

Catholics and Other Religions Bridging the Gap between Dialogue and Theology

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The issue at hand in this essay¹ became crystal clear to me at a dinner table in San Cristóbal, Chiapas in November, 1998. I was there as one of the trustees for the International Interreligious Peace Council. This is a group of leaders representing faith communities from around the world who come together to promote peace interreligiously. They visit areas of the world where there is conflict or violence in order to identify and foster a nonviolent solution to the discord. The Bishop of San Cristóbal, Don Samuel Ruiz Garcia, is a member of the Peace Council, along with the Dalai Lama, Bishop Tutu, Maha Ghosananda (Supreme Patriarch of Cambodian Buddhism), Joan Chittister, OSB and ten others. We had spent just about a week in the Chiapas area trying to urge a dialogue towards peace with justice between the indigenous communities and the Mexican government. This was the last day, our final dinner together. Father Gonzalo Ituarte, O.P., Don Samuel's assistant and also on the Board of Trustees of the Peace Council, was sitting opposite me. In a moment of concluding reflection, looking down to the other end of the table where Maha Ghosananda was sitting quietly, with his usual gentle, peaceful smile, Gonzalo said to me: "You know, after these three years of knowing Maha and coming to feel his deep holiness, peace, and persistent commitment to justice, I could never, never try, or even think of trying, to convert him to Christianity. That would make no sense. It would be wrong. Knowing him, working with him, I am convinced that he should remain what he is, a holy Buddhist." And then

1. The original form of this essay was presented as the inaugural Michael G. Lawler Theology Lecture, Creighton University, March 25, 1999.

Gonzalo stopped, took another sip of the tequila we were sharing, and added: "I'm certain of what I just said. And yet, it contradicts what I'm supposed to believe as a Christian."

That is what I want to deal with in the following reflections: the tension, or the contradiction, between what Father Gonzalo discovered through his dialogue with Maha Ghosananda (and others of the Peace Council) and what he had learned in his catechism and theology classes. On the one hand, his practice of interreligious dialogue told him that Maha Ghosananda was spiritually okay the way he was; on the other, the theology he had learned in the seminary assured him that Maha was saved through Jesus and could find his true religious fulfillment only in the Christian Church. This is what I mean by the subtitle of this essay: there's a gap (to put it mildly) for many Catholics between their practice of dialogue and their understanding of theology. And as Gonzalo uncomfortably sensed, the gap needs to be bridged.

It is the same kind of gap, calling for the same kind of bridging, that can exist between what in Catholic theology has traditionally been called the *lex orandi* (the rule or way of praying) and the *lex credendi* (the rule or way of believing). From the early centuries of the Church's life, pastors and theologians have recognized and fostered a relationship of mutual nourishment and support between the community's way of praying (spirituality) and its way of believing (theology). If there was stress and strain between the two – for instance between what the community was experiencing in its liturgy and what the bishops or theologians were saying in their teaching – something had to be done. It was a bugle call to theologians and bishops to roll up their sleeves and address the problem. That might mean clarifying, expanding, or correcting what they were teaching; or it might mean redirecting liturgical excesses. Whatever the solution, a gap between the *lex orandi* and the *lex credendi* signaled a problem that needed a solution.

What we have in the Catholic Church today, I suggest, is a real, often painful, but frequently ignored tension between the *lex credendi* and what we might call the *lex dialogandi*. That's what Fr. Gonzalo was feeling between what he felt about Maha Ghosananda and what he read in his theology textbooks. The practice of dialogue with other religions, as it is fostered and lived in the Catholic Church today, is in tension with the theology of other religions as formulated in official magisterial statements and by many Catholic theologians. In other words, our Catholic community has a problem that needs fixing. In what follows, I will concentrate on describing and analyzing the problem, for I sense that, for whatever reasons, many in our Roman Catholic community

(and in other Christian churches as well) do not see, or do not want to see, this problem. So I will conclude with some suggestions on where we can find solutions that stretch our Catholic tradition, without breaking it.

Interreligious Dialogue: Essential to What it Means to be Catholic

As we enter the new millennium and look back over our shoulder, we can note a prominent and promising milestone in the long journey of the Catholic Church through the centuries. During the second half of this past century, especially since the watershed of the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church has come to understand and define itself *as a religious community in dialogue with other religious communities*. Really, it is not just a milestone, it is a whole new highway! I am old enough to remember a time when the Catholic Church would not even recognize the validity of other Christian churches, much less allow Catholics to dialogue with them.² Taking their cues from theologians and from movements already stirring amid the grassroots of the Church, the Bishops of Vatican II turned all that around. What they had to say about other Christian churches might be seen as an effort to catch up with a Christian ecumenical movement that had been launched much earlier, especially through the World Council of Churches. But what the Bishops had to say about the wider ecumenism with other religions was a pioneering breakthrough that many Protestant churches, staggered by surprise at such Roman revolution, are still trying to catch up with.³ The tidal wave of change regarding “the Church’s attitude toward Non-Christian Religions”⁴ that Vatican II let loose has continued to move forward. I suggest that we can note three phases in the Church’s growth into a dialogical community.

1) Though the Catholic Church in recent years had been more generous than other denominations in affirming that “saving grace” can operate outside the precincts of Christianity, never throughout most of its history did it allow that grace to actually operate in and through other religions.⁵ The *modus operandi* of the saving Spirit, evidently, was

2. See Pius XII’s *Humani Generis* and *Mystici Corporis*, in *The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church in English Translation*, ed. John F. Clarkson et al. (St. Louis: Herder, 1955) 121 and 108-109.

3. Kenneth Cracknell, “Ambivalent Theology and Ambivalent Policy: The World Council of Churches and the Interfaith Dialogue 1938-1999,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 9 (1999) 87-111.

4. The English title of *Nostra Aetate*.

5. See Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985) 123-124.

one-on-one and disembodied. Until Vatican II. For the first time in the history of Christianity, as far as I know, there was a formal, official affirmation of the values of other religions – their “profound religious sense,” “their spiritual and moral goods,” and “their rays of Truth.”⁶ The statement even spells out, in some detail, just where these truth-rays can be found in Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and of course, Judaism. But the Bishops held back: they did not expressly state that these other religious paths could be “ways of salvation,” vehicles of grace, genuine conduits of the Spirit. To proclaim unambiguously that the religions are means not only of revelation but also of salvation would have been going too far.⁷

2) But that was soon to change as well. In 1991, what Vatican II only hinted at, the Vatican Commission on Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples spelled out lucidly in their joint statement *Dialogue and Proclamation* (henceforth: DP). Here our Vatican guides expressly recognized “the active presence of God through His Word” and the “universal presence of the Spirit” not only in non-Christian individuals but also in their religions. Therefore it is “in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions ... that the members of other religions correspond positively to God’s invitation and receive salvation.” Even more unambiguously, the document concludes that the religions of the world play “a providential role in the divine economy of salvation.”⁸ As if this were not clear enough, the International Theological Commission in 1996, recognizing a “saving function” with other religions, affirmed that they can “a means (*mezzo*) which helps for the salvation of their adherents.”⁹ – We’ve come a long way from “Outside the Church no salvation”!

3) Paralleling this affirmation of the value of other religious communities has been a repeated call to take these values seriously in genuine *dialogue* with them. Already in Vatican II’s *Nostra Aetate*, for the first time in the Church’s two-millennia-long life, Catholics heard themselves being called “prudently and lovingly” to dialogue and collaborate with followers of other ways.¹⁰ This call to dialogue became stronger and more focused over the years, especially through

6. *Nostra Aetate* 2.

7. A number of Catholic theologians, including myself, argued that implicitly the Council was recognizing the religions as channels of saving grace. See Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 123; Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997) 165-170.

8. DP 29 and 17.

9. International Theological Commission 1997, 84, 87.

10. *Nostra Aetate*, 2.

the publications and projects of the Vatican's "Secretariate for Non-Christian Religions" (which tellingly changed its name in 1989 to the "Commission for Interreligious Dialogue"). But in 1991, Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (henceforth: RM), together with the two Vatican bodies for dialogue and evangelization, took the theological giant step forward and declared that for the Church to carry out its "mission" it must not only *proclaim* the Good News about Jesus, it must also *dialogue* with the Good News that God may be providing through other religions! Proclamation *and* dialogue are now affirmed as defining characteristics of the Church's life in the world. "There can be no question of choosing one and ignoring or rejecting the other ... Both are legitimate and necessary. They are intimately related, but not interchangeable."¹¹ So, for Catholic missionaries to be good missionaries, they must not only talk but also listen; they must not only teach others but also learn from others. To do one without the other is to limp as a good Catholic. Again, this milestone has become a road-sign putting us on a new highway!

The Meaning of Dialogue

This new highway becomes all the more exciting when we look more carefully as just what is meant by *dialogue* as a defining characteristic of Catholicism. Both the Pope and the Congregations recognize that dialogue is not just casual conversation or a subtle means to soften up the audience for conversion. In the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* and especially in the statement *Dialogue and Proclamation*, Catholics are called to a form of dialogue with other believers that just a few generations ago might have been inconceivable, if not illicit. They are told that:

- Dialogue is "a method and means of mutual knowledge and *enrichment*."¹² Notice, the Pope says *mutual* enrichment. Both sides have something to gain.
- In the dialogue, both sides should be ready to be shaken up – to be "questioned," to be "purified," to be thoroughly "challenged." This is not just chit-chat or casual comparing.¹³

11. DP 6 and 77, also 2. See RM 55. Actually, the first Vatican recognition that dialogue is an essential part of the Church's mission came in the 1984 statement of the Vatican Secretariate for Non-Christian Religions, *The Attitude of the Church toward Followers of Other Religions*. See section 13.

