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**ASIAN RESEARCH CENTER FOR RELIGION AND  
SOCIAL COMMUNICATION (ARC):  
ORIGIN AND ACTIVITIES <sup>1</sup>**

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A group of Asian researchers from seven Asian countries gathered at a consultation held at the Assumption University in cooperation with St. John's University in Bangkok in 1999. There a proposal for a research center for Religion and Social Communication was endorsed.

The initiative for this consultation came from the Office of Social Communication of the FABC (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences) based in Manila. The participants' proposal was taken up by St. John's University and the center officially opened there in November 25, 1999.

In the beginning, there were some initiatives of collecting documents, starting a newsletter and a website making especially Church-related documents available. A list of addresses of researchers was initiated but without developing its full potential.

A research library originally developed by a similar initiative of the Jesuits in London was moved to the center in 2003. It still exists to this day with almost 4,000 books that were published mainly during the 1970s to 1980s. They give an overview on the subject of Religion and Social Communication of those days. Recently, new books have been added. All titles will be available soon on the ARC website.

Right from the beginning of the center, research was envisaged beyond Christianity. Soon it became clear that such studies should be a concern for all religions in the different cultures of Asia. Therefore, the research base had to be extended still under the main headings which were foreseen right from the beginning. They are:

<sup>1</sup> ARC is located at Saint John's University, Ladprao, Bangkok 10900 Thailand.



1. **Communication within Religions** which would study especially the communication means and processes within a religion or religious community.
2. **Religion, Communication and Society** which would devote itself to the inter-link between the communication of a religion and its effect and influences on human society which is thus also the subject of “social communication” as the communication of and in human society. Here also the media of society in relation to religion come in: how do they reflect and report about religion and religious life?
3. **Religion, Communication and Culture** devotes itself especially to the study of relations and inter-links between communication and culture: how does culture influence ways and means of religions or religious activities, but also how do religions in their way of communication influence culture ... and the lives of people? In a call for papers (2010), some of these themes and concerns were listed in more detail in the following questions which are, however, by far not exhaustive:

- How does Religion influence the communication of and in Asian societies?
- What are the traditional communicative expressions in and of Asian Religions?
- Is religious communication in Asian Religions changed through modern technologies (Media)? How?
- What are the different communicative means used by Religions traditionally and in modern times? How are they adjusted, when and where?
- Are the ways of sharing religious experiences and content today different from the Past and Today? With what consequences?
- How are religious convictions and messages communicated to members of the same Religion and to other people?
- Does religious communication change humans, communities and political situations? Does Religious Communication contribute to the daily lives of people? How
- How can Social Communication contribute to Interreligious

Dialogue and mutual understanding?

- Does religious communication change lives of peoples and societies? How? When?

In another proposal for a Research Agenda, the concerns for special studies were broken down into the following groups of possible research according to the means, recipients, and interrelations in communication processes:

1. Study the use of means of communication - traditional and modern – by religious groups: Programs –
  - Content
  - Presentation
  - Frequency
  - Style
  - Impact
2. Study the recipients/ audiences of religious communication:
  - Composition and size
  - Age
  - Expectations
  - Interactivity
  - Effects
  - Priorities in media/ communication means ... habits
  - Ethics and human dignity
3. Study the interrelation between:
  - Communication and culture
  - Different ways and means of communication (“multimedia”)
  - Religious practices and the role of communication in the process
  - Theology/ Philosophy and communication
  - Anthropology, religion and social communication
  - Communication dimension of interreligious dialogue

- Intercultural communication and religion

The following initiatives of the Center emerged as a permanent concern and somehow a permanent structure of activities beside the library in Bangkok.

### 1. ARC Journal

The “Religion and Social Communication, Journal of the Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication (ARC)” started in 2003 as a regular activity of the Center. The founder and that time Dean of St. John University’s Graduate School for Religion and Philosophy, Prof. Kirti Bunchua, was the first editor. He succeeded the first ARC Director, Maryknoll Fr. James Kofski, who set the first steps for the center since 1999. As a first step in those days, he had developed an extensive documentation website, which was to quite an extent Church-oriented. A newsletter also existed for a short time to support a network of researchers.

