TOWARD A PLANETARY THEOLOGY

Along the Many Paths of God

JOSÉ MARÍA VIGIL (ED.)

AMALADOSS, BARROS, BRIGHENTI, CHIA, EGEA, KNITTER, LOY, MAGESA, NEUSNER, OMAR, OKURE, PANIKKAR, PHAN, PIERIS, RENSHAW, ROBLES, SESHAGIRI, SOARES, TEIXEIRA

ECUMENICAL ASSOCIATION OF THIRD WORLD THEOLOGIANS

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V

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International Theological Commission of
ECUMENICAL ASSOCIATION OF THIRD WORLD THEOLOGIANS
(EATWOT)

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José María VIGIL (editor)
INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION of the
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CONTENTS

Invitation 7

Presentation 9

THE CONSULTATION 14

POINT OF DEPARTURE:

Toward a Global, Secular, Planetary, Interreligious Theology
The Future of Theology as the Point of Departure of our Investigation
International Theological Commission of EATWOT 16

THE REPLIES

Being a Hindu-Christian
Michael AMALADOSS 33

Theology for a Trans-religious Spirituality
The Fragile Transparency of the Absolute
Marcelo BARROS 38

Theology and Religious Pluralism. Methodological Considerations.
Agenor BRIGENTI 55

Is Inter-faith Theology Possible?
Edmund Kee-Fook CHIA. 63

A Bahá'í Contribution to a «Trans-religious» Theology
Amín EGEA 69

Foundations for a Pluralistic Multifaith Theology
Paul KNITTER 76

Buddhist Reflections on Interreligious Theology
David R. LOY. 82

Inter-FaithTheology: the African Indigenous Contribution to the Discussion
Laurenti MAGESA 87

"Religions in general"?
Is an Interfaith Theology Plausible on the Campus?
Jacob NEUSNER 93

Is Interfaith Theology Possible?
If Not, Why Not?
Teresa OKURE 98

World Interfaith Theology of Religious Pluralism
A Muslim Perspective
Irfan A. OMAR 106

Liberation Theology and the Liberation of Theology
Raimon PANIKKAR 112

An Interfaith Christology: A Posibility and Desideratum?
Peter C. PHAN 117

Toward a Theology of Religious Pluralism
Fidelity and Fairness in Inter-FaithFellowship
Aloysius PIERIS. 124

Religious Experience as Foundation for a Possible Inter-faith Theology
Richard RENSHAW. 131

Toward a Post-Confessional and Post-Religous Theology
Religious Experience, Symbol and Post-Religious Theology
J. Amando ROBLES 140

Inter-faith Theology: A Hindu Perspective
K.L. SESHAGIRI RAO 146

Syncretism and Interconfessional Theology
Some Preliminary Notes
Afonso Maria Ligorio SOARES. 154

Marks of an Inter-Religious Mysticism
Faustino TEIXEIRA 170

The Seductive Future of Theology
José María VIGIL. 180

OPEN CONCLUSION

José María VIGIL, Luiza E.TOMITA, and Marcelo BARROS 189

Co-authors 192

Invitation

Moving toward an Open and Free Planetary Theology

This book is written for all those who are preoccupied by the future of theology: Where is it headed? How far can it go? Where does it seem to be going?

The result of the investigation that this book presents, directed as it is to people devoted to theology throughout the world and in different world religions, draws a conclusion that is not only positive but a source of enthusiasm: In spite of what many believe, theology is moving, is evolving, is taking risks, is questioning itself, is asking about the transformations that have to be brought about so that it can be a theology for today and a theology for the future. As the religious discipline that it is, it has always been tinged with a halo of eternity, of unquestionability, of immutibility. It seemed that theology—that sacred science!—could not change its classical figure as patrimony of religions and Churches. But that is over. For decades now some pioneers have proposed a "planetary theology," to include not only the human world but also the world of the cosmos: Gaia. It was a proposal to advance toward a theology that would leave behind the ghetto of its own religious confession in order to be able to speak to all of society, the society of today that is increasingly plural in its religiosity. In today's world, a strictly mono-confessional theology is condemned to be not listened to, and in fact not even to be heard by society as a whole.

We have asked these theologians—men and women—and their response allows us to present an attractive panorama: the theology of the future seems to be heading toward a pluralist model (without the classical complex of religious superiority and without the exclusivity of truth that traditionally accompanied theology). It is moving toward a pluri-confessional theology that we could also call inter-religious or multi-religious, or (always paying attention to the nuances of the word) trans-religious. There are those who also speak of a post-religional theology (religious but beyond the religions, on a level that is deeper), secular in that sense, and with a planetary awareness in this new knowledge society that in some way is being brought about little by little all across the planet, even in those places where they think it isn't evident.