12. RM 55; see also DP 9.

13. DP 32, 49; RM 56.

- Having been challenged and questioned, Catholics involved in dialogue with others should also be prepared to be *changed*, and ready “to allow oneself to be *transformed* by the encounter.”¹⁴
- The document *Dialogue and Proclamation* goes an amazing step further: the change or transformation can actually lead to *conversion*. Catholics must be ready for that. But what kind of a conversion? Yes, “a deeper conversion of all toward God.” But even more: “In the process of conversion, the decision may be made to leave one’s previous spiritual or religious situation in order to direct oneself toward another.”¹⁵ They’re talking here not only about Buddhists becoming Christians – but Christians becoming Buddhists!

In the kind of dialogue called for in these official Vatican exhortations, Catholics must *proclaim boldly*. That’s nothing really new. What is new is the equally clear call to *listen boldly*. Real dialogue will not take place, in other words, unless both sides are ready, at least theoretically, to learn something really new, something that might demand a total turning around of one’s life. This is hearty wine. How many Catholics are ready to drink it?

A Grassroots Dialogical Community

But so far, I have been describing the growth of the Church into a dialogical community from the top down – from official, magisterial statements and admonitions. This growth toward dialogue has also been taking place, often more vigorously and sometimes antecedently, amid the grassroots of the Church. I think we can say that the average, so-called “practicing” Catholic of today has a very different attitude toward members of other religions than the average pre-Vatican II Catholic did. Most Catholics today have a sense, if not a focused belief, that God is bigger than the Church and is working in and through other religions; and that therefore, we need to have good relations with these religions, relations in which we learn from and cooperate with them. And so we find within parish adult education programs and in undergraduate classrooms a vigorous, if not prevalent, interest in learning about other religions. This is more than curiosity; these Catholics want to learn *about* so they can learn *from*. This is particularly the case when they explore Asian religions and the mystical traditions of Islam and Native American religions. They feel the need to dialogue. That need is fostered, nurtured, guided by the many dialogue programs that are promoted in

14. DP 47.

15. DP 41.

parishes, especially urban parishes, and by the ecumenical officers for interreligious affairs who are on the payroll of many, if not most, dioceses in North America and western Europe.

In the churches of Asia the dialogical face of the Catholic community is even more evident and bright. In fact, as I have learned during my visits and stays in Asian countries, many Catholic communities of Asia have not *become* dialogical; they grew up that way! For Catholics in India, Sri Lanka, Japan, Indonesia – all members of a minority religion – it is a given fact that most of their friends and neighbors are very religious – but are so, very differently than they are. This is just the way things are, and have always been. And in living within this multi-religious reality, many Asian Catholics have found that for the most part, it is not only a manageable reality but an enriching one.¹⁶ The present interreligious or “communal” tensions and violence in India and Indonesia are not, my Jesuit friends in Delhi and Colombo tell me, typical of the relations Catholics have had through the centuries with their Hindu or Muslim neighbors.¹⁷ For the most part, the multiple religious communities have been to each other what people generally are – neighbors who respect each other, support each other, and often celebrate their religious festivals with each other.

So we can understand why over the past decades the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) has been one of the clearest and strongest voices for the dialogical character of the Catholic Church – even before the Vatican recognition of dialogue as an essential part of the Church’s mission.¹⁸ In fact, in the recent Synod of Asian Bishops in April and May of 1998, the bishops had to remind the Vatican experts who had prepared the *lineamenta* for the Synod that to cut off possibilities of dialogue with the religions of Asia is to cut off much of the air the Asian Catholic Church breathes. The Japanese bishops admonished

16. For expressions of this popular or grassroots affirmation of dialogue, see the statements of the two Formation Institutes for Interreligious Dialogue (FIRA I/1998 and FIRA II/1999) available through the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs in Bangkok (fabceia@loxinfo.co.th). See also the popular publication *Partners: For Catholics in Asia and their Partners in Dialogue*, also available through the FABC Bangkok office.

17. Such tensions and violence between religions are rooted and fed primarily by economic and political forces. Religion becomes a tool in the hands of politicians in order to amass power or divert from economic injustice. See: T. K. John, “Today’s India and Its Religions,” *Vidyajyoti* 60 (1996) 12-30. L. Lobo, “Communalism and Christian Response in India,” *Vidyajyoti* 59 (1995) 365-373.

18. An excellent overview of FABC perspectives on dialogue is found in Sebastian Painadath, S.J., “Theological Perspectives of FABC on Interreligious Dialogue,” *Jeevadbara* 27 (1997) 272-288.

the Vatican that in its stress on “proclamation,” “... not enough attention is given to the necessity of dialogue.”¹⁹ The bishops of Sri Lanka added that in Asia, “there is the *necessity* of a missionary spirituality of dialogue.”²⁰ The Indonesians went even further: “... as for the FABC, so for us too, interreligious dialogue is the primary mode of evangelization.”²¹ The Indian Bishops agreed: “Dialogue is not merely one ecclesial activity among many. It is a constituent dimension of every authentic local church ... After Vatican II, to be church means being a faith community-in-dialogue.”²² In this regard, as in so many others, Asian Catholics are helping their brothers and sisters in North America and Europe to understand what it means to be Church in a religiously plural world.

The Gap between Dialogue and Theology

So far we have been describing what I’m calling the *lex dialogandi* that has come alive within the Catholic Church – the need, the value, the fruits of dialogue with other religious communities. It is what Father Gonzalo discovered in his peace-making dialogue with Maha Ghosananda. But now we come to Gonzalo’s “but”: the clash he felt between the *lex dialogandi* and the *lex credendi* – between what he discovered in dialogue and what he affirmed, or is expected to affirm, in doctrine and theology.

Tensions/Contradictions between Practice and Theory

To better understand and feel the tensions that Father Gonzalo sensed, we can try to view them through the mind and feelings of a non-Christian with whom we are attempting to dialogue. Let’s call this imaginary Buddhist dialogue partner Naoto. I am sure that Naoto would appreciate, even bow in gratitude for, the picture we have just painted of the new dialogical consciousness of the Catholic Church. But we must also ask ourselves what Naoto would feel as he considers other statements in the same Vatican documents that heralded the new call to dialogue.

19. Section 2 of their response. Responses to the Vatican *Lineamenta* can be found at: <http://www.ucanews.com/~ucasian/AsianSynod-end.htm>

20. Section 5, emphasis mine.

21. Section 4.0.1.

22. Quoted in the *National Catholic Reporter*, April 10, 98, p. 16.

After having stated clearly, as we have seen, that proclamation (that is, “speaking”) and dialogue (that is, “listening”) are two essential elements in the Church’s life and mission and that there should be “no conflict” but rather a “mutual relationship” between them,²³ the Pope adds a qualification, which to Naoto might sound like a negation: he states that proclaiming Christ holds a “permanent priority” over dialoguing with Buddha and that such proclamation makes up “missionary activity proper.”²⁴ The Vatican declaration *Dialogue and Proclamation* voices the same reservations; it adds that while dialogue and proclamation are both necessary for the Church’s mission, they are “not on the same level,” for dialogue always “remains oriented toward proclamation.”²⁵ Naoto might ask himself whether Catholics, after all, are using dialogue, as a softening up tactic for conversion. Those fears are strengthened by the Pope’s insistence that making converts in order to establish new local churches is the “central and determining goal,” the “first and foremost” concern for all missionary work.²⁶ And finally, the Pope’s very explicit declaration: “Dialogue should be conducted and implemented with the conviction that the Church is the ordinary means of salvation and that she alone possesses the fullness of the means of salvation.”²⁷ To Naoto this looks like the “relationship of mutuality” between dialogue and proclamation has now been transformed into one of subordination.

How are we to explain this reversal, or this ambiguity? I suggest the roots of the ambiguity are to be found in Christology. Again, let me select some statements about Jesus from the Vatican documents we are considering and ask how they might sound to Naoto.

Alongside the clear statements that saving grace can be transmitted through other religious conduits besides the Church, the Pope also announces: “Christ is the *one* savior of all, the *only one able to reveal God and lead to God* ... salvation can *only* come from Jesus Christ ... In him, and *only in him*, are we set free from alienation and doubt.”²⁸ The uniqueness of Christ means that he has not only an “universal” but also an “absolute significance whereby, while belonging to history, he remains history’s center and goal.”²⁹ *Dialogue and Proclamation* echoes the Pope: “In

23. RM 55, DP 3.

24. RM 44, 34.

25. DP 77, 75.

26. RM 48.

27. RM 55; see also DP 19, 22. 58.

28. RM 5, 11, emphasis mine.

29. RM 6.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, we have the *fullness* of revelation and salvation.” There is therefore “one plan of salvation for humankind, with its center in Jesus Christ.”³⁰ And just in case the implications for other religious figures are not clear, the Pope adds that whatever other “mediations” of God’s saving grace there might be in other religions, “they acquire meaning and value *only* from Christ’s own mediation and they cannot be understood as parallel or complementary to his.”³¹

Here we have, I believe, the central source for the tension between what Fr. Gonzalo experienced in dialogue and what he experienced in theology, or between what these official Church statements say about the nature and necessity of dialogue on the one hand and about the primacy of proclamation and conversion to Christianity on the other: in the contemporary terminology of Christian theologians, it has to do with a *constitutive Christology*. This is an understanding of Jesus Christ as the origin or source (in Scholastic terms, the efficient cause) of whatever possibilities of communing with, participating in, experiencing the Divine that are available to humanity throughout history. Such a constitutive or efficient cause is understood to be *singular*: without the cause, no product; and once you have the product, no other cause is needed. Therefore, what Christians call “saving grace,” or the presence of God’s loving Spirit, is operative in the world because of Jesus. He *constitutes* (or more accurately, God through him constitutes) the possibility, or the offer, of participating in God’s life, here and hereafter. Without him, no such possibility. As we shall see, this is only one way of understanding the salvific role of Jesus, one Christology or soteriology. But it is the Christology that dominates Vatican perspectives and much of Roman Catholic theology, and is the cause, I believe, of Father Gonzalo’s unrest.

