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Revelation in the Vernacular: A Discussion with Jean-Pierre Ruiz
About His Work and the Future of the Study of Revelation and Scriptures

An Asian Response

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Let me begin by thanking the Latina/o/e and Latin American biblical interpretation unit of the Society of Biblical Literature for organizing first a panel, then this roundtable, which provided the opportunity to speak on and reflect with Dr. Jean-Pierre Ruiz's recently published book, *Revelation in the Vernacular*.¹ *Revelation in the Vernacular* is more than merely a groundbreaking and intellectually stimulating book. Without a doubt, this book is Jean-Pierre Ruiz's *magnum opus*, the crowning achievement of his lifelong biblical and theological scholarship. In particular, *Revelation in the Vernacular* challenges us to rethink how we understand revelation through interreligious and intercultural lenses by: (1) *disrupting* its classical Eurocentric underpinnings, (2) *juxtaposing* Taíno glyphs and contrasting colonial Spanish responses in Cave 18 on Isla de Mona in the Puerto Rican archipelago, as well as Latin and the vernacular Spanish of Fray Luis de León's translation of and commentary on the Song of Songs, and finally, (3) *theologizing en conjunto* with *intersecting* past and present encounters, together with Indigenous Amazonian experiences and Pope Francis's 2020 Postsynodal Apostolic Exhortation to the 2019 Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazonian Region, *Querida Amazonia*.

¹ Jean-Pierre Ruiz, *Revelation in the Vernacular* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2021).

What emerges is a *tour de force* which not only challenges and disrupts, but also re-envisions and re-imagines a theology of revelation *latinamente*, retrieving insights and experiences from early interreligious encounters between the Indigenous Taíno and Spanish colonizers, as well as privileging the vernacular and recognizing divine self-communication in *lo cotidiano*. We see this clearly in Ruiz's in-depth analysis of the various statements from the Conference of Latin American Bishops/*Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano* (CELAM) and their culmination in Pope Francis's *Querida Amazonia*, privileging Indigenous Amazonian experiences of divine revelation within their own lived experiences as resources for developing an emergent interreligious and intercultural theology of revelation for today's culturally diverse and religiously pluralistic world.

More importantly, Ruiz argues the case that "revelation is always particular, that divine self-disclosure takes place in the vernacular, even in the complex particularities of countless vernaculars."² Here, he reminds us that revelation, as divine self-communication, takes place neither outside of, nor apart from, but rather within the *encuentro* of human culture and *lo cotidiano* of lived experience. He points out that revelation, as divine self-communication, is not a static one-time event. On the contrary, revelation encompasses yet transcends a singular and defining christological event—"the Word *became* culture but that the Word continues to *become* culture, revealed in countless vernaculars."³

At the same time, *Revelation in the Vernacular* has the potential to disrupt how we understand and undertake the task of theologizing. In today's transnational and global world that is constantly being shaped by peoples from diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious

² Ruiz, *Revelation in the Vernacular*, xxvi.

³ Ruiz, *Revelation in the Vernacular*, xxxiv.

backgrounds on the move and rubbing shoulders with each other, the task of theologizing has become more difficult and complex. The realities of cultural diversity and religious pluralism arising from ongoing massive movements of peoples and the growth of global and transnational human networks across boundaries mean that it is no longer possible for anyone to assume a static worldview and homogeneous socio-cultural and religious contexts as the foundation for doing theology. The complexities of cultural diversity and religious pluralism in today's world raise the overarching question of how theological reflection can be carried out, not by excluding other cultural and religious traditions, but rather by engaging and interacting with these religious traditions as part of the socio-cultural context for theologizing. This is what Ruiz has done in *Revelation in the Vernacular*. I would accentuate this: As ongoing human migrations continually transform the cultural and religious landscapes of Europe and North America, how can the task of doing Christian theology generally, and theologizing on divine revelation in particular, be challenged, reshaped, transformed, and enriched by engaging with the cultural and religious traditions of transnational migrants to Europe and North America?

