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## THE SITUATION OF CHRISTIANS IN NORTH EAST ASIA AND SOUTH EAST ASIA

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The situation of Christians in a specific country is closely connected to the way in which active and passive religious freedom is allowed. The freedom of religion in itself does not only express the degree of a guaranteed rule of law but also indicates the cultural tolerance within the country. However, another decisive factor for a religion to be acknowledged in society is the engagement of religious communities and the attitude of religious leaders. Minority religions, that separate themselves deliberately from the rest of the community or practise an aggressive conversion policy can be counterproductive and could lead to massive conflicts within society. State repressions, which as a rule reflect the missing freedom in the relevant political system, as well as suppressions by members of a majority religion, are the main reasons, why Christians are very restricted in practising their faith in the region of North East and South East Asia (NESEA) as well.<sup>1</sup>

### CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION OF "NORTH EAST- AND SOUTH EAST ASIA"

The region North East Asia comprises the states of East Asia, which belong to the Chinese culture: Taiwan, North- and South Korea and the Peoples' Republic of China. Besides Mongolia and Japan are considered to be part of this region. Vietnam, although it has been a former Chinese

1 | The country specific information in this article are based on information which were collected by Canan Atilgan (Bangkok), Thomas Knirsch (Kuala Lumpur), Peter Köppinger (Manila), Winfried Weck (Jakarta), Rabea Brauer (Phnom Penh), Colin Dürkop (Seoul), Amos Helms (Hanoi), Johannes D. Rey (Ulan Bator) as well as the authors.

protectorate (111-939 A.D.) and should culturally belong to East Asia, is considered to be a part of South East Asia due to its geographical location.

Furthermore, all states which lie east of India and south of China belong to South East Asia. While states in North East Asia, with the exception of Japan, show cultural similarities (Confucianism), South East Asia is a very heterogeneous region. Apart from their own, very different traditions, the countries in South East Asia have been strongly influenced by various colonial powers.

All countries in the region with the exception of today's Thailand had been under western colonial rule for a time. The colonial rulers brought Christianity to South East Asia, whereby the religion was spread among the local population with most different results. Islam also had an important impact on culture and society of a number of states in the region. As early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century the Islamic religion was carried across the region by Indian Moslem traders. Until today it is the majority religion in Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei. To what extent Christianity was able to establish itself always depended on how much other religions had already established themselves.

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There are many different political systems in the NESEA region: communist regimes such as the Peoples' Republic of China, Vietnam and Laos; formal democratic systems with a de facto single party government such as in Malaysia and Singapore; formal democratic systems which, however, do not fulfil all standards of a constitutional liberal democracy as in Thailand and the Philippines; and democracies, which correspond to Western standards such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. At least there is a close connection between political and religious freedom in the individual countries.

## **HISTORICAL ENCOUNTER OF CHRISTIANITY WITH ASIA**

The geographical extension as well as the social standing of Christianity in the NESEA region is based on a most diverse mission history. The first contacts between members of

different Christian denominations and the East Asian cultures took place very early. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century Christianity reached China and Mongolia via the trading routes of Central Asia. The Emperors of the Tang-Dynasty (618-907 A.D.), who were known to be tolerant towards religions, granted the Nestorians, who were the first to arrive in China, the right to spread their religion and erect churches and monasteries. Later on, Christian missionaries sometimes played an important role as advisors at Chinese imperial courts due to their knowledge as mathematicians, astronomers and scientists. A well-known example is the Italian Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), whose scripts were also read in Korea and contributed to the spreading of Christian faith.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Christianity was prohibited and the followers persecuted because of a so-called "dispute of rites" and the decision made by the Vatican, that ancestor worshipping among the Chinese converts could no longer be accepted. Also in Japan and Korea Christians were persecuted for a long time. From 1784 onwards the Christian faith in Korea was spread by local intellectuals, who had contact with this teaching in China. However,

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until 1882 the Christian faith remained officially prohibited. The Jesuit priest Franz Xaver reached Japan in 1549 and began his missionary work. To start with, the Shoguns used this new faith to break the power of Buddhist monasteries. After this was done successfully, Christians were systematically suppressed and killed for several centuries. Only with the Meiji restoration (since 1868) the Christian faith was legalised again.