With this constitutive understanding of Jesus’ role as savior, it is understandable why Christians have given certain adjectives to the truth and power – that is, to the revelation and salvation – they have found in Christ: He is the *full*, the *final*, the *unsurpassable* expression of what God reveals and is doing within history. To what God has done in Jesus nothing more can be added; no other criterion can stand above him; we can expect no other. Stated with the precision of traditional Catholic language: he is the *norma normans non normata* – the truth that judges all other truths and can be judged by no other truth.

30. DP 22, 28. The New Catechism echoes this same understanding of Jesus. See 66-67, 843, 845.

31. RM 5.

And this is why, after all the recognition of truth and goodness in other religions, after all the exhortations to Catholics that they enter into authentic dialogue with other religious persons, in the final analysis, the results of such dialogue will have to – have to! – lead Naoto to find his completion and fulfillment in Christ and in Christ’s Church. As the Pope states with utter clarity: “Christ is thus the fulfillment of the yearning of all the world’s religions and, as such, he is their *sole and definitive completion*.”³² In the end, therefore, the ideal results of dialogue must be, from the perspective of a constitutive Christology, conversion to Christianity; dialogue is a means of proclamation. What Vatican II claimed back in the 60s remains: whatever truth and good and “saving grace” are found outside of the Church are all “oriented toward” (*ordinantur*) to completion in the Church.³³ In the final analysis, the other religions of the world remain a *praeparatio evangelica* – a preparation for the Gospel. Their value is only preparatory; it is to enable and facilitate their conversion to Christ and his Church. As Jacques Dupuis in his review of Catholic theology of religions admits, the current views of Christ as stated by the Vatican and many Roman Catholic theologians, lead to a “fulfillment theology” of other religions.³⁴ “Finality” and “fulfillment” remain on the side of Christ and Christianity; and that, to be honest, means superiority.

Where does this leave Naoto? How does this feel to him? Perhaps a spokesperson for the Jewish community can better answer that question. Recently, Rabbi David Levy warned that all the positive statements by John Paul II about dialogue are jeopardized by the “theological vacuum” concerning the uniqueness of Jesus and the finality of Christianity. “There is a theological vacuum here, one that cannot be filled by inter-faith efforts to coordinate good works.” And then he goes on to point uncomfortably to the more insidious effects of this vacuum and why many Jews are wary of Christian calls to dialogue:

So long as one group can justify feelings of superiority toward other groups, it can, and likely will, justify racist behavior toward those other groups. So long as Christianity teaches that salvation can only be attained through the vehicle of Christianity, ... condemnations of racism will lack the clout needed to move humanity forward.³⁵

32. RM 5 (emphasis mine).

33. *Lumen Gentium*, 16.

34. Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, pp. 161-170.

35. In the *National Catholic Reporter*, Dec. 12, 1997, p. 12.

Can Catholics Really Dialogue?

My question is simple and direct: Can Catholics be honest about their eagerness to engage in dialogue with other religions when they enter that dialogue with the kind of traditional Christology required by the Vatican documents? I want to pose this question with the utmost of caution and respect; it points to what seems to be a tension, if not a contradiction, within the Vatican statements themselves. We heard earlier that Catholics are urged to open themselves in dialogue to real possibilities of being enriched. But what kind of enrichment is possible when we have the *fullness* of what God wishes to manifest to humankind? At the most, dialogue will only *clarify* what we already know. We were told that in the interreligious dialogue we must stand ready to be questioned, challenged, shaken up. But again, if we have the truth that norms all other truth and can be normed by no other, just how seriously can this questioning be? At the most, it will deal with peripherals, or perhaps add nonessentials to the definitive truth we already possess. And finally, we heard our religious pastors urging us that in dialogue one must “allow oneself to be *transformed* by the encounter,” maybe even *converted* to a new vision of truth.³⁶ But what can we be converted to when we have the unsurpassable expression of what God wills to communicate to all humanity? When we’ve reached the end of our journey, there’s no where else to go.

I do not want to raise these questions in a purely intellectual fashion. I am asking my fellow Catholics to explore their psychological dispositions toward their dialogue partners, when as Catholics they enter the dialogue with the certainty that the truths and values in these other religions are there because of Jesus and are inherently directed toward fulfillment in Jesus. No matter how kind and warm I feel toward that Hindu or Buddhist or Jew, I will, in my feelings, if not in my thoughts, regard her as religiously inferior to me, as someone who has only the partial truth that must be completed in my complete truth. Such an attitude, unintentionally perhaps, leads to condescension (Indian Hindus might say, colonialism!). But it also prevents me from truly *hearing* what my Buddhist or Muslim friend is trying to tell me. In claiming to open myself to the “truth” of Buddhism, I am really only opening myself to what will fit into what I already have in Christ, i.e. to what is already implicitly contained in Christian revelation. In my deeper feelings and convictions that Jesus is God’s last Word, I cannot hear,

36. DP, 47, 41.

because I cannot recognize, any other Words that might say something different and new. And if I cannot hear what my partner is trying to say to me, I cannot really dialogue with her.

At this juncture, I want to listen carefully to criticisms of what I have just stated. On purely psychological or philosophical grounds, some will say I am asking for the impossible. We cannot climb out of our cultural, socially-conditioned skins to achieve the kind of openness I am calling for as a condition for dialogue. As the postmodernists remind us, we are profoundly conditioned and caught in the language and culture in which we have been formed. So we always look at, and judge, other languages, cultures, religions according to the “norms” of our own. To ask for anything else is to ask us to escape our humanness. Furthermore, such critics who are also historians of religions, will add, this is why *all* religions, not just we Christians, make absolute claims about their own religion. When you add to our inherent cultural conditioning the *passion* that goes with religious conditioning, you naturally find yourself with truth claims that stand above all other truth claims. When I am not only socially but religiously conditioned, then I am not only going to be “predisposed,” I’m going to be passionate! And that means I naturally am going to claim that my truth is “bigger” than or normative over yours. This need not be an obstacle to dialogue, these critics add. Rather, it makes for the stuff of dialogue. Dialogue gets really interesting, not when we agree but when we disagree – when I try to convince you that my truth excludes or absorbs yours!³⁷

To such critics I am grateful. They help me clarify and modify what I am suggesting when I point out dialogical problems with traditional Christology. I am certainly not asking my fellow Catholics to approach the table religiously naked, with an openness that is an emptiness, without any firm truth claims. That would not only be impossible, since we cannot climb out of our culturally conditioned skins; it would also empty the dialogue of any real content. The passion of religion must be brought to the dialogue; otherwise it would not be a religious dialogue.

But there is a difference between being passionate and being perfect, between entering the dialogue with firm truth claims and entering it with absolute, immovable truth claims. Yes, as the postmodernists remind us, we are always culturally and religiously conditioned; that means I cannot avoid viewing the culturally or religiously others

37. See Paul Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study of the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991).

through the perspective or norm of my own culture and religion. But as the postmodernists also remind us, while such perspectives and norms are unavoidable, they are also, always, limited, relative, incomplete. That means they can be clarified, expanded, corrected, yes even changed. Here we must distinguish between those postmodernists who remind us that our own social conditioning *influences* everything we see outside of that conditioning and those who claim that it *prevents* us from really seeing or understanding other perspectives. The latter, “hard-core” postmodernists would imprison every culture and religion in its own intratextual prisons and rule out any real possibility of dialogue.³⁸

As for the passion that we do and should find in religious truth claims, yes this has led most religions of the world to make, in their sacred scriptures, what look like, and are, absolute claims – claims that apply to all people and call for decision and response. And these are the claims that are, and must be, brought to the dialogue table. But what I say to my fellow Catholics I suggest to all religious people: there is a difference between, on the one hand, knowing that God has touched me, transformed me, and given me a truth that is true not only for me but for all people, and, on the other hand, knowing that this is the *entirety* of all God’s truth, the final norm for any other truth that God may have. Religious experience, I am suggesting, assures us that what we have experienced is really true and universally meaningful; it does not, it cannot, assure us that we have the only or the full or the final version of God’s truth.