These theologians offer us some passionate pages, worthy of study and meditation, with positive and negative arguments—for discernment. We hope that the conclusion of the reader will be, as was ours, that these are good times for theology, times of effervescence, of mutation, of new proposals, of risky experiences, of an open future. We are walking at a good pace, not without difficulties, toward a theology that is open and free.

Walk with us and see all that in reading these pages.

The Co-Authors

Presentation

Fifth Volume in the series «Along the Many Paths of God»

This book is the fifth and last in the series "Along the Many Paths of God."

The series flows from an initiative organized initially by the Latin American Theological Commission of EATWOT, taken up and completed in this last volume by the International Theological Commission of EATWOT. From the beginning, the objective and intention motivating this collective effort has been to trace the "crossroads between liberation theology and the theology of religious pluralism. These theologies had each remained in their own circles when we began this investigative project. There had been no contact or dialogue. Today, in concluding the project, several years later, we can say that liberation theology and the theology of religious pluralism are not unknown to one another. Instead, there is a good deal of reflection ahead that points to a fruitful dialogue.

But, this objective of mutual encounter and dialogue between the two theologies has gone beyond the expectations that we had with regard to the distance to cover. After looking into "the challenges of religious pluralism for liberation theology," (the first volume) and then considering the first steps "toward a Christian and Latin American theology of religious pluralism," (second volume), we took the leap of suggesting and elaborating a first outline of what would be a "Latin American pluralist theology of liberation" in the third volume. In the fourth volume we opened our windows to the world to entrench our project on the five continents in the search for a "Christian and intercontinental liberation theology of

religious pluralism." Had we hit the seemingly insuperable goal, beyond which it would not be possible to find a viable form of "theology?" That at least is what many people suggested in saying that theology can only take place within a specific religious confession. Was it possible to open the perspectives further?

What had inspired this whole progressive search pointed to a final goal by which, at least we needed to ask about, and to understand, a theology that would not be mono-religious and confessional but rather multi-religious, inter-faith, and perhaps not even religional, that is to say not linked to or limited to the framework of religion. It would instead be open to what are just and simply human questions and would take up not just what is anthropocentrically human but what is integrally bio-centric and cosmic, planetary...

In short, the final question remaining to be faced and answered was: Where is the theology headed that responds sincerely and courageously to the demands of the radical evolution of this society that is not just plural and pluralist but also united and heading toward an ever greater unification within itself and also with nature and with the cosmos? What is the final stage or level of the theology we can dream of today—even though we surely cannot yet reach it? With this in mind, we put into motion the process of consultation. The volume you have in your hands is the result.

This book is the expression of these dreams; the investigative project that the series presents is now completed. Obviously—and the reader will notice this in what follows—the resulting panorama does not provide a specific or mapped out guide to what is or will be that "planetary theology" that can be suggested.... The panorama is rather that of a foggy intuition that can be suggested among the many ways of seeing things differently and that is in constant evolution. We need to allow time for the horizon to clear. In any case, we believe that the investigation that this book represents points to the arrival of a debate that is already classic in the theological field and that it will constitute a positive contribution to the already large task of helping theology provide the most accurate responses possible to the new and always changing situation of today's world.

Although the investigation that this fifth volume represents is preceded by the earlier ones, this one is, as such, entirely independent and can be read independently and with full comprehension, without reading the earlier volumes. Still, in concluding this presentation, we recall briefly the books of the series as much to assist their overall vision for those who do not know it as to render present the complete panorama in which this volume is framed:

1. The first book, published in 2003, had as subtitle, "Challenges of religious pluralism for liberation theology."[1] It merely attempted to clear out this new path by pointing out the main challenges that needed to be addressed. The publishing house Rede[2] published it in Portuguese and Editorial Misionera Italiana (EMI) in Bologna, published it with the title of "I Volti del Dio Liberatore."[3]

2. The second volume, published in 2004 and subtitled "Toward a Latin American Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism" attempted to provide the "first responses" to those challenges.[4] The publication was double. The Spanish version came out in Ecuador and the Portuguese in Brazil.[5] It also appeared in Italian through the same publishing house in Bologna[6] with a long "epilogue" by Carlo Molari[7] who, in this way, initiated a critical and also welcoming dialogue between European and Latin American theologians.

3. The third book, concluded in 2005, proposed a first attempt at an initial "Latin American pluralist theology of liberation."[8] In Brazil[9] it was also published in Portuguese. Italy[10] is now also preparing its publication with the participation of Maruillo Guasco, who continues in this way the Italian dialogue he had already initiated with our Third World theology.

4. The fourth volume appeared in 2006 and proposed to evaluate, from an intercontinental and therefore not just Latin American perspec-

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[1] ASETT, *Por los muchos caminos de Dios. Desafíos del pluralismo religioso a la teología de la liberación*, Verbo Divino, Quito 2003, 187 pp, collection «Tiempo Axial» nº 1.

