



ASEAN IIDC Plenary Session 5

Transforming ASEAN into an epicentrum of peace, tolerance, and harmony through shared civilizational values

“We share a civilization dating back 2,600 years, and stand on a common ground of shared values, ancient language, culture, and spirituality. This makes us who we really are as ASEAN.”

*~ Venerable Phra Shakyavongvisuddhi (Anil Sakya)
Director, Peandin Dhamma Foundation*

JAKARTA, Indonesia, 7 August 2023 — The fifth plenary session of the ASEAN Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Conference discussed the potential for religious leaders to revitalize Southeast Asia’s shared civilizational heritage in order to resolve conflict and foster peace, tolerance, and harmony throughout the region.

Moderated by Dr. Muhammad Najib Azca — Deputy General Secretary of the Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board and a senior lecturer in the Sociology Department of Gadjah Mada University, Indonesia’s premier seat of higher learning — the plenary convened religious leaders with decades of experience in conflict resolution and a deep appreciation for the powerful socio-political reality of ASEAN shared civilizational values.

The session featured contributions by Most Venerable Phra Dr. Anil Sakya, an advisor on religious affairs to the Thai royal family and Ecclesiastical Governor of Thailand’s Region 6; His Eminence Cardinal Orlando Beltran Quevedo, OMI, Archbishop Emeritus of Cotabato (the Philippines); and Reverend Jacky Manuputty, General Secretary of Indonesia’s Communion of Protestant Churches (PGI).

Selected excerpts of the panel discussion, edited for publication, may be read below.

Most Venerable Phra Dr. Anil Sakya delivered the panel’s opening address, titled [“Strengthening ASEAN as an epicentrum of peace, tolerance, and harmony: Building on the vision and legacy of Ashoka,”](#) during which he said:

This is indeed a good time for us as ASEAN to come together and try to excavate our history and understand our common shared moral and spiritual values — particularly those that foster peace, tolerance, and harmony. This is not about identifying how we are different, but rather discovering what we share. We share a civilization dating back 2,600 years, and stand on a common ground of shared values, ancient language, culture, and spirituality. This makes us who we really are as ASEAN.

If we delve into our history, two widely used Sanskrit terms exactly designate the modern nations of ASEAN — *Suvarnabhumi* (“Golden Mainland”) and *Suvarnadipa* (“Golden Archipelago”). The territory of ASEAN Member States was thus called “The Golden Mainland (mainland Southeast Asia) and the Golden Archipelago (Nusantara).”

The very concept of unity in diversity is a legacy bequeathed to us by our ancestors, especially the mighty Emperor Ashoka: one of the first kings mentioned in the written history of Asia, and generally viewed as epitomizing a civilized state. Ashoka became the very model of a *Dharmaraja* (“righteous king”), beloved by gods and men. Many kings and leaders in Asia look to Ashoka as the model for a perfect ruler or head of state, for Ashoka’s vision and legacy epitomize the humanitarian ideal of the common welfare: the creation of a compassionate society administered to achieve the material and spiritual wellbeing of all of its members....

Throughout history, religious conflicts have torn apart countless peoples and nations. Ashoka offered an alternative vision that is profound, modern, and greatly worth reflecting upon.... Even today, Ashoka’s legacy continues to inspire discussions about religious harmony and peaceful coexistence, reminding us of the need to respect diversity and promote mutual understanding among different religious communities.

Let us follow the trail blazed for us by Ashoka and strengthen ASEAN as an epicentrum of peace, tolerance, and harmony based upon respect for our shared moral and spiritual values.

Let us teach Ashoka’s vision and legacy to future generations, so that we can be proud of our common heritage and show the world how we may live in physical and mental prosperity.

Let us all — as citizens of ASEAN nations — look to Ashoka’s vision and legacy, so that we may rediscover and re-enliven the principle of unity within diversity.

Reverend Jacky Manuputty — General Secretary of Indonesia’s Communion of Protestant Churches (PGI) — delivered an address titled “[Strengthening religion’s role as a genuine and dynamic source of solutions, rather than problems, in ASEAN.](#)”

Across Asia — and within ASEAN in particular — religion does not exist in a vacuum, nor is it reducible to a self-conscious ideology. In fact, religion is a way of life. It is integrally woven into every aspect of our existence and social relations.

As such, interreligious dialogue serves critical real-world functions — we do not engage in it merely to enjoy diversity or practice charity, but rather to strive for justice and eliminate suffering and oppression.

I hail from the Maluku Islands, where in 1999 [a bloody religious war](#) erupted between Muslims and Christians that eventually claimed 10,000 lives and drove half a million inhabitants from their homes.

My “big picture” view of the importance of interreligious dialogue is, therefore, based upon long experience working at a grassroots level during conflict and witnessing firsthand religion’s power to help those in need.

It is my firm belief that ASEAN should continue to accelerate religion’s dynamic, action-oriented spirit across our region, to ensure that it retains its vital problem-solving role.

Successful interreligious dialogue typically relies upon identifying and leveraging the common ground that exists among different groups. This common ground is often cultural....

As mentioned by the Chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama in the previous session, cultures throughout ASEAN place a strong emphasis upon harmony. Anyone familiar with ASEAN culture and religion will know that harmony is at the center of a profoundly organic understanding and approach to reality that is shared across Southeast Asia. Harmony is not merely a pragmatic strategy for coexistence amid differences or the absence of strife, it is the sincere acceptance of diversity.... hard-coded into the mental layer of our community and can, at any time, be called upon to mobilize Indonesians in situations of calamity, tension, and conflict.

I myself have experienced the power of this cultural emphasis upon harmony. In Maluku, harmony was integral to my strategy for reconciling the divide between people from different religious groups that nevertheless shared the same traditions and cultural background....

As should now be clear, religion plays an indispensable societal function in regulating and preserving a dignified, shared living space for communities. This is not merely an ethical or theological obligation: it is a cultural imperative. Religion is one of the prime ingredients in social stability and transformation.

To be valuable on the vast scale of ASEAN, interreligious dialogue must focus on both the cultural and issue-based common ground. Moreover — in order for religious pluralism to be harnessed in a practical way — religions themselves must be reconciled with the deep cultural structures that unite ASEAN society.

During his remarks, Cardinal Orlando Beltran Quevedo spoke of the vital role played by religion and culture in fostering peace between Muslim and Christian communities on the island of Mindanao in the Southern Philippines, where a decades-long conflict left thousands dead and over half a million displaced:

The most important part of my own life as a priest and as a bishop was Action for Peace. For 40 years, the Muslim revolutionary fronts waged war with the government,

and I was asked to be an informal consultant to the government and the Muslim revolutionary fronts. Finally, the 40-year war in which hundreds of thousands were killed — civilians and troops alike — ended with a peace agreement, and the revolutionary fronts and the government called me to witness its signing....

[The goal of my action group] is to establish solidarity between diverse cultures and religious traditions, and by traditions I also mean the indigenous peoples' beliefs. To move from hostility or bias and prejudice towards mutual respect and mutual understanding and then towards mutual friendship, leads one to embrace what I would call love of one another, love of neighbor, as enjoined by the Bible.