Christianity spread in South East Asia with European traders and the penetration of colonial powers. As early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Catholic missionaries reached the regions of today's Philippines, Vietnam, Myanmar and Cambodia. After Spain had claimed the Philippines as colony in 1521, the Spanish occupiers started with a systematic conversion of the local population by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with the aim to contain Islam, which was also expanding there. Christianising the people was done by forced conversion. In the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Catholicism was the prevailing religion in most parts of the country, and has

remained so until today. Catholicism was first brought to Vietnam by missionaries from Portugal and Holland. During French colonial rule (1883-1954) the church organisation was extended all over the country. Compared to that the missionary efforts among the mainly Buddhist population in Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia, remained less successful.

By contrast, spreading Protestantism in North East and South East Asia (NESEA) started only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is still being promoted mainly by American missionaries of diverse denominations. After the United States of America defeated the Kingdom of Spain in the Spanish-American War (1898), many missionaries from the U.S. moved to the Philippines. Also in many other North- and South East Asian countries the Protestant faith became increasingly important from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

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The establishment of communist government systems on mainland Asia since the 1930s was devastating for Christianity. By removing any political opposition and ideologically based on atheism (and nationalism), the Communist regimes completely destroyed the organisational basis for a church life. Thus Christian faith in North Vietnam after 1950 could hardly be practised, while especially Catholicism in South Vietnam was spreading even faster being actively supported by the military government, who considered this a stronghold against communism.

After the victory of the Chinese communists under Mao Zedong, who considered Christian churches as "Instruments of Imperialism", in the 1950s all Christian missionaries (approx. 6,200) were expelled from the newly established Peoples' Republic of China and the representation of the Holy See in Peking was closed. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) suppressing all religions reached a hitherto unknown extent. The same goes for the communist North Korea as well as Cambodia during the rule of the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979).

In the Peoples' Republic of China as well as in Vietnam the situation of Christians relaxed during the reform policy and their opening to the world (since 1978 in China and since 1986 in Vietnam). While Vietnam already maintains unofficial relations to the Vatican and the prelates are selected in Vietnam within the scope of consultations between the Vietnamese authorities and the Vatican, the relationship between the Communist Party of China (KPCh) and the Holy See is still heavily affected by severe conflicts.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Christians in the South East Asian countries mainly escaped a systematic state suppression, but new conflict areas arose in the 1970s due to the expansion of Islamic movements. Today between 150 and 240 million Christians are living in NESEA according to various estimates. It is difficult to provide exact figures about the Christians in this region, as underground churches have established themselves especially in some authoritarian states, whose number of members is difficult to obtain and also the understanding of belonging to a religion differs sometimes very much from the European model. In China e.g. the official figure for Christian community members is about 26 million, according to estimates however, there could be up to 100 million Christians.

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Atheism is still widely spread in China based on a still prevailing Communist doctrine – at least officially. Christianity however, became attractive during the past few years. Most of the Chinese Christians are Protestants. Their official figure is about 20 million; it is however presumed that up to 70 million further Protestants are organised in underground churches. The reason for this is the fact that the Chinese government has granted legal status to only three representative bodies of Christian churches. The official representation of the Catholic Church, the Catholic Patriotic Organisation, and their conference of bishops are however not recognised by the Vatican. Therefore many Catholics in the Peoples' Republic do not practise their faith publicly. Officially there are only 5.6 million people who belong to the Catholic Patriotic Organisation. It is, however, presumed that a further 12 million Chinese Christians visit not officially recognised Catholic churches

and house churches. There are 50 official bishops, whereas approximately 38 bishops work as so-called underground bishops.