And therefore, I make bold to *suggest* to all religious persons what I am *urging* for my fellow Catholics: that we reexamine and revise the absolute claims that we have made in our traditions. Passionate claims, yes; absolute claims, no. And I believe that such a suggestion is not an imposition on other religions. For I trust that the historian of religions can find in all these traditions, besides what sound like absolute claims, a pervasive recognition, not only among the mystics, that the object of their claims – the divine Mystery – is a reality that can never be captured and contained in these claims. Every religion, I believe, recognizes a *plus*, something more which my religion has not grasped – and which, maybe, yours has. This means that if all religions make absolute claims; they also recognize that no such claim can be absolute. Religious experience, in

38. Such hard-core attitudes can be found, implicitly, in the broadly influential work of George Lindbeck and the so-called Yale School of post-liberal theology. See Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984). Also: William Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989).

other words, affords me the *passion* of knowing that God has truly spoken and called me; but it also, paradoxically, imbues me with the *humility* of knowing that God has more to say. To acknowledge this is to open oneself to the possibility of dialogue with others. All religions, it seems to me, can do this.

A Recent Example of the Tension: The Asian Bishops Synod

Returning to my own religious terrain and to my assertion that there is a gap between the Catholic practice of dialogue and Catholic theology of religions, I believe that what I have been laying out theoretically has recently been clearly verified or exemplified. The recent Synod of Asian Bishops was a resounding reminder that we have a problem and that it needs addressing. I say “resounding” not only because of the clarity of its content but also because it shows a contrariness to the position of Rome that does not usually mark bishops’ behavior when visiting the Vatican.

We already reviewed how strongly the various episcopal conferences of Asia, in their responses to the Vatican’s *lineamenta*, insisted that dialogue is one of the defining characteristics of the way the Catholic Church is church in Asia. Let me now list the clear, I would say bold, ways in which they also identified traditional understandings of the uniqueness of Christ as a problem for, if not an impediment to, such dialogue:

- The Japanese Bishops told the Vatican that the “defensiveness” and “apologetic attitude” that marked the Vatican’s proposed working document for the Synod rendered its theological assessments “clearly unfair and inadequate.” They specified: “This is especially clear in the section on Christology. This does not help the faith of Asian Christians.” And then their specification became even sharper: “If we stress too much that ‘Jesus Christ is the One and Only Savior,’ *we can have no dialogue, common living, or solidarity with other religions.* The Church, learning from the *kenosis* of Jesus Christ, should be humble and open its heart to other religions to deepen its understanding of the Mystery of Christ.”³⁹
- The Sri Lankan Bishops echoed: “The uniqueness of Jesus and of the Church has been a perennial problem and poses its own distinctive difficulties for authentic dialogue.”⁴⁰
- The Indonesians were clearer as to where the problem lies: Jesus “is the Savior of all humankind. But it is difficult to preach this in a

39. Japanese Response, I/2/(1), emphasis mine. Website given in note 19.

40. Sri Lankan Response, Section 5.

pluri-religious society ... It seems difficult also to preach Christ as Savior of the world without creating divisions or some confusion, or the impression as if He were going to 'take over' the influence of their leaders (which they do not accept)."⁴¹

- The Indian Bishops were even more assertive: "... the Indian Christological approach seeks to avoid negative and exclusivistic expressions ... We cannot, then, deny, a priori, a salvific role for these non-Christian religions."⁴²

The Asian Bishops also offered suggestions for what kind of a Christology might replace one that insists on Jesus' superiority over all others. Two themes stand out:

- Instead of understanding the uniqueness of Jesus in a way that insists on his superiority or difference over others, Asian bishops urged a way of showing Jesus' distinctiveness through the way he and his message connect and work with the truths of other ways. The Japanese bishops reminded the Vatican Europeans: "... in the tradition of the Far East, it is characteristic to search for creative harmony rather than distinctions."⁴³ The Sri Lankans applied this to Christology: "While we affirm the uniqueness of Christ, we need to move towards a non-threatening articulation, an articulation that would be more conducive to dialogue in Asia ... As universal source of love, Christ unites and breaks through differences, while respecting diversity."⁴⁴ Speaking for all the Asian bishops conferences, the Indonesians called for a relational, and therefore a more authentically catholic, Christology: "The FABC makes attempts at an integral and holistic approach to the mystery of Jesus Christ by using 'inclusive language,' so that Christology truly becomes 'Catholic,' i.e., embracing all humans of whatever religious conviction."⁴⁵
- But the Asian bishops, besides calling for a more relational Christology, also made suggestions as to just what is Christ's and Christianity's unique, or special, contribution to the relationship and dialogue with other religions. There was no unanimity here, but there is a recurrent theme. The bishops found Jesus' uniqueness especially in his concern for the poor, for those suffering from the injustice of others.

41. Indonesian Response, 5.1.5 and 5.2.1.

42. In *National Catholic Reporter*, April 17, 1998, p. 15.

43. Section 2.

44. Section 5.

45. Section 5.3.2.

- The Sri Lankan Bishops: “He has something specific and ‘unique’ to offer to Asian people, has a special message to the poor and the oppressed, who are fast becoming a socio-cultural group in our country, a by-product of a profit-oriented market economy that is beneficial only to a few. The teachings of Christ can help address the conscience of the rich in favour of the poor.”⁴⁶
- The Japanese Bishops made the same point in the name of the entire FABC: “... ‘compassion with the suffering’ has been identified time after time at the General Assemblies of the FABC as a most important element.”⁴⁷ Such a proclamation of the uniqueness, the Bishops added, is better done in action and lifestyle than with words and ideas. For the Japanese, *life* comes before, or makes clear, *truth*: “Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, but in Asia, before stressing that Jesus Christ is the TRUTH, we must search much more deeply into how he is the WAY and the LIFE ... What is necessary is an open and spiritual Christology rooted in real life and alert to the problems of modern people.”⁴⁸
- The Sri Lankans agreed: “Communication of the absolute uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the salvific process should be by lifestyle of the people of God at all levels.”⁴⁹

If the Asian Bishops did not succeed in convincing the Vatican theologians and dignitaries that a new kind of dialogue with Asian religions is possible only on a new kind of Christology, neither did they abandon their own convictions and efforts as they returned home.

A Recent Theological Attempt to Bridge the Gap

Recently, one of the most respected, faithful, and practiced Catholic theologians, working especially out of the Church’s experience in India, has recognized the gap we have pointed to between dialogue and theology and has attempted to bridge it. I’m talking about Jacques Dupuis, S.J. and his much discussed book *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*.⁵⁰ Dupuis stands out among what we might call the mainline school of Catholics theologians; most of them, in addressing the challenge of religious pluralism, do not seem to address, or resolve, the tensions between dialogue and theology. I’m thinking in

46. Section 5.

47. Section 2.

48. 1/2/(1).

49. Section 6.

50. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997.

particular of Gavin D'Costa, Joseph DiNoia, Paul Griffiths, Monika Hellwig, Claude Geffré, Michael Barnes, Terrence Merrigan, Anselm Min.⁵¹ (Interestingly, the list contains only theologians working in the North!) By taking a careful look at Dupuis's efforts, we can further clarify the complexity, the contours, and I believe the unfinished quality of the task.

For Dupuis an essential purpose or quality of any Catholic theology of religions must be that this theology enables authentic dialogue between Christians and members of other ways (383).⁵² If theology doesn't help construct the bridge to dialogue, it cannot bear the name "Catholic." But to do this, Dupuis insists, Catholic theology *must* move beyond any form of the fulfillment perspective that sees other religions as "stepping stones" or "seeds" or a "preparation" for membership in the Christian Church (204, 388). Dupuis wants to make possible a true *complementarity* between Christianity and other religions.

'Complementarity' is not understood here in the sense of the fulfillment theory, according to which Christian truth 'brings to completion' – in a one-sided process – the fragmentary truths it finds sown outside. There is a question of mutual complementarity, by which an exchange and a sharing of saving values take place between Christianity and the other traditions and from which a mutual enrichment and transformation may ensue between the traditions themselves (326).

Dupuis, clearly, intends *mutual* enrichment and transformation for both other religions *and* Christianity; for both sides there is the real possibility of a "more profound conversion of each to God" (383). That means authentic dialogue.

But for this to happen, Dupuis, with an unsettling clarity, states that Catholics must abandon the ecclesiocentrism that has marked their

51. Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985); Joseph DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1992). Paul Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics* (see note 37); Monika Hellwig, "Christology and the Wider Ecumenism," *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll: 1990) 107-116. Claude Geffré, "Paul Tillich and the Future of Interreligious Ecumenism," *Paul Tillich: A New Catholic Assessment*, ed. R. F. Bulman and F. J. Parrella (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1994) 268-287. Michael Barnes, "Theology of Religions in a Post-modern World," *The Month* 28 (1994) 270-274, 325-330. Terrence Merrigan, "Religious Knowledge in the Pluralist Theology of Religions," *Theological Studies* 58 (1997) 686-707. Anselm K. Min, "Dialectical Pluralism and Solidarity of Others: Towards a New Paradigm," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65 (1997) 587-604.

52. For this section, I will give references to Dupuis's book within the text.

theology of religions. "An ecclesiocentric outlook needs to be transcended. A theology of religions cannot be built on an ecclesiological inflation that would falsify perspectives" (186). With forthright candor he even points out that such a view of the church still lingers in the Pope's mission encyclical: "... the narrow ecclesiocentric perspective of *Redemptoris Missio* must be regretted..." (371). For Dupuis, a theology of religions that truly permits and promotes dialogue will be grounded in a *regnocentric* understanding of the Church, a kingdom-centered perspective that recognizes that God's Reign is larger than the Church and that the primary purpose of the Church is to promote the Reign of God, not itself (342, 356). The goal of dialogue, therefore, is not ultimately to sweep the other religions into the Church but to work with them in building the Reign of God.⁵³ This grants to the religions not a "transient" or stepping-stone role; rather, a regnocentric understanding of other religions can "... assign to them a lasting role and a specific meaning in the overall mystery of the divine-human relationships" (211). For Dupuis, as for Schillebeeckx, the many religions are not simply a "matter of fact" but "a matter of principle." They belong, and belong permanently, to God's way of relating to humanity (201). This means that "more divine truth and grace are found operative in the entire history of God's dealings with humankind [i.e. through the religions] than are available simply in Christian tradition" (388). This is indeed a new, a dialogical Catholic theology of religions.

