament understanding concerned "who" the human being is, the New Testament added a new intensity and thrust by integrating a new focus: "Who the human being is called to be". In the course of history both emphases were reflected upon.

### **3. 5. Anthropological Elaborations in the Course of History**

At the beginnings of Christianity, the Christian vision was elaborated primarily in a Jewish milieu and its proponents used Semitic categories of expression, which were basically functional in character. However, this approach radically changed when Christianity encountered Greek culture. Christian thinkers were compelled to go beyond the descriptive Scriptural categories of thought and formulate in a precise and technical manner the truth that Sacred Scripture had expressed in functional terms. In this perspective, the significance of the reality of faith was expressed in ontological terms. The focus of reflection gradually shifted

from the plane of attitude to the plane of being, from “respect for life” to a theological anthropology, with a special focus on the “image of God” in the human person.

During the period of the Apologists, one observes, (e.g. in Irenaeus) what perhaps could be called a creative polarity between “who the human person is” (The Old Testament emphasis) and “who the human person is called to be in Jesus Christ” (The New Testament emphasis). One consequence of this thrust will be the tendency to identify the image with a specific dimension of the human being.

Early Christian theologians drew on the Greek language and thought-forms in an attempt to articulate the understanding of the human being. One significant attempt borrowed the word “hypostasis” from Greek Middle Platonic thought, and, as it were, put a face on it, a *prosopon*. This concept, designated as “person”, was used to characterize the human being in his/her uniqueness. However, given the static perspective of Greek philosophical thought as a whole, this approach was more concerned with the human being as “substance”, rather than with the “dynamic thrust of human existence”. This definition of human nature consequently denoted primarily a static substantial entity, rather than the dynamic attributes characteristic of a personal existence. One such trend of reflection, led to a highly abstract notion of human nature. This reached its culmination in the sixth century, when Boethius defined person as: “an individual subsistence of a rational nature”; and further in Thomas Aquinas who asserted: “Man is therefore in the image of God, because he, like God is rational” (ST, Ia, 93, 4). The image of God is realized principally in an act of contemplation in the human intellect.

In Augustine, the image is defined in terms of rationality, which comprised the power of remembering, understanding and loving God. Augustine, however, adds a dynamic correlate in accordance with the New Testament emphasis and with his Platonic underpinnings that the human being is made for God. “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you (Aurelius Augustine, Confessions, 1, 1).

In our discussion on respect for life in the light of Christian faith, it is useful to keep in view the development of theological anthropology, which delineates the features of a holistic anthropology. In this way we are able to understand human personhood in all its wholeness that relates to respect for human life as its foundation. Respect for life belongs to this human wholeness. For Catholic Christianity in general, relationship to God is constitutive of the human being, which is also creatureliness in its essence. Though this relationship may be lived on the level of personal religious experience, it is nevertheless indispensable that one be able to understand and defend this experience also theologically, on the level of the *intellectus fidei* where it can withstand the fire of contestation.

The discussion on human person is raised to a new level when it is related to the context of Revelation, Redemption and Salvation in Jesus Christ. Against this background the Catholic community, under the movement of the Spirit, has been in the process of articulating an anthropology that has become part of its vision. To pinpoint some of the focal points of the same: The basic assertion regarding the uniqueness of the human person has been a Christian constant, rooted in the Bible, both the Old and the New Testament and reiterated by Christian Tradition till the present day.

In the first place, there is a movement towards a more holistic understanding of the human being. While it is true that there have been periods in history when the uniqueness of the human tended to be either blurred, or understood restrictively, in terms of his/her spiritual/intellectual dimension, nevertheless, generally speaking, there has been a movement towards holism in contemporary Christian understanding, wherein the uniqueness of the human reality is seen as not residing merely in one or another dimension of the human being, but as comprising the human being, whole and entire.

Furthermore, it has been the unique contribution of the New Testament vision to situate all human beings and the entire human being with reference to Jesus Christ “through whom and for whom everything has been created” (Cf. Col 1/16). As a consequence, the universal need of all human beings, nay all creation, for Jesus Christ is affirmed in unequivocal terms (Cf. XVI Council of Carthage).

The uniqueness, characteristic of the human being, has been spelt out in relational terms in the course of Christian history. Initially, there is a discernible anthropological shift from “individuality” to “personhood”; the former laid its primary emphasis on uniqueness in seemingly isolationist terms, whereas the latter understood uniqueness in terms of relationship, with its consequences for situating the relationship between the sexes and with respect to the community. In a still further development, the understanding of the human person is situated in the context of his/her relationship to nature (the ecological dimension), with its implications for the human responsibility as steward of creation.