Communist Vietnam's population is officially also atheist, but at least 50 per cent of the Vietnamese people are considered to be Buddhists and also the Christian faith is represented with an estimated nine per cent.

Christianity only plays an outstanding role in three countries within NESEA: the Philippines, South Korea and in East Timor, which became independent from Indonesia in 2002. In the Philippines, Christians represent a majority of 90 per cent, of which over 80 per cent are Catholics. The Muslim minority representing about five per cent of the population is mainly concentrated in the region of Mindanao in the southern part of the country. In South Korea, Christianity with 27 per cent is the largest and most influential religion, followed by Buddhism with 23 per cent. Well over 98 per cent of the 1.1 million people of East Timor are Christians. 96 per cent of which are Catholics and two per cent Protestants.

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In all other South East Asian countries Christians are a minority. Muslims in Indonesia and Malaysia represent the majority of the population and there are only eight and nine per cent Christians respectively. In Malaysia about half of the Christians are Catholics and the rest belongs to different Protestant denominations. In Indonesia, with 200 million Muslim followers the worldwide largest Muslim community, about two-thirds of the 24 million Christians are Protestants and one third Catholics.

In Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar well over 90 per cent of the population are Buddhists, in Laos 65 per cent and in Vietnam at least 50 per cent. The Christian communities in these countries are relatively small. Of these Buddhist dominated countries only Vietnam has organised Christian communities, which are, however, mainly to be found around Hanoi and Ho-Chi-Minh-City (Saigon). About eight per cent of the Vietnamese are Christians, most of them Catholics.

Singapore, a multi ethnic and multi religious state, takes up a special position in South East Asia. Almost all people in Singapore are religious and religion plays an important role in their daily life, but there is no dominating religion. 18 per cent of the Singaporeans are Christians, mainly among the population of Chinese origin. 33 per cent of the people in Singapore are Buddhists, 15 per cent Muslims, 11 per cent Daoists and five per cent Hindus.

In many South East Asian countries belonging to a religion is closely connected with belonging to a certain ethnic group. Religious minorities are often strongly represented in certain regions. In Indonesia e.g. Catholics represent with about 55 per cent the majority in the province of East Nusa Tenggara and Protestants form with 58 per cent the majority in the province of Papua, even though only about 8 per cent of the Indonesians are confessing to Christian faith. In Malaysia Christians are to be found especially among certain ethnic groups of the indigenous people. Besides, many Christians in Malaysia are of Chinese origin. As the ethnic Malay people, which represent the majority in Malaysia, are Muslims from birth according to their Constitution, and converting to Christianity is extremely difficult, there are only few Christians to be found.

In Myanmar Christianity is mainly represented amongst the tribes of "Chin" and "Karen", in Vietnam a large part of the Protestants belong to ethnic minorities. This is also one of the reasons why Christians are persecuted in some countries. In Myanmar persecution has no religious motives but is directed generally against Christian tribes, who are seen as a threat to the monopoly on authority of the military government and national unity. Christian confessions in Laos follow the ethnic line. Most of the Catholics are ethnic Vietnamese and the Lao Protestants only belong to certain ethnic groups as a rule.

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### **THE LEGAL POSITION OF CHRISTIANS**

Most constitutions of the NESEA countries, including the authoritarian and communist countries, contain a statement about the status of religions and religious activities. The right of active and passive religious freedom is

predominantly granted. Provisos, however that (could) massively restrict the previously granted rights, are a problem under the constitutional law. Constitutions in authoritarian states contain as a rule the statement that religious activities must not be contrary to the public interest, the national security or cultural traditions. Based on this ambiguous statement there is a high degree of legal uncertainty. Especially on the level of regional administrations e.g. in Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam this restriction is also used to (deliberately) restrict the rights of Christian and other religious minorities. The missing rule of law and corruption is an equally serious problem.