Dupuis is well aware that if his bridge between theology and dialogue is going to bear heavy traffic, it's going to have to have solid Christological foundations. On the one hand, to maintain his Christian identity, he insists that any Christian theology of religions must be Christocentric. "Christian theology is not faced with the dilemma of being either Christocentric or theocentric; it is theocentric by being Christocentric and vice versa" (191). Christians understand God through Christ; that's what makes them Christians. And Dupuis admits that the understanding granted them in Christ represents "the fullness of revelation." Here, recognizing that such "fullness" can exclude the opportunity to learn in dialogue, Dupuis shows his theological skills of

53. This is why Gavin D'Costa accuses Dupuis of a "reduced ecclesiology" and of "breaking the link between Christology and ecclesiology ..." In other words, Dupuis, while continuing to hold to the necessity of Christ, no longer affirms the necessity of the Church. See D'Costa's review in *The Journal of Theological Studies* 49 (1998) 910-913. See Dupuis's response to reviewers of his study in Jacques Dupuis, "'The Truth Will Make You Free': The Theology of Religious Pluralism Revisited," *Louvain Studies* 24 (1999) 211-263.

distinguishing. He characterizes this fullness of revelation in Christ as “qualitative,” not “quantitative.” He explains: “This plenitude ... is not ... one of extension and all-comprehensive, but of intensity ... It does not – it cannot – exhaust the mystery of the Divine” (379). “It remains relative” (249). Christians do not “possess a monopoly of truth” (382). A fullness that remains relative and limited! Elsewhere, Dupuis suggests that instead of “relative,” a better description of the fullness of Christ’s revelation would be “relational” – capable and in need of relating to other revelations (305).

Dupuis further grounds and nurtures such a relative or relational Christology in a dialogical Pneumatology. The reason why there is more of God’s revelation in the entirety of religious history than in just Christian history is precisely because the Spirit is alive and well and active throughout time, before and after Christ. The Spirit, in other words, is breathing within other religions in ways different from her breathing in Jesus and Christianity. Dupuis bases this rather bold assertion on what he thinks is a sound Trinitarian theology: “... the hypostatic *distinction* between the Word and the Spirit as well as the specific influence of each in the Trinitarian rhythm.” There is “real differentiation and plurality” between the activity of Word within Jesus and of Spirit within the sweep of salvation history. In seeking to avoid the Trinitarian sin of “subordinationism,” Dupuis affirms what few Catholic theologians make bold to say: that the Spirit has more to show than what she has shown in Jesus the Christ (206, emphasis mine; also 197-198). A Christology balanced and expanded by such a Pneumatology is inherently dialogical.

We have, therefore, in Jacques Dupuis’s book one of the boldest blueprints for a theology of religions that will bridge the gap between theology and dialogue. But it seems to me, and to others, that his bridge doesn’t quite make it to the other side. The problem, it appears, has to do with his understanding of Jesus as the Christ. Although he calls for a “relative” or “relational” understanding of Jesus’ fullness, one that would allow Christians to discover “more” of God’s truth in other religious traditions, he also insists that such a relational understanding of Jesus must be grounded in a *constitutive Christology*. “The uniqueness of Jesus Christ is ... at once ‘constitutive’ and ‘relational’” (305). And here, I fear, is where the coherence, and the dialogical potential, of his position breaks down.

For Dupuis, Christians really don’t have a choice regarding a constitutive Christology: “... the Christian faith cannot stand without claiming for Jesus Christ a constitutive uniqueness” (304). He’s also clear on what he means by constitutive: “The event of his [Jesus’] death-resurrection

opens access to God for all human beings, independently of their historical situation” (387). Without that event, there is no access. Jesus therefore “constitutes the *privileged* channel through which God has chosen to share the divine life with human beings” (305, emphasis mine). “... his [Jesus’] risen humanity is the *obligatory* channel, the instrumental cause, of grace for all people” (350, emphasis mine). Why do Christians, why *must* Christians, make such claims about Jesus? Admitting that they “lie beyond the purview of an empirical or scientific proof” (295), his reasons are essentially “from the vantage point of Christian faith” (286). It’s what Christians have always understood and announced. “Christian identity, as it has been understood through the centuries, is linked to faith in the ‘constitutive’ mediation and ‘fullness’ of divine revelation in Jesus Christ.”⁵⁴ Further, a constitutive Christology is tied tightly to a Trinitarian theology: “... the constitutive uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ must be made to rest on his personal identity as the Son of God” (297). There is an ontological identification between the human person of Jesus and the Word of God. “Jesus *is* the eternal Word of God in person ...” (296-297).⁵⁵

This is the reason why Dupuis expressly and resolutely rules out Christologies that propose a representative, or what he terms a “functional,” understanding of Jesus’ uniqueness. Any Christology that would reduce the *ontological* identity of Jesus and the Word to a *functional* role of revealing the Divine, or any Christology that would describe the difference between Jesus and all other humans as one *of degree* rather than *of nature* (280-283), would come up short where all Christians must stand firm – that is, in affirming “the personal identity of Jesus Christ as *the* Son of God” (155).

Under the pressure of such a constitutive Christology, Dupuis, it seems to me, loses some of the dialogical gains he had acquired in his efforts to get beyond the fulfillment perspective of other religions. Again, I ask you to consider how some of his further statements about Jesus will sound to our Buddhist friend, Naoto. Even though the fullness of revelation in Jesus is *qualitative* and not *quantitative*, even though it is not “absolute”:

- Jesus constitutes “the deepest and most decisive engagement of God with humankind” (388).

54. Yet, at one passage, he seems to qualify this certainty when he states that this is what “the Christian tradition *seems* to require” (288, emphasis mine).

55. This last statement is a citation from Karl Josef Kuschel, *Born before All Times? The Dispute over Christ’s Origin* (London: SCM Press, 1992) 389.

- "... no revelation of the mystery of God [in other religions] can match the depths of what occurred when the divine Son incarnate lived on a human key, in a human consciousness ..." (249).
- "No revelation ... either before or after Christ can either surpass *or equal* the one vouchsafed in Jesus Christ, the divine Son incarnate" (250, emphasis mine).
- "In Christianity, God's personal presence to human beings in Christ reaches its highest and most complete sacramental visibility" (318).
- "... the Christian faith will continue to imply 'fullness' of divine manifestation and revelation in Jesus Christ not realized elsewhere with the same fullness of sacramentality" (204). Thus, though a "relative fullness," Christian revelation surpasses all others.

And when Dupuis goes on to apply the consequences of such a constitutive Christology to Christian dialogue with other religions, he starts to sound very much like the proponents of the traditional fulfillment model whom he had been criticizing for their demeaning of other religions. Although he will allow other religions and religious figures to share in the mediation or communication of salvation, he cannot allow any other to share in Jesus' *constitutive* role in making that salvation possible. Thus, the saving grace or true religious experience that can be found in Hinduism or Buddhism are there because of "the universal mediatorship of Jesus Christ in the order of salvation" (183). This begins to sound curiously close to other views of the "anonymous" or "cosmic" activity of Christ in other religions. In the end, Dupuis, perhaps contrary to his original or basic intents, slips into fulfillment language: Other religions are "incomplete 'faces' of the Divine Mystery experienced in various ways, to be *fulfilled* in him who is 'the human face of God'" (279, emphasis mine). Other traditions are "integral parts of one history of salvation that *culminates* in the Jesus Christ-event" (303, emphasis mine).

As for his blending of Christology with Pneumatology and his suggestions that the Spirit has more to say than what has been said in Christ, it seems that in the end, Dupuis, despite his disavowals, *does* subordinate the Spirit to Christ. He states that the "new" that the Spirit manifests in other traditions not only *can* but, eventually, *must* be related to that of Christ. The implication is that without this relatedness, the Spirit's work is incomplete, unfulfilled. "If, then, the Spirit is present and active in history before the event of Jesus Christ, he is so *in view of, and in relation to*, the historical event which stands *at the center* of the history of salvation" (197, emphasis mine). There is only one center. Dupuis is explicit: "Christ, not the Spirit, is at the center as the way

to God” (197). That means, that in the “total complementarity” that Dupuis calls for between Christ and the Spirit, the norm for deciding what is or is not complementary will be found in Christ, not the Spirit. To me, that seems to smack of subordination.

This subordination of the religions to Christianity and this “culmination” of their truth in that of the Church slips through in the way Dupuis talks about what Christians have to learn from other traditions. Although he is clear in calling for a “reciprocal complementarity” in the dialogue (328), one in which there is “mutual enrichment and transformation” (326), it appears that there is more enrichment and transformation for the religions than for Christians. The *transformation* that Christians might experience in the dialogue seems to be more a *clarification* or *deepening* or *purification* of what they already have. It’s not clear that they can learn anything really new. Note the caution and limitations in Dupuis’ description of what Christians can gain in dialogue:

- “... they will be able to discover *at greater depth* certain aspects, certain dimensions, of the Divine Mystery that they had perceived *less clearly* ... At the same time they will gain a purification of their faith” (383, emphasis mine).
- “... it is possible to discover, in other saving figures and traditions, truth and grace not brought out *with the same vigor and clarity* in God’s revelation and manifestation in Jesus Christ” (388, emphasis mine).