I read *Revelation in the Vernacular* on the airplane as I was flying back to the U.S. after addressing the Asian Catholic bishops at the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)'s *50 General Conference* celebrating fifty years of the founding of the FABC with the theme, "Journeying Together as Peoples of Asia."⁴ I was struck by the close parallels between the emergent interreligious and intercultural theology of revelation *latinamente* in the pages of *Revelation in the Vernacular* and key insights from various FABC statements and documents over its fifty years of history. As the Asian counterpart to Latin America's CELAM, whose statements and documents are thoroughly analyzed by Ruiz in *Revelation in the Vernacular*, the

⁴ See <https://www.fabc2020.org/>.

FABC is a transnational federation of episcopal conferences comprising fifteen Asian Catholic Bishops' Conferences located across Asia as full members: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Korea, Laos-Cambodia, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei, Myanmar, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam; together with ten individual dioceses and apostolic vicariates as associate members: Hong Kong, Kyrgyzstan, Macau, Mongolia, Nepal, Siberia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Timor-Leste.⁵

In its many statements and documents, the FABC speaks of the need to listen to the active presence and saving power of God's Spirit at work in the multitudes of Asia, so as to be able to witness the salvific message of Jesus and the presence of God's Reign amidst the diverse cultures, religions, and marginalizing life experiences across postcolonial Asia.⁶ In so doing, the FABC has laid the groundwork for an intersectional approach to doing theology in contemporary postcolonial Asia that seeks to integrate intercultural, interreligious, and liberative dimensions of theologizing in its much heralded theology of threefold dialogue with the subaltern masses of Asia, in the fullness of their diverse cultures, many religions, and experiences of poverty and marginalization.⁷

⁵ For an in-depth survey and analysis of the FABC's theologizing in its various statements and documents over its fifty-year history, see Jonathan Y. Tan, *The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC): Bearing Witness to the Gospel and the Reign of God in Asia* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2021). The various FABC statements and documents referenced here are taken from Gaudencio B. Rosales and C.G. Arévalo, eds., *For All The Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents From 1970-1991* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992).

⁶ See discussion in Tan, *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences*, 56-60.

⁷ For an analysis of the FABC's theology of threefold or triple dialogue with the subaltern Asian masses and their rich diversity and complexity plurality of cultures, religions, and experiences of poverty and marginalization, see Tan, *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences*, 76-89.

In particular, the FABC has proceeded on the basis that the Asian milieu, with its rich diversity and pluralism of religions, cultures, and philosophical worldviews, requires a distinctively Asian approach to doing theology that is sensitive to such diversity and pluralism. At the Asian Bishops' meeting with Pope Paul VI in Manila (1970), the Asian Catholic Bishops acknowledged that Asia is "a continent of ancient and diverse cultures, religions, histories and traditions, a region like Joseph's coat of many colors."⁸ Four years later, the First FABC Plenary Assembly (FABC I) that gathered in Taipei in 1974 recognized that the great religious traditions of Asia are

significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design and salvation. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. Over many centuries they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations.⁹

Building on this statement, the FABC stresses that the religious traditions of Asia are "expressions of the presence of God's Word and of the universal action of his Spirit in them,"¹⁰

⁸ *Asian Bishops' Meeting*, 7, in Rosales and Arévalo, *For All The Peoples of Asia*, 4. See also the Final Statement of Second FABC Plenary Assembly, FABC II, 7, in Rosales and Arévalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 30.

⁹ FABC I, 14, in Rosales and Arévalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 14.