**Constitutions in authoritarian states contain as a rule the statement that religious activities must not be contrary to the public interest, the national security or cultural traditions. This can be used to restrict the Christian rights.**

In most of the NESEA countries the conversion to the Christian faith is officially permitted, as well as marriage between Christians and followers of other religions. But reality is often different: For Muslims in Malaysia, the civil law is applied as well as the Sharia. For Muslims this means that sometimes Sharia courts decide about religious conversions or marriages to followers of other denominations and most of the time these are rejected. For non-Muslims in Malaysia however there are no restrictions for conversions to Christian faith or interreligious marriages. Furthermore, Muslim judges refer to the Sharia as a legal source when passing judgement in civil suits, which could possibly lead to discrimination in jurisdiction of Christians and other religious minorities. In Singapore free practice of religion is comprehensively protected by law, at the same time a lot of emphasis is put on the harmony between the religions in a multi religious state. In recognition of religious diversity there is a separate marriage law for Muslims, which rules that the non-Muslim partner has to convert to Islam in order to submit the marriage.

Also in Indonesia, known for its tolerant attitude, conversions to Christianity as well as interreligious marriages are very restricted. Although interreligious marriages are not legally prohibited, only a few religious leaders are prepared to perform interreligious ceremonies. As this is however the prerequisite for a marriage registration by civil law, the conversion of the partner or a marriage abroad have become the rule more or less. Also in the Philippines

tolerance ends with marriage. The Catholic Church is vehemently against mixed marriages, and Muslims can only marry non-Muslims, if they convert to Islam before the marriage.

Active and passive religious freedom is also manifested in the constitutions of the communist and authoritarian states in NESEA, practising faith however is subject to strong restrictions, which renders an organised community life often difficult. Control of Christian communities is maintained by granting or refusing state registration. This of course subsequently leads to a division into "legal" activities protected by the state and "illegal" activities, which must happen mostly underground. In Myanmar e.g. applications for constructing or renovating churches are often rejected, making it difficult for the members to practise their faith together. Furthermore, the churches and other religious institutions are not allowed to be engaged in any political activities (see paragraph Christianity and Politics), including the education sector.

Especially cross-border links of religious groups is critically viewed, as it is interpreted as a danger to national independence and considered as ideological influence. The People's Republic of China forbids altogether that any religious communities in the country express their devotion to religious leaders abroad such as the Pope and the Dalai Lama. This is the reason why many Catholics refuse to join the Catholic Patriotic Association and instead become active underground. Activities of

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these Catholics as well as other underground and "house churches" can be prosecuted. Furthermore, registered religious communities are allowed to produce and print religious material for internal use, however public distribution is largely prohibited. Religious texts not authorised by the government can be confiscated, and not registered printing shops can be closed. In Laos and Myanmar printing and distribution of religious material are subject to severe restrictions. Censoring also refers to the new media.

Also in Singapore, which has a high degree of religious freedom, all religious groups, communities and churches must be registered by the government. Based on this regulation the Singapore government prohibited Jehovah Witnesses and the Unification Church, as their activities allegedly violate public order and the general public interest.

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In most of the NESEA states, religious freedom includes the right not to commit to any religion. The only exception is Indonesia, as the constitution of the country defines the belief in the one true God as a basis of the state. Freedom of Religion is rather understood as an obligation to belong to one of the six official religions.

### **RELIGIOUS INVOLVEMENT IN DAILY LIFE**

Most East Asian countries have been shaped by long standing religious traditions, which are deeply rooted in daily life and in the people's self-conception. Apart from the political frame, modernising processes within the society are also responsible partly for a decline, partly for a change in the appearance and social practise of religion. This also and especially applies to Christianity.