At the end of his book, Dupuis places his overall assessment of how religions relate to Christianity under what we might call an “eschatological proviso.” He suggests that the “incomplete faces” of God found in the religions may find their fulfillment in the “human face of God” in Jesus, or their “culmination in the Jesus-Christ event” (279, 303), only *at the end of history!*

An eschatological ‘reheading’ (*anakephalaiosis*) (Eph 1:10) in Christ of the religious traditions of the world will take place at the eschaton and it will respect and preserve the irreducible character which God’s self-manifestation through his Word and Spirit has impressed upon each tradition. This eschatological reheading will coincide with the last ‘perfection’ (*teleiosis*) of the Son of God, as ‘source of eternal salvation’ (Heb 5:9)... (389).

This allows Dupuis to grant the religions a “more than a transient character” and a “lasting role” in God’s dealings with humanity. But it lasts only till the end. In the end, all will be “reheaded” (read: subordinated?) in Christ. – But I must ask: if Christians know for sure that at the end of the game, they will win, won’t this affect the way they regard

and deal with the other team during the game – and vice versa? If the playing field isn't level at the end of the game, is it at all?

So in the end, I must ask whether Jacques Dupuis, for all his sincere intents and innovative efforts, has really bridged the gap between theology and dialogue. I don't think so. Despite his clear recognition that the so-called fulfillment or inclusivist Catholic theology of religions is an impediment to a true dialogue with others, and despite his efforts to move beyond that theology, he is not able to move very far.⁵⁶ I agree with Terrence Merrigan in the conclusion of his careful study of Dupuis's book: "... it is not at all clear that Dupuis has actually managed to move beyond the 'fulfillment theory' as regards the relationship between Christianity and other religions." Indeed, Merrigan feels that some of Dupuis's assertions about Jesus "... might even be read as a return to the fulfillment theory of salvation and revelation history from which Dupuis seeks to disassociate himself."⁵⁷ Why this apparent failure? I believe it has to do with his understanding of Christ, specifically with his constitutive Christology. On this issue, our bridge between theology or dialogue "stands or falls."

Bridging the Gap

The primary purpose of this essay is to show that we Catholics "have a problem" – a problem in getting our dialogical and theological acts together. What we say or seek in dialogue is not supported by what we say or teach in doctrine. More specifically, what we say we believe about Christ does not allow us, it seems, to be as open, as attentive, as ready to learn and change as we want to be, or say we are, in the dialogue with others. As I suggested earlier, it seems that this clash between the *lex dialogandi* and the *lex credendi* is not being properly faced in Catholic theology.

Though the "problem" has been my major concern, I would like to conclude these reflections with some general directions or suggestions

56. Because Dupuis remains firmly, if not always clearly, within the precincts of "official" Roman Catholic views of other religions (often called inclusivism), I, with others, remain perplexed about his difficulties with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Perhaps it is his suggestion that the religions hold a "lasting" role in the economy of salvation, that therefore conversion to the Church is not necessary, and that even the Pope's views in *Redemptoris Missio* were too ecclesiocentric is what stirred the CDF's concerns.

57. Terrence Merrigan, "Exploring the Frontiers: Jacques Dupuis and the Movement 'Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism,'" *Louvain Studies* 23 (1998) 338-359, pp. 355, 352.

toward a solution. All of them have to be, as we say, “developed,” and that means critiqued. Focusing on the nub of the tension, I would like to outline the main ingredients of a *dialogical Christology* – that is, an understanding of Christ that would enable us to be as fully *committed* to Jesus as we are *open* to other religions. I do this, with the assistance, and following the direction, of other Catholic theologians (tellingly, most of them Asian), such as Raimon Panikkar, Aloysius Pieris, Felix Wilfrid, Roger Haight.⁵⁸

1. *In its methodology*, such a Christology must be thoroughly and inherently *dialogical*. This means that dialogue with persons of other faiths is not merely an *application* of an already formulated understanding of who Jesus is for us; rather, dialogue with others is part of the lens through which we see Jesus and determine his meaning for us. In other words, because the ability to enter into loving, creative, cooperative relationships with others is part of who we are as followers of Jesus, any understanding of him that would impede such a relationship couldn't be talking about the real Jesus. A Christology that doesn't promote dialogue cannot be an authentic Christology.

So I agree fully with Roger Haight when he urges Christian theologians not to regard religious pluralism as merely a “corollary of a Christology that has already been determined” or as a “special question” to be treated at the end of a book on Jesus. Rather, the reality of other religions is “part of the point of departure” for Christology, part of the “a priori context for Christological thinking.”⁵⁹ Dupuis agrees but extends this dialogical criteria to the entirety of theology: “More than a new topic for theologizing, the theology of religions must be viewed as a new way of doing theology, in an interfaith context; a new method of theologizing in a situation of religious pluralism.”⁶⁰ In a dialogical Christology, therefore, we don't first understand Jesus and then talk with other religions; in and through the conversation we come to know who Jesus is for us today.

58. Raimon Pannikar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999, revised edition); Id., *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993). Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988); Id., *God's Reign for God's Poor: A Return to the Jesus Formula* (Kelaniya: Tulana Research Centre, 1999), especially ch. 6. Felix Wilfred, “Some Tentative Reflections on the Language of Christian Uniqueness: An Indian Perspective,” *Pro Dialogo Bulletin* 85-86 (1994) 40-57. Roger Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), ch. 14.

59. Roger Haight, “Spirit Christology,” *Theological Studies* 53 (1992) 257-287, p. 261.

60. Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, p. 18.

2. *In its New Testament foundation*, a dialogical Christology will be *regnocentric* and *doxological* in the way it hears and unpacks the scriptural story and language about Jesus the Christ. Clearly, all Christology in its very identity is an effort to continue the task begun in the New Testament – to help the Christian community answer the question “Who do you say I am?” (Mark 8:27). This effort was begun by the New Testament communities and can be carried forward only on the basis of, in fidelity to, that original witness. But in doing this, each Christian community, in its particular cultural context and historical slot, has a particular lens, a dominant perspective, in its efforts to understand who Jesus is for them. This was already the case in the New Testament itself, which is why we have so many different Christologies, from the Synoptics to John to Paul.

My suggestion is that for a Christology to be dialogical, the particular lens that we use to understand the original witness of the New Testament must be both regnocentric and doxological. By regnocentric, or Reign-centered, I mean that the focus of our picture of Jesus today should be what Scripture scholars tell us was the heart of his own message: his commitment to announcing and giving shape to God’s Reign on earth. Thus, to say that Jesus himself was theocentric, or God-centered, is not accurate enough; his God-centeredness was further located within his centeredness on the Reign of God. God without God’s Reign was, for Jesus, not the true God.⁶¹ So a dialogical Christology would see Jesus primarily as the prophet of God’s Reign; Jesus as prophet would be the key, the dominant theme, for understanding his other titles and images. His divinity, for instance, would remain essential to a dialogical Christology, but Jesus as the Son of God would be understood as a further or deepening grasp of Jesus as Prophet of the Reign.

A regnocentric focus is both heuristic and selective – it guides us in how we understand Jesus for our own community and in what we stress when we talk about him to others. It is also consistent with a so-called “Christology from below,” starting with what we can know of the original message and mission of Jesus rather than with a “Christology from above,” the later conciliar stress on Jesus as the one-person, two-natured Son of God.

61. See Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: An Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994). John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God: The Message of Jesus Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), esp. ch. 5; R. David Kaylor, *Jesus the Prophet: His Vision of the Kingdom on Earth* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

By a *doxological* perspective on the New Testament, I have in mind a lens to understand all the given, undeniable *exclusivistic* language used for Jesus in the New Testament witness. He is the “only-begotten Son of God,” (John 1:14), the “one Mediator between God and humanity” (I Tim 2:5), and there is “no other name” by which we can be saved (Acts 4:12). I suggest that we affirm and appropriate these proclamations according to the kind of language scholars tell us it is: language used by the early communities, especially in their liturgical life, to give praise to him who had become the center of their life, their source of salvation, he who turned their lives around in this world and for the next. In other words, this was language meant primarily to do two things: *praise* Jesus and express *commitment* to him. They wanted to extol this Jesus, risen in their communities, who had “saved” them and who, they were certain, could save others; and they wanted to profess, within their own community and before the world, that they were his followers, to the death if need be. All this “one and only” language, therefore, in its doxological and liturgical exuberance, was what can also be called *confessional* or *performative* language – or in terms closer to our own experience, *love language*.⁶²

Such love language is, admittedly, both functional and ontological, both subjective and objective; it intends to express both what the Jesus-followers feel about him, but also what they claim his *is*. But the primary intent of confessional or love language is not to give a cement-sealed definition of the nature of Jesus and his relationship to the Divine, nor to define other religious figures in their relationship with the Divine. Confessional language is not theological or philosophical or scientific language; it is not discursive discourse, it is performative. It expresses resolve and call to action – that is, to follow Jesus in his efforts to build the Reign of God. It speaks in superlatives – “only,” “sole,” “fullest,” “no other” – to express the depths of this feeling and the imperative of this resolve. We misuse this language, I believe, if we use it to denigrate or exclude others rather than to express our commitment to Christ and our desire to let others know about him. When I tell my wife that she is the most beautiful woman in the world, I am saying something real about how I feel about her and who I think she really is; I am not declaring that no other woman can be as beautiful as she is.