The “Journal” is published twice a year which means once every academic semester. It features original articles but also presentations from ARC Roundtables and covers a variety of fields – from philosophy, theology, culture in relation to social communication as a communication of and in human society.

The contributions from different Asian countries are in no way confined to technical means (media) but are especially concerned about culture and cultural/religious expressions. The publication, which goes mainly to the members of the ARC Research network and their institutions, also includes occasional reports and professional information as well as reviews of books which have a special relation to the field.

Now on its 10<sup>th</sup> year (2003-2012) of publication, the ARC Journal has become an important instrument for research and thinking far

beyond the center in Bangkok, and even beyond Asia.

### 2. Annual Roundtable

The Roundtable on Religion and Social Communication of the ARC at Saint John’s University in Bangkok (Thailand) has actually emerged, since 2010, as a regular academic activity of the Research Center.

Normally held under a certain theme and at Saint John’s University in Bangkok, the Roundtable is confined to a small group of researchers. The group is composed of some 25 researchers to secure proper discussion and deeper sharing. The participation is by invitation only. Participants are expected to submit and present a paper in line with the theme of the conference or/and the concerns of the Center.

The conferences try to study the field of social communication as the communication of and in human society in Asia. This refers not only to the media and technology but to all means and ways of communicating in human Culture related to Religion.

Though the conferences usually are held in Bangkok, where the center is based, they can also move to other countries if the theme of the gathering warrants and a special interest proposes such a shift. Financial considerations, however, also play a decisive role.

Thus in 2012, the ‘Roundtable’ was for the first time held outside Bangkok and moved to the “Mudra Institute of Communications” in Ahmedabad (MICA), India. With the theme “Religion and Communication in a Multi-Religious Setting: An Asian Perspective” it was mainly devoted to Research on communication in a multi-religious society, like India. Presentations came from different religions, like from Sikhism, Jainism, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism.

The Roundtable gathering is normally held in the middle of October

every year because this is semestral break in many Asian countries and thus fits more easily into the academic calendar of participants.

The conferences study Religion in Social Communication as the communication of and in human society in Asia. This refers not only to media and technology but to all means and ways of communicating in human Culture related to Religion.

Participation in one Roundtable does, however, not automatically also guarantee participation in succeeding Roundtables. All participants (past and present), however, will become part of the “ARC Researchers’ Network” and will receive free copies of the bi-annual ARC Journal “Religion and Social Communication” as well as other publications of the Center such as the upcoming ARC Book Series titled “Religion and Social Communication,” which will be published in cooperation with the publishing house of the University of Santo Tomas (UST) in Manila. Participants and Network members are also free to propose and contribute research articles for ARC Journal as well as the book series.

Aside from contributing to the meeting expenses, ARC tries to partly share in the travel expenses of its Roundtable participants.

The theme of the Roundtable for each year will be discussed at the annual gathering but will be decided on by the academic board of the ARC.

### 3. ARC Book Series

As a result of the Journal and also of the Roundtables, a book series on “Religion and Social Communication” is envisaged with at least three volumes as a first step. They will contain some of the studies of the past but will also break new ground. The series will be published in cooperation with the Graduate School of the University of Santo Tomas in Manila, the oldest university in Asia (1611), and in their publishing house (UST Publishing House). The first volumes are

expected to be released in 2013.

### 4. The Development of a Researchers’ Network

The development of a network of researchers in the field of religion and social communication was initiated already in the beginning of the Center but unfortunately, not much developed. Many of the authors of the articles published in the Journal and participants of the Roundtables are on the list which needs further development and probably also a more permanent information structure: Here latest publications, books and articles of the network members can be announced and relevant ideas, proposals for research as well as special insights and experiences in the field of Religion and Social Communication shared.

### 5. The ARC Website

A new website of the center is under construction and will be further developed to respond to the direction and needs of the center. St. John’s University (SJU) with their IT section stands for quality in the technical sense but we need more professional input. We hope to develop this in the coming months so that in 2013, a new content of the website can be presented. The plan is to also include interactive possibilities for the network members in planning and proposal for Research. A “Network Members only” section should become discussion ground and an opportunity to share ongoing studies and experiences in the field of Religion and Social Communication.