This becomes most obvious in the Philippines, where religion is an integral part of daily life and penetrates all areas of society. The mutual Christian tradition and Christian rites are the basis for cooperation in the community and represent the moral reason of existence. Social connections outside the family are usually grounded on a common membership in Christian communities. The importance of religion becomes obvious, considering that 68 per cent of the population take part in a Catholic service every week. The churches run a number of educational institutions, including several universities.

Also in Korea an important part of Christian life happens within communities, e.g. many Koreans find a job or their partner through mediation of community members. Korean Christians engage themselves excellently within the community, whereas an exchange with the rest of society remains very restricted (see paragraph on Christianity and

Politics). Many Koreans, however, work abroad as missionaries. According to an estimate, there are about 20,000 Korean missionaries, which means that after the U.S. Korea has the second highest number of missionaries worldwide.

Christian communities in Buddhist dominated states in South East Asia show a lot of willingness to engage in social projects in order to contribute to general public life. In Mongolia, with only a very small number of Christians, their strong social engagement has contributed to a positive image of Christianity.

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In Japan, despite a relatively small Christian population, the churches are important with regard to the educational sector. About a third of all schools and universities are maintained by Christian churches. Still, the activities of Evangelical and Catholic institutions in the middle and higher education, as well as their social care are not seen as religious activities by society. Daily life is still dominated by the traditional religions such as Shintoism and Buddhism.

As already mentioned, in authoritarian states, the social involvement of religious communities is very restricted, as the relevant governments consider strong religious communities as a threat to their own power monopoly and state unity and are afraid of religion becoming too involved in politics. In China, e.g. Christian communities are not allowed to run educational institutes. As public engagement of religious communities is viewed with displeasure, Christian community life takes mostly place behind closed doors.

Nonetheless, China's Christians engage themselves very strongly by giving their support during catastrophes, e.g. after the earthquake in the Sichuan province in 2008, by making donations and doing voluntary work. Furthermore religions and here especially the Christian faith in the People's Republic of China contribute in an important way by offering answers to spiritual needs in a society focussed on materialism and to find inner peace. Christian festivities, above all certainly Christmas, are becoming increasingly popular. This is, however, no indication of a growing interest in Christian beliefs, but rather a sign of globalised consumer behaviour.

## CHRISTIANITY AND POLITICS

While during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe the political Catholicism and Protestantism essentially influenced the constitution and party systems, a comparable development did not take place in Asia. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century Christianity only marginally influenced the political development in NESEA. This was partly due to the fact that the Confucianism-influenced countries could develop neither a state religion, nor a legally secured autonomous sphere for religious communities. Another aggravating factor were their close involvement with the colonial aspirations of European powers.

Parallel to establishing communist and other authoritarian political systems in the 1930s, a systematic persecution of Christians took place. In terms of figures and the degree of organisation, Christianity on mainland Asia had reached rock bottom in the 1970s. Since then the number of believers and their organisation is continuously on the rise. During the transition phase of authoritarian regimes in South Korea and Taiwan towards democracy, individual church representatives have played an important mediational role.

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In East Timor, Christianity had an extremely political importance in the resistance struggle against Indonesia. During this struggle for freedom the Catholic Church became the unifying mediator for the twelve large tribes against the mainly Muslim Indonesians. This is the reason why the number of followers of the Catholic faith has increased so much over the past decades. In 1975 only about 30 per cent of the people in East Timor were Christians. By now it is over 98 per cent. The Catholic Church also has the best developed organisational structure, while parties and other civil society organisations are still lagging behind.

Also in the Philippines the Catholic Church had and still has an essential influence on political processes. It played a major role e.g. during the overthrow of Dictator Ferdinand E. Marcos in 1986. At the time the Bishop of Manila called for a protest march. Seven million Philipinos took part and forced Marcos to step down. In 2001 it was again a

cardinal, who called for protests against the wide spread corruption under the government of President Joseph Estrada. After long lasting demonstrations Estrada, too, decided to resign.