62. For more on the exclusive language of the New Testament, see Paul Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996) 67-71.

So all the “one and only” language of the New Testament and Christian tradition, as doxological language, does not mean that Jesus, and only Jesus, is in the center of God’s dealings with humanity but, rather, that whatever we Christians understand about God’s dealings will be colored and guided by our experience of and commitment to Christ. Therefore I like David Tracy’s suggestion: “There is no serious form of *Christian* theology that is not christomorphic. This is a more accurate designation of the christological issue, I believe, than the more familiar but confusing word ‘christocentric.’ For theology is not christocentric but theocentric, although it is so only by means of its christomorphism.”⁶³

3. *In its criteriology* – i.e. in the standard of evaluation for its ongoing task of interpreting Jesus – a dialogical Christology will grant a certain priority to *orthopraxis* over *orthodoxy*. This follows from what I just described as the regnocentric and doxological nature of this Christology. Because we are using Jesus the *prophet* as the foundational or key New Testament image to grasp his meaning for the world today and to interpret his other titles, any new titles for our age, any new Christologies, especially as they take shape in Asia and Africa and Latin America, will be assessed for their orthodoxy according to the criterion of whether they can foster a following of Jesus in his vision of the Reign of God. Does such a new view call and guide the community in its resolve to work for a world in which the God of love, justice, mutuality, and hope reigns among and between human societies? If it does, we have reason to trust that such new understandings of Jesus are faithful to the original witness about him.

But our criteria are orthopraxic also because they are doxological: we judge new Christologies also by the way they inspire Christians to a personal experience of the risen Christ and a ruling relationship with him. Do such new titles or understandings of Jesus bring Christians to “praise the Lord,” to sing his praises both within the community and before the world. Or, in traditional terminology, does the new “way of believing” (*lex credendi*) inspire the community’s old “way of praying” (*lex orandi*)?

Such practice-oriented, doxological criteria aid us in assessing whether new Christologies enable the community to affirm, because they enable it to understand, what it means to call Jesus divine. To call Jesus “Son of God,” to proclaim him as “Word of God” and therefore

63. David Tracy, “Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity,” *Theology Today* 51 (1994) 104-114, p. 111.

divine, grew out of, and grows out of, the Christian community's experience that to meet and know and follow this human being was, indeed, to meet and know and follow God.⁶⁴ Such an experience inspires and gives rise to the words "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Luke 9:20); and the words inspire and give rise to the experience. It's an ever-turning circle between words and experience-beyond-words. Any new words about Jesus, any new Christologies, must promote this doxological circle; if they do, they are probably orthodox.

A brief caveat is necessary: In assigning a primacy to orthopraxis in the community's task of assessing new Christologies, I am *not reducing* orthodoxy to orthopraxis. Creeds, words, theological reflection have always played an essential role in the Christian tradition; and they must continue to do so, for faith without beliefs, or right-acting without right-knowing, is like love without words or a project without a program. We do need creeds. And we do need a Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to admonish and challenge us when our words do not promote an authentic following of Christ. But I am saying that the practice of faith, the following of Jesus in his vision of the Reign, do have a priority over the doctrines that give rise to, nurture, and express that faith-experience and following. It is more important to do God's will and struggle to build the Reign (amid abiding ambiguity) than to know precisely the meaning of proclaiming Jesus as "Lord, Lord" (Matt 7:21-23). Even for Jesus, I suspect, his *work* was more important than his *person*.

4. *In its soteriology*, a dialogical Christology will follow, in the theological terminology we have been using, a *representative* rather than a *constitutive* model, for trying to formulate how Jesus "saves." Summarizing without, I hope, simplifying, we can describe the differences between the two as follows: as suggested earlier, representative Christologies understand the saving power of the Christ event along the lines of exemplary or final causality rather than of efficient or instrumental causality. Jesus "saves" or brings us to feel the power of God in our lives by "showing" us something rather than by "effecting" or creating something. He manifests or embodies and places powerfully before us what is in fact already there and available: God's saving love and power in our lives. He does not create that saving love, or unlock the gates that hold it back from pervading the cosmos. Salvation therefore is more a matter

64. For a contemporary, classical statement of such an understanding of the content of belief in Jesus' divinity see Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), esp. 13-46; also, Monika K. Hellwig, *Jesus the Compassion of God* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1983), esp. chapter 8.

of *revelation* rather than of *production*, of making something known rather than of fixing something. Salvation does not change *what is there*; but it does enable us *to see what is there*. (And that, indeed, is a big change in itself.)

Representative Christologies are naturally more dialogical and pluralistic than their constitutive counterparts. If we understand “being saved” or “entering into God’s life” to be brought about by a powerful, transforming manifestation of God’s reality and love, we will probably, or necessarily, expect that there be *many* manifestations of that love. After all, the reality revealed to us is universal; that it take on a variety of revelations or forms makes sense if that universal loving Spirit of God is to become real in the extent and variety of human cultures and contexts. On the other hand, understanding the saving role of Jesus as a process that brings about, or constitutes, a reality that would otherwise not have been possible, or as fixing something that could otherwise not be fixed, we will more readily, or necessarily, view the origin of salvation as a *one-time* event. What is once made does not need remaking; what is fixed does not need refixing. Simply stated, as a representative savior, Jesus more readily can stand with others; as a constitutive savior, he stands alone.

This issue of a constitutive versus a representative Christology is one of the most pivotal, but also one of the most controversial, ingredients in present-day Christian efforts to formulate an understanding of Jesus that would effectively be dialogical. As we saw, even as open and bold a Catholic theologian as Jacques Dupuis does not seem able to view a representative Christology as even a possible choice for Christians. Although this is not the place to make the case, I do believe, with other Catholic and Protestant theologians, that what we are today calling representative Christologies (or soteriologies) do populate Christian tradition, even in its origins.⁶⁵ Let me offer only a schematic, or suggestive, paralleling:

- Besides the Pauline perspective that stressed how Jesus saved us by dying for our sins, there is the Johannine view that Jesus the Savior is Jesus the Light of the World, the Word of God.

65. Roger Haight’s recent *Jesus Symbol of God* (note 58) can be considered an elaborated case for a representative Christology. See also Schubert Ogden, *The Point of Christology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982). Rahner’s argument that Jesus’s salvific role can be better understood as a *causa finalis* rather than a *causa efficiens* can also be considered an indirect affirmation of a representative Christology. See *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1978) 208-212, 194-195.

- Besides the Logos Christologies that gave rise to the one-time incarnational models of Chalcedon, we also have the Spirit Christologies that viewed Jesus as being inspired by the universal Spirit.⁶⁶
- Besides “kyriocentric” Christologies that proclaim Jesus as one time Lord, there are the Sophia Christologies that see him as embodying the Wisdom of God found throughout time and creation.⁶⁷
- Besides the Son of God Christologies, which led to claims of uniqueness, there were also the, perhaps earlier, eschatological prophet models that looked upon Jesus as carrying on the work of all God’s prophets.⁶⁸
- Besides the dominance of Anselm’s “objective” soteriology in which Jesus substituted for our sins and satisfied the demands of God’s justice, there was also Abelard’s more “subjective” view that found the saving power of Jesus in his revelation to the world of the reality of God’s love.

All of these “other” Christologies have been part of Christian life and belief. They contain, or move in the direction of, what we have been calling representative models for understanding how and why Jesus is proclaimed as Savior in the Christian community. Such Christologies, I urge, need to be taken more seriously by the Christian theological community.

As this happens, I expect that theologians, especially in the Roman Catholic community, will discover that the contrasting distinction between “representative” and “constitutive” Christologies is actually a false dualism. In Catholic sacramental theology, the difference between “showing” and “effecting” blurs. Sacraments *bring about* grace precisely because they *reveal* or show it. “*Symbolizando causant*” – by symbolizing or representing they cause – is a foundational maxim of Catholic sacramental theology. Applied to Jesus, the Primal Sacrament of the Church, this means that Jesus *constitutes* salvation because he so powerfully *represents* it. And if this is how we can understand how Jesus “constitutes” salvation, there can be others who share in that constitutive role.

66. Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, 445-466. G. W. H. Lampe, *God as Spirit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977). John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (London: SCM Press, 1993).

67. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1994). Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), chapter 8.

68. This perspective was developed especially by Edward Schillebeeckx in *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1979), esp. 439-515. Also: N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), chapter 5.