As a consequence, this new awareness of human potentiality confronts us with a host of new problems and possibilities in this regard, primarily in the following sectors: with reference to the human responsibility for life as a whole, with reference to the human responsibility for the biological integrity of human beings, and finally, with reference to the responsibility of human beings for the created world. Hence we can affirm that Christian understanding of human person in all dimensions including life stands for a holistic understanding of human person of which relationality is constitutive of the wholeness of human person. This understanding of the wholeness of human person is also the foundation of the dignity and sacredness of human life without distinction and discrimination. Moral obligations of respect, care and promotion of human life are rooted in the same foundation.

The onset of Personalistic Philosophy in Western Europe brought with it an existentialist colouring to the understanding of the human person. This is typified in the stance of Martin Buber: “The You encounters me by grace – it cannot be found by seeking. But that I speak the basic word to it is a deed of my whole being, is my whole essential deed...The basic I-You can be spoken only with one’s whole being. The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished by me; can never be accomplished without me. I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You (Martin BUBER, *I and Thou*, 62). More fundamentally, the responsibility and freedom of being a human person is itself a response. Therefore, we are persons actually before we are confronted with the possibilities of personal existence. But this would affirm that the Christian faith rests on the creative Word of God, which summons the human creature into personal existence. One of the basic thrusts of such an approach is that the human person and therefore, human life can and should never be instrumentalized.

### **3.6. The Encyclical of Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae***

Since Vatican II, the doctrine of the image of God began to enjoy greater prominence especially in the official teaching of the Church – a process which reached its culmination in the encyclical of Pope John Paul II: *Evangelium Vitae*. This papal magisterial document can be called the *magna carta* of human life in the recent history of the Church. After articulating a Catholic theological anthropology based primarily on the understanding of the human person as “image of God”, the encyclical draws out the consequences for the mission of the Church and for each Christian.

This doctrine, based on Natural Law, has been reaffirmed by Sacred Scripture, transmitted by the Tradition of the Church and taught by the ordinary universal magisterium. (Cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 57). The document is unequivocal in its pro-life stance and the Pope categorically states: “Therefore, by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, and in communion with the Bishops of the Catholic Church, I confirm that the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral” (*Evangelium Vitae*, 57).

The document then goes on to draw out the practical moral implications of such a principle: The direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral. The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception to the moment of death. Consequently, euthanasia is a grave violation of the law of God. There is a grave and clear obligation to oppose abortion and euthanasia by conscientious objection. Widening the perspective, there is reference to the ecological responsibility, which devolves on human beings as stewards of creation. In a nutshell, there is need to eliminate from culture all its anti-life implications, while proclaiming the Good News, because, in its essence, Christianity is the “Gospel of Life”.

### **3. 7. Service of Life in the Church, a Living Tradition of the Gospel of Life.**

The Church in Asia has not failed in its mission to promote a culture of life among its people. In faithfulness to the teachings of Jesus who came that all may have life and have it in abundance, the Church continues to bear witness – in words and more importantly, in deeds – to the value and dignity of human life. At the same time, we cannot forget that at times, there have been shadows too, with regard to respect for life on the part of the Church in Asia. We also will reflect about the vital role modern media could play in promoting a culture of life. This is an indispensable means that the Church needs to use in her contemporary endeavours to promote life.

#### ***3. 7.1. Living Witnesses to the Gospel of Life in Asia***

Among the specific ways in which the mission of promoting a culture of life is concretized in various regions of Asia, the following well-known special instances can be highlighted:

- The selfless work that the Missionaries of Charity Sisters (founded by Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta) have been doing for and with the poor, sick, homeless and abandoned people in areas in Kolkata, in Sri Lanka, the

Philippines and elsewhere. Indeed the culture of life is served when no one is left feeling unwanted and uncared for.

- The different ecclesial bodies in various Asian regions have been and are seriously engaged in pro-life advocacies and action and information dissemination. Special mention is to be made of the pro-life organizations and family life commissions functioning in many dioceses which are critically vocal against abortion and the use of contraceptive methods and which try to offer alternative responses to people who are sometimes forced by circumstances to employ such methods.
- In the Philippines, one can mention the presence in a number of dioceses of houses that not only welcome but actively seek and extend comfort and care to sick and old people who have been abandoned by their families; houses that offer shelter and love to street-children and migrant young people; different religious congregations who are actively engaged in the rehabilitation of drug addicts, prostitutes and in giving counsel to single mothers; the continued existence of Basic Ecclesial Communities which have been effective agents in fostering a culture of life; church-related cause-oriented groups who have struggled for women empowerment; Philippine bishops' persistence in blocking bills in Congress that, among others, encourage the use of contraceptives and offer social and financial privileges to two-children families. Here we must mention many initiatives taken by the local churches, religious and other Catholic NGOs to welcome the abandoned, the orphans, the homeless and to give dignity and care for them in different countries of Asia.
- Several Bishops' Conferences in Asia have prophetically addressed what they deem to be anti-life forces in their respective domains. The Bishops of Japan issued a message on "reverence for life" which asserts a "clear 'no' to all evil that undermines or neglects human life" and to work towards the building of a society founded on truth, justice, and love. The Bishops of Sri Lanka issued two statements reaffirming the church's commitment to respect for life on the two occasions the recent governments in that country tried to legalize abortion in certain special cases, like rape and defects in the foetus. The Bishops of the Philippines issued a primer reiterating the church's commitment to life and calling for the abolition of the death penalty even for heinous crimes. In another statement, they also opposed the proposed bills in congress that might open the doors for the legalization of divorce, abortion, and immoral means of demographic regulation.
- AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) carries a social stigma. People infected with the disease are ostracized and isolated from the larger community and often treated with disdain. In fidelity to the church's respect for the culture of life, the Camillians (and other Church members as well) in Thailand and elsewhere in Asia have continued to look after the welfare of AIDS patients while at the same working with various concerned groups to prevent the further spread of the disease.
- Another manifestation of the Asian Church's living out of the culture of life can be seen in the non-discriminatory care and assistance it gives to the disabled, the blind, to terminally ill-patients, and to differently challenged