In other countries of NESEA, however, in present times the political influence of Christianity remains rather low. As already mentioned, opportunities for Christians in the region depend mainly on the degree of democracy and rule of law practised in the relevant country. These possibilities are however negatively influenced by the religious understanding of the state in Muslim dominated countries of South East Asia (Malaysia, Indonesia).

At present only about 29 per cent of the people in NESEA live in democratic systems and there are only some countries where a pluralistic (functioning) party system has established itself. These party systems also show structural weaknesses, which makes it almost impossible to develop and implement a Christian founded party programme or at least establish references to Christian values and society structures. While the European party system is essentially influenced by Christian (people's) parties, politically organised Catholicism and Protestantism only play a marginal role in the political arena of NESEA. Also in the Muslim orientated countries of South East Asia (Malaysia and Indonesia) there are no independent Christian parties. Only in the Catholic orientated Philippines an attempt has been undertaken to establish an interreligious party.

**While the European party system is essentially influenced by Christian parties, politically organised Catholicism and Protestantism only play a marginal role in the political arena of NESEA.**

What about the influence of Christianity, the churches beyond the political party organisations? The democratic deficit in most of the Asian countries becomes also apparent in a weak civil society – an area, where in Western countries religious communities take up an important role. Even if freedom of association has been expressively guaranteed in most of the constitutions, building organisations is often massively restricted in practise. Most Christian communities and religiously motivated social initiatives are affected, but also trade unions.

There are hardly any influential newspapers or other press bodies in the media sector on a regional or even national level which expressively have a Christian background. Only in the Philippines religion plays an essential role in the media. There, the Roman-Catholic Church has established the Catholic Media Network, holding sermons and discussing Christian subjects. Apart from this there are further Catholic TV channels such as EWTN and Familyland.

The influence of churches and Christian orientated organisations on shaping public opinion and political decision makers is remarkably weaker than in other regions of the world. This is also due to the weak internal Church organisation. State bodies interfere sometimes very massively with the inner order and autonomy of religious communities. As already mentioned the communist regimes in China and Vietnam have created national church representatives, which are under state surveillance and which massively restrict the inner autonomy (e.g. selecting priests and bishops). Thus permanent conflicts especially with the Catholic Church are pre-programmed, as this governmental claim collides with the universal understanding of one holy church ("una sancta ecclesia") and the submission to the Vatican. Although the Catholic Church shows a higher degree of organisation on the national level based on its uniform structure, smaller Protestant denominations have a considerable political and economic influence. However, their high fragmentation prevents them from implementing their interests in a stronger way.

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In the established Asian democracies, churches regularly take position to (socio) political issues; mostly outstanding individual personalities amongst the bishops but also individual priests. The focus is mainly on respecting human rights and also the demand for social justice.

## **INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE**

Especially in South East Asia members of the most diverse religions live closely together. In the past this resulted in a series of interreligious but also inner Christian conflicts, mixed with ethnical and social questions. Very early, Christian Churches have recognised the necessity to hold

interreligious dialogues and tried to create relevant platforms for a better mutual understanding and a peaceful coexistence of members from different beliefs.

**The reasons for interreligious dialogues as well as their aims vary from country to country and are most diverse and complex.**

Most of the East Asian states have a certain degree of dialogue between the Christian Churches and denominations as well as other religions, which is however institutionalised in varying degrees. Nevertheless the reasons for interreligious dialogues as well as their aims vary from country to country and are most diverse and complex. In Malaysia, the cooperation between representatives of the Protestant and Catholic communities in the scope of a Christian Federation Malaysia (CFM) is highly developed, because the Christian communities, based on their discrimination within the society are of the opinion that they have to stick together. Also the intensive dialogue with other non-Muslim religions can be attributed to the efforts of counteracting against being suppressed by a Muslim majority. A committee for a religious understanding and harmony was established in Malaysia. The reason for the initiative, which was set up by the ruling prime minister, is to solve conflicts between the Islamic majority and minority religions. However, as the representatives of the Muslim group consider themselves as part of the government bureaucracy and frequently express fundamentalist positions, success so far has been very limited.