¹⁰ *FABC Theological Consultation*, 43, in Rosales and Arévalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 344.

revealing the “inescapable truth that God’s Spirit is at work in all religious traditions,”¹¹ on the basis that

it has been recognized since the time of the apostolic Church, and stated clearly again by the Second Vatican Council, that the Spirit of Christ is active outside the bounds of the visible Church. God’s saving grace is not limited to members of the Church but is offered to every person. His grace may lead some to accept baptism and enter the Church, but it cannot be presumed that this must always be the case. His ways are mysterious and unfathomable, and no one can dictate the direction of His grace.¹²

Mindful of Revelation 1:4, in which John addressed the churches of Asia, and Revelation 3:22, “Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the churches [of Asia],” the Third FABC Plenary Assembly (FABC III), which met in Samphran, Thailand forty years ago in 1982, urged Asian Catholics to “listen to the Spirit at work in the many communities of believers who live and experience their own faith, who share and celebrate it in their own social, cultural and religious history,” accompanying them “in a common pilgrimage toward the ultimate goal, in relentless quest for the Absolute,” and becoming “sensitively attuned to the work of the Spirit in the resounding symphony of Asian communion.”¹³ In so doing, the FABC echoes what Ruiz asserts as the Word continuing to become culture in countless vernaculars, what CELAM speaks of as “seeds of the word” in the Latin American milieu, and what *Querida Amazonia* perceives

¹¹ Bishops’ Institute for Interreligious Affairs/BIRA IV/12, 7, in Rosales and Arévalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 326.

¹² BIRA II, 12, in Rosales and Arévalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 115. See also BIRA IV/1, 10, in Rosales and Arévalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 249.

¹³ FABC III, 8.2, in Rosales and Arévalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 57.

as an emergent intercultural and interreligious understanding of the Spirit at work in Indigenous Amazonian experiences.

Finally, the FABC recognizes that the “great religions of Asia with their respective creeds, cults and codes reveal to us diverse ways of responding to God whose Spirit is active in all peoples and cultures.”¹⁴ It is “the same spirit, who has been active in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and in the Church, who was active among all peoples before the Incarnation and is active among the nations, religions and peoples of Asia today.”¹⁵ On this basis, the FABC speaks of tapping into the movement across Asia “among peoples of various faiths to break down traditional barriers of division and hostility, and their initiative to reach out to neighbors of other faiths in a spirit of love, friendship, harmony and collaboration,” and “discerning the hand of God” in “all these aspirations, movements and initiatives.”¹⁶ The ultimate goal for the FABC’s interreligious and intercultural theology of revelation is harmony—the church as a sacrament of harmony and unity: “In an Asia marked by diversity and torn by conflicts, the Church must in a special way be a sacrament—a visible sign and instrument of unity and harmony.”¹⁷

The FABC has been quietly articulating a new way of being church, doing theology, and bearing witness to the Gospel of Jesus and the reign of God in diverse intercultural and plurireligious societies across Asia, where Christians continue to comprise only a small percentage of the population in the midst of an immense diversity and plurality of traditional

¹⁴ BIRA IV/7, 12, in Rosales and Arévalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 310.

¹⁵ BIRA IV/3, 6, in Rosales and Arévalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 259.

¹⁶ BIRA IV/11, 5, in Rosales and Arévalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 318-319.

¹⁷ FABC V, 4.2, in Rosales and Arévalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 282.

Asian cultures, philosophies, and religions. While the FABC's intercultural and interreligious theologizing is not typically on the radar of many Catholic theologians in the Americas, as the Americas become increasingly diverse and pluralistic as a result of globalization and massive transnational movements of peoples with their cultures, spiritualities, and religions, the FABC's theological pronouncements deserve to be better known beyond Asia. Without a doubt, the FABC's theological pronouncements complement the contributions of CELAM and *Querida Amazonia*: all three speak, in their own ways, of the need to listen to the active presence and saving power of God's Spirit at work, as well as to bear witness to the salvific message of Jesus and the presence of God's Reign, amidst the diverse cultures, religions, and daily lived experiences across Asia and the Americas, respectively. Both the Americas and Asia testify, in the words of Ruiz, to the Word continuing to become culture, revealed in countless vernaculars.