children—in Thailand, in India, In Bangladesh, in Korea and other parts of Asia.

- In India, chains of hospitals have bonded together to form an Association of Catholic Hospitals that takes a common stand against abortion. Doctors offer alternatives that promote respect for life to patients who in the midst of confusion are thinking of aborting their babies. By injecting the value of life in their conversations with patients, doctors help patients in making gospel-informed decisions.
- The few Catholic voices, both individual and collective, in war-torn Asian countries like Iraq and Sri Lanka, who boldly and impartially raise their prophetic voices in public, against the killings of all innocent human beings (irrespective of race or religion) due to war, suicide-bombings, terrorism and other acts of violence against life, are a clear witness to the Gospel of Life in Asia. At a time when the majority seem to feel that “silence is golden” mainly due to fear of death threats and intimidation by war-mongers and terrorists, these prophetic voices continue the prophetic ministry of Jesus in favour of life but in fearless opposition to the forces of death.
- Last but not least, the Asian Church has been supportive of the culture of life through its work against the eradication of poverty, by making the “option for the poor” its own, through its staunch defence of people whose basic human rights have been violated. In a continent where millions of our peoples are negatively affected by hopeless situations of poverty, most of which are due to unjust structures created by human beings, such an option is surely pro-Gospel of Life.

We are sure that there is a lot more being done in promoting a culture of life in different parts of Asia, in places which we do not know, by people whose generosity and selfless, silent service will remain unacknowledged but whose work never fails to be a constant source of joy for the Asian church and hope for the peoples of Asia. This work continues to embody Christ’s mission of proclaiming, healing and making whole. It is indeed the witnessing service of the Gospel of Life.

### ***3. 7.2. Some Shadows in giving Witness to the Gospel of Life in Asia***

On the one hand, while enumerating the witnessing value of the service of the Asian Churches in the service of the Gospel of Life, on the other hand, we cannot ignore the failures of the Church in Asia, with regard to the same Gospel. While proud of her accomplishments in various parts of Asia, we also take note of the fact that there have been occasions when some of her actions have run counter to what it professes and are inconsistent with its claims. One can mention the following instances when the Church has not been faithful to the Gospel of Life:

- The many kinds of violence perpetrated in the name of faith against ancient Asian cultures and great Asian religions, especially, during the time of colonialism in various parts of Asia did negatively affect multitudes of Asians and their lives

- The support that some Catholics give to the continuance of capital punishment and systematic torture is a counter-witness to the gospel of life
- Catholics who not only do not respect life but are stubbornly against pro-life practices
- The seeming neglect and indifference the Asian Church has shown with regard to violence committed against women
- The apparent lack of a concerted prophetic response against injustice and oppression on the part of some Churches in Asia
- The deafening silence and indifference of the ‘good practicing’ Catholics in the face of injustice, untruth and violence which promote a culture of death

As the Catholic Church approached the new millennium, the late Pope John Paul II uttered the following words: “It is appropriate that, as the Second Millennium of Christianity draws to a close, the Church should become more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children, recalling all those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Christ and his Gospel and, instead of offering to the world the witness of a life inspired by the values of faith, indulged in ways of thinking and acting which were truly forms of counter-witness and scandal” (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 33).

The Asian Church takes these words of the late Pope to heart. It asks for a sincere apology for her inconsistencies and lacunae in the area of respect for human life in all its forms, which hopefully will be manifested in a more resolute and more courageous stance against everything that diminishes the value of human life

### ***3. 7.3. Media: A tool yet to be effectively used in promoting a Culture of Life in Asia***

An important means the Church can and should use prophetically in Asia is the media for the promotion of a culture of life in the face of the contemporary media promoting a culture of death. Already local churches have realized the potential of the media for this purpose. As Pope John Paul II said in his message on the occasion of the 39<sup>th</sup> World Day of Social Communications, in 2005, “the media has enormous potential for promoting peace and building bridges between peoples. The media can teach billions of people about other parts of the world and other cultures. Accurate knowledge promotes understanding, dispels prejudice, and awakens the desire to learn more”. In this message, the Pope focuses on the relationship between peoples and cultures and the key role the media play in promoting such a culture of peace and life.