Due to conflicts between Muslims and the religious minorities, dialogues in Indonesia are also necessary. This has been supported in Indonesia by the state for quite some time and is well established. During the Suharto-Regime (1967-1998) there was a state programme for spreading tolerance among the religions. The new democracy continued the programme. However, there has so far not been much success. There are some moderate Muslim organisations in Indonesia, who promote the inter-religious dialogue together with engaged representatives of churches. Within this scope there are training seminars e.g., where vicars from the 86 church synods and also Muslim scholars take part together. The causes of Islamic fundamentalism and what sort of possibilities there are to contain it are explained from a Muslim point of view within this framework.

Also in the Philippines: Hostilities between Muslims, who traditionally live in the Southern region of Mindanao, and the Christians, who immigrated there over the past 60 years, require an initiative for a better understanding between the religions. The Interfaith Group, a non-governmental organisation, consisting of Catholic, Protestant and Muslim representatives, have been promoting the peace process on Mindanao for years. There is also an active mutual conference of Catholic bishops and Islamic Ulama in Mindanao, who meet regularly to discuss questions with regard to peace problems, intercultural solidarity and peaceful coexistence. The process is supported by the state. In 2007 the government decided to create a mechanism to promote the "Interfaith Initiatives" by establishing the "National Committee on Interfaith Cooperation" (NCIC).

In Singapore, where members of different religions live closely together, a dialogue between the denominations is intensely promoted to guarantee a harmonious coexistence. There is a government programme called "Community Engagement Programme" which is aimed at bringing together the diverse religious groups and strengthen mutual understanding. One main focus is the cooperation in case of a terror attack, for which seminars and workshops are prepared. Additionally, there is the "Interreligious Organisation Singapore", uniting all religions represented in Singapore. This organisation also works for more understanding and cooperation between the religious groups and offers e.g. joint mixed-religious ceremonies, feasts, prayers and seminars.

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The democratic countries Japan and Korea do not use the possibility for interreligious dialogue very much and it is also hardly supported by the state. In Japan some Christian and Buddhist communities meet in events for getting to know each other or for mutual prayers. This type of dialogue is not really institutionalised. Japanese organisations support however the interreligious dialogue in other states in the scope of "Religions for Peace", an international non-governmental organisation, which, since 1961, has actively performed work for peace by promoting interreligious dialogues. The Japanese committee within the organisation took part financially e.g. in setting up

the “Cambodian Interreligious Council” (CIC) founded in Cambodia in 2002. In Korea above all Catholics as well as progressive Protestant communities are getting involved in the exchange with Buddhists. There is, however, a large number of conservative Christians, who completely reject close contact with Buddhist communities.

Some states in East Asia do not yet have an institutionalised dialogue between the religions. These include the communist governed states of Vietnam, the Peoples’ Republic of China, Laos and Myanmar. The main reason is, that the Christian communities e.g. in Laos and Myanmar are very small and furthermore such a dialogue is not desired in countries with an autocratic government. In China at least there are first considerations to build up a dialogue between Christians and Muslims, but as there are currently no religiously motivated conflicts, no immediate action is required.

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On a supranational level, efforts are being made to reinforce the interreligious dialogue in NESEA. Apart from the “Organisation Religions for Peace”, the United Nations are also especially engaged in creating harmony between the members of different denominations. An example for this is the interreligious harmony week in Malaysia, which took place in February 2011, financed by the international community, which could motivate the government to increase its efforts in this area.

With regard to the region NESEA one cannot say at present that Christians are systematically persecuted by the states – in the sense that Christians become victims of state suppression because of their faith. However, repressions against Christians are social practise in many societies within the region. One should nonetheless be careful to cast simple judgement on the actual causes of the conflicts.