5. *In its way of witnessing to the uniqueness of Jesus*, a dialogical Christology will be both *correlational* and *prophetic*. With these final qualities of a dialogical Christology, it is clear, I trust, that this understanding of Jesus in no way wants to deny or water down the uniqueness of Jesus both in the Christian community and for the world. But it does seek to comprehend and announce that uniqueness in a way that does not deny what might be the analogous uniqueness of other religious figures and traditions

A correlational understanding of Jesus' uniqueness is best captured in John B. Cobb's dictum, "Christ is the Way that is open to other Ways."⁶⁹ The paradoxical and exciting contents of this statement are rooted not just in the rational insight of an academic theologian but in the experience of what Christians find in Jesus: He gives them a clear way to follow, a place to stand and to take stands; but this way also, at the same time, assures them that the God they have discovered in Jesus is a God whose universal, merciful love cannot be contained in, or confined by, any one way. Therefore, to understand the *Word* of God spoken in Jesus, Christians must look and listen to other Words of God. As the meaning of any word can only be understood within a sentence – that is, in relation to other words – so the Word of God in Jesus can be understood only within all the sentences that make up the Story of God's dealings with humanity. As Joseph O'Leary has expressed it: "... a theology true to the Bible [or Christ] is obliged to be a relational event, a dialogue. If the Bible [or Christ] retains a certain authoritative primacy in regard to other texts, it does so, paradoxically, only by exposing itself fully to the critique of other texts."⁷⁰

Therefore, if we Christians continue to announce to ourselves and others that in Jesus "dwells the fullness of Divinity" (Col 2:9), it will be a fullness – to continue the paradox – that opens us to the fullness of God possibly found in others. If we possess this fullness, we can grasp it, appreciate, and live it, only by relating it to the fullness in others. To sharpen the paradox and make it even more dialogical, yes we Christians *truly* have encountered the fullness of God's saving power in Jesus the Christ; but we cannot maintain that this powerful fullness is found *only* in Jesus.

So I wish to describe Jesus' uniqueness with the somewhat awkward adjective "correlational" (which my spell-checker continues to

69. Cobb, "Beyond 'Pluralism'," *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* (note 51), p. 91.

70. Joseph Stephen O'Leary, *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996) 53.

underline!); and I believe this term is more appropriate than others that have been suggested, such as “pluralistic” or “complementary.” To call a Christology or theology *pluralistic* suggests that it affirms plurality for the sake of plurality, as a good in itself, while to call the uniqueness of Jesus *complementary* to that of others implies that there will always be mutual agreement between them all. This is why I prefer to name the Christology I’m looking for *correlational*: it means that the value of “many” is not simply in their manyness but in their ability to “co-relate,” to connect with each other, to enter into fruitful exchange. And the fruitfulness of that exchange will not always be peaches and cream; while we seek for mutuality and agreement, there can also be sharp contrasts, even opposition. Thus, to understand Jesus’ uniqueness as correlational is to announce to ourselves and others that one of the things that is distinctive about him is how *who* he is or *what* he reveals enables him to co-relate, connect, enter into dialogue with others. Jesus’ uniqueness, in other words, does not *exclude* him from others or make him better than they; it relates him to all the others.

But there is another central quality of the way Jesus’ uniqueness relates to other religious figures and communities. We can call it *prophetic*. With this adjective, we’re trying to answer the question: what is really distinctive about Jesus? Admittedly, there is no one answer to that question; it will receive different responses in different periods, perhaps in different places, in the Church’s history. We’re asking what, in our age, is at the center of Jesus’ message and power – that without which we wouldn’t really be talking about Jesus. We’re also looking for what does not seem to be expressed so clearly and centrally in the message and movement of other religious figures and communities. We can call this distinctive, or unique, quality *prophetic*.

What this means is expressed, clearly and powerfully, by Aloysius Pieris, and is based on his experience of following Jesus in dialogue with the religions of Asia. He identifies two essential elements without which “Jesus, both as message and person, can hardly be encountered and much less proclaimed...” One element is a “common denominator between Christianity and all non-biblical religions in Asia,” whereas the second is “conspicuously absent in the Scriptures of other religions.” The first element is “the irreconcilable antimony between God and Mammon,” that is, the contradiction between the self-centered pursuit of wealth and the pursuit of the Divine. All religions, or most of them, call their followers *to be poor* – that is, not to allow greed to order their lives. But the second element in Jesus’ identity – what makes him distinct among the messengers of God and what is not so conspicuous

within Asian religions – is the way Jesus proclaims and embodies what Pieris calls “the irrevocable covenant between God and the poor.” Carrying on and sharpening the message of his fellow-Jewish prophets, “Jesus is the covenant between YHWH and the non-persons of the world.”⁷¹ Jesus calls his followers not only to be poor, but to *opt for the poor*, to stand with and for them. Whatever else Jesus and his followers can learn from persons of other religious experience and traditions – and there is much to learn – they must also call these dialogue-partners to recognize something they may not find that clearly in their own religious treasures: that to experience the Divine, to be enlightened, is to be called to a concern for the victims of this world.⁷²

For Pieris, if Christians want to speak about the *scandal* of the incarnation, here it is. The scandal or shock is not in God becoming human. After all, “All that God created was good; the whole creation is God’s body. God did not find it demeaning to be human. God could have become a flower without lowering Herself.”⁷³ The real shocker in Jesus is that God, the Divine, was incarnated as “a slave of human tyrants.”⁷⁴ “... the incarnation is the scandalous agreement (covenant) between God and Slaves, embodied in Jesus who sided with the non-persons...”⁷⁵ “Humanity is beautiful because it is the finest creation of God, the fruit of love. But slavery is ugly, because it is a creation of human greed, the fruit of sin.” And so, for Christians God’s incarnation is distinct from the “divine men” of the Greeks, or the divine avatars of Hinduism: “Incarnation cannot merely be the hypostatic union between divine and human natures, but the convenantal identification of God with the slaves of the earth. Jesus as the God of slaves and the slave of God is a proclamation that the Greeks never thought of.”⁷⁶

Though scandalous, such an understanding of Jesus’ uniqueness need not be offensive or a threat to friends in other religions; indeed, they might hear it as “Good News.” In a personal letter to a young theologian doing his dissertation on his theology, Pieris talks about his experience in “proclaiming” this view of Jesus’ uniqueness to his Buddhist friends:

71. *Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996) 150-151.

72. This interpretation of the distinctiveness of Jesus is powerfully present throughout the pages of Pieris’s recent, *God’s Reign for God’s Poor: A Return to the Jesus Formula* (Colombo: Tulana Research Centre, 1999), especially chapter 4.

73. Aloysius Pieris, “Whither New Evangelism?,” *Pacifica* 6 (1993) 327-334, p. 333.

74. *Ibid.*

75. Pieris, *Inculturation in Asia: A Theological Reflection on Experience* (Frankfurt: Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 1994) 68.

76. Pieris, “Whither New Evangelism?,” 333.

... they have not renounced even an iota of Buddhism to go along with this explanation of the uniqueness of Jesus. Rather, they have been deeply moved by this Christology, moved to reflect on our obligation as religious people in contemporary society. This is what Christology should do if it is soteriology and not just ontology. It is neither proselytizing nor philosophizing, but saving and transforming.⁷⁷

Other Christian theologians are locating the uniqueness or distinctiveness of Jesus not in the singularity of his ontological divine sonship but in the clarity of his prophetic witness to God's preferential concern for victims.

- This is one of the focal features of Gil Baille's *Violence Unveiled* when he states that "In one form or another, all of the world's religions urge their faithful to exercise compassion and mercy, as does the Judeo-Christian tradition. But the empathy with victims – as victims – is ... quintessentially biblical."⁷⁸
- For Fred Herzog, besides the elements of Jesus' message that are universal or common with other religions, Christians must also announce how Jesus "... in his walk embodies the protection privilege of the poor. He invites us concretely to commit ourselves to others in distress."⁷⁹
- Joseph O'Leary also finds Jesus' uniqueness in his concreteness, for in Jesus we realize that "God is at grips with the particular injustices of historical existence ... [Therefore] The type of interpretation that the memory of Jesus requires is *prophetic and engaged*, and always concerns concrete cases, whereas Buddhist wisdom focuses on the essential structures of existence, often unmasking the element of illusion in the apparent urgencies of history." For O'Leary, then, the uniqueness of Jesus "is less a matter of ontological superiority than a precise and irreplaceable function."⁸⁰
- In his magisterial review and proposal for an ecological theology, Larry Rasmussen ends his book with the claim that the distinctive Christian contribution to a theology of the earth is the reminder that God is to be found not only in the beauty of nature but also, and perhaps today especially, in the victims of injustice. In Jesus the Christ, we are told that "God is found ... in weakness and wretchedness, in

77. To Dr. Philip Gibbs, S.V.D.

78. Gil Baille, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 19. For Baille however, this unique quality of the Bible seems to exclude, rather than relate to, other religions.

79. In J. M. Rieger, *Liberating the Future: God, Mammon and Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 1998) 147.

80. O'Leary, *Religious Pluralism* (note 70), pp. 225 and 229. Emphasis mine.

darkness, failure, sorrow, and despair.” “The way of Jesus ... means, as *the starting point itself*, entering into the predicaments of others who suffer.” Therefore, “Love earth, yes, emphatically. But redeeming the planet means embracing its distress as movement of that love. It means going to the places of suffering to find God and God’s power there.”⁸¹

Such an understanding of Jesus’ uniqueness as a prophet who invites us to share in God’s special concern for the poor and victims imbues Christianity with a message that is not superior to other religions but that is relevant to all of them. It can enhance other religions and be enhanced by them. But it can also stand in opposition to religions that might ignore or even justify the victimization of some humans by others. The uniqueness of Jesus as prophet is a correlational, dialogical uniqueness.

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Father Gonzalo’s uneasiness about the tension or gap he felt between what he experienced in dialogue and what he understood in theology *must* be addressed in our community called the Catholic Church. And it *can* be addressed by continued and persistent theological grappling with this tension, perhaps along the lines of the dialogical Christology I have suggested. We can trust that our theological efforts *will* indeed bear fruit, if they are sustained and guided by both a deep commitment to Jesus Christ and his Gospel and to the dialogue with others to which this Gospel calls us.

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81. Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth, Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996) 284, 285, 290.