Given the enormous influence the media enjoy over vast multitudes, through mass media and the electronic media, surely the media can contribute either to build a culture of life or a culture of death, in our contemporary world. The Church has always taught that the media has to serve the common good; building a culture of life is certainly within the concept of common good. We know that many conflicts (including conflicts of opinion and attitudes) have their roots in prejudice and misunderstandings of our peoples. The media play a pivotal role in forming and inculcating such prejudices and misunderstandings in our society. It is in this sense that

unfortunately, contemporary media has played a negative role in the way they use concepts, words, ideas...etc. in their communication of information. Added to this, are the selective reporting and the distorted reporting on life issues, such as abortion, political issues, partial reporting on issues on war and terrorism, mass murders, criminal activities, issues of poverty and starvation...etc. Communicating information on such vital issues, the media often tend to give a one-sided opinion that is hostile to a culture of life. The simplistic and deceptive concepts used by them to refer to abortion (e.g., termination of pregnancy, the removal of the embryo...etc.), is a case in point.

In dealing with such vital issues such as life issues, undoubtedly, the media are expected to be more responsible, if they are serious about serving the common good of different peoples. In our contemporary world, the media have a vital role to play in building a culture of life. In this sense, we cannot resist posing the question to the media personnel: are they serving a culture of life or a culture of death, in their communication of information? In their reporting of political, socio-economic issues, especially issues of war, violence and peace, are certain lives of certain areas of our globe, more important than the lives elsewhere on the same globe? Or at times, are certain lives within the same country more important than other lives there?

## **EPILOGUE**

The local churches of Asia have to meet the diverse and complex challenges for the promotion of life and respond to them in the light of the wisdom of the Gospel and the teachings of the Church. This they do in dialogue with the thought and teachings of Asian religions and cultures and in collaboration with the followers of these traditions in service of life.

The way the Church will have to respond to the issue of respect for life will have a double focus. First the Church should focus on engendering respect for life and service of life on the part of all the baptized faithful regarding service of life within the Church. The second focus of response would be on the obligation of witness to and service of life on the part of the Church in the larger society. For the latter, especially, in the context of Asia, dialogue would be the characteristic mode of the Church's way of life and action for witness and service of life.

It is important to understand the entire pastoral response of the Church in terms of a pro-life movement. The theological reflection made above is concerned with what human life is, why respect for life is to be duly fulfilled and guaranteed especially, in situations where threats to life are on the increase.

The Church in Asia understood in terms of communion, sanctifying ministry, journeying together will share the faith with prophetic courage for fullness of life for all in discipleship of witness and service. While journeying together with the peoples of Asia, the Church fulfills its mission of service of life and its promotion.

The Church in Asia is at the cross roads of its mission to the peoples of Asia. In this great continent, the Church needs to discern the moment of truth, the *kairos* of God to serve life. It is a call to proclaim life, protect life and enhance life. Respect for life and its promotion mean all this and more in each situation of Asia. One of the important focal points is service of life in a situation of growing threats to life through forces of death operative in multiple manifestations, which the paper refers to, in a brief survey without being exhaustive. In such a situation of shadows and forces of death, the Church rooted in its faith in the Good News of Life in abundance offered in Jesus Christ becomes a lamp of hope for life lit in the midst of dark clouds of death. It is in such a situation, that the Church has to constantly get inspired by and point to, Jesus the Redeemer, forever saying: “In Him, there is plentiful redemption”! The Church confesses its faith in the God of life in relation to the contextual realities of Asia and bears witness in deeds and prophecy. This is the way the Church in Asia lives its discipleship in service of life.

The Church is called to be a faithful servant of God’s purposes for the mission of life in Asia. In a multi-cultural and pluri-religious context of the continent, it is a tremendous challenge for the Church to live its discipleship in witness and service of life in dialogue and solidarity with all those who are committed to the care and promotion of life. Though it is a daunting task, the Church with the strength of Christ (who was unjustly put to death but who gloriously rose to life), who is with us to the end of time, will not cease to proclaim the Gospel of Life that the Lord of Life offers in abundance for all peoples.

Being Church in Asia today means continuation of the mission of love and service for the people in Asia - “they may have life and have it abundantly”. In line with the theme of the 8<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly of the FABC, the service consists in the promotion of “a culture of an integral life”. We affirm that Church in Asia lives its discipleship as witness and service of life.

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