[2] ASETT, *Pelos muitos caminhos de Deus. Desafios do puralismo religioso à Teologia da Libertação*, Rede, Goiás GO, 2003, 160 pp.

[3] BARROS, TOMITA, VIGIL (editors), *I volti del Dio liberatore. Le sfide del pluralismo religioso*, Editrice Missionaria Italiana, Bologna 2004, 160 pp. See: http://latinoamericana.org/tiempoaxial/textos/ivoltideldioliberatore.htm

[4] VIGIL, TOMITA, BARROS (orgs.), *Por los muchos caminos de Dios. Hacia una teología cristiana y latinoamericana del pluralismo religioso*, Abya Yala, Quito 2004, 239 pp., collection «Tiempo Axial» nº 3.

[5] TOMITA, BARROS, VIGIL, *Pluralismo e Libertação. Por uma Teologia Latino-Americana Pluralista a partir da Fé Cristã*, Loyola, São Paulo 2005, 231 pp.

[6] BARROS, TOMITA, VIGIL (a cura), *Verso una teologia del pluralismo religioso*, postfazione di Carlo Molari, Editoriale Missionaria Italiana, Brescia 2005, 270 pp., collana «La Missione».

[7] *Ibid.*, págs. 239-267.

[8] VIGIL, TOMITA, BARROS, *Por los muchos caminos de Dios. Teología latinoamericana pluralista de la liberación*, Abya Yala, Quito 2006, 207 pp., collection «Tiempo Axial» nº 6.

[9] TOMITA, BARROS, VIGIL (orgs.), *Teologia latino-americana pluralista da libertação*, Paulinas São Paulo 2006, coleção Pelos Muitos Caminhos de Deus, vol. III, 312 pp.

[10] Pazzini Editore, Rimini, Italy.

tive, the current world situation of the construction of a "pluralist theology of liberation."[11] In Brazil[12] it was also published in Portuguese.

5. As has been said, this series was conceived as a set of levels. The final book crowns the series by taking up the question of a possible "multi-religious" and pluralist theology of liberation," from a perspective that is obviously global. By "multi-religious we mean something more than "interreligious," something also more than a theology pointed toward a preoccupation for "interreligious dialogue." In short, dialogue cannot be more than a means that points to a further goal. How will theology be when interreligious dialogue achieves its goal, even though that is not the end of the story? Some call it inter-faith theology or world theology, a theology that is multi-religious, global, planetary.... This fifth book is dedicated to this dream and to its problematic. Obviously, it does so in a way that is also multi-religious, etc. As for its publication, on paper and in Spanish, this series "Along the Many Paths of God" has been published as part of the "Axial Times" theological collection of the publishing house Abya Yala in Quito Ecuador. Its web page address is http://latinoamericana.org/tiempoaxial

As we have said on other occasions, the ordering of the journey through a series of five books draws graphic attention to its five levels:

- The first book is limited to pointing out the challenges; the four that follow try to construct a new theology in a positive way;
- The first two are looking for a "pluralist paradigm," while the last three consciously take it up;
- The first three books are "Latin American" and make for a Latin American theology; the last two go beyond this geo-cultural setting to situate themselves in an inter-continental and world perspective;
- The first four are "Christian theology," while the fifth is already multi-religious;
- The five books are liberation theology from a pluralist perspective and cross liberation theology with the theology of religious pluralism, which is the objective of the series "Along the Many Paths of God."

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[11] VIGIL, TOMITA, BARROS, *Por los muchos caminos de Dios. Teología liberadora intercontinental del pluralismo religioso*, Abya Yala, Quito 2007, 255 pp., collection «Tiempo Axial» nº 8.

[12] VIGIL, TOMITA, BARROS, *Teologia pluralista libertadora intercontinental*, Paulinas, São Paulo 2008, 390 pp.

We cannot end without expressing our very sincere appreciation to all the authors, men and women, who, in accepting the challenge have made possible this collective work and have given up their rights as authors to make this book as accessable as possible to the public.

We want to thank once more the Aachen-based Missionswissenschaftliches Institut for its support for the realization of this volume.

Finally, we thank the readers, the correspondents and also our critics for their understanding, their critiques and suggestions to keep moving ahead in the construction of this new, planetary theology that is elaborated "along the many paths of God," and that we hope will, day by day, become more known and recognized.

The very appearance of a book like this presupposes the concrete exercise of dialogue as a spiritual and human path that we hope might one day be the daily practice of the religions of all humanity.

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EATWOT.

THE CONSULTATION

The investigation presented in this book was developed through a consultation directed to a select group of theologians—men and women—from different religions throughout the world through the good graces of the four continental Theological Commissions of EATWOT (Asian, African, Latin American and the representative of minorities in the United States).

The consultation took place in these terms:

In the earlier books of this series, "Along the Many Paths of God," the long march of Christianity and theology has been studied from the archaic stages of exclusivism, passing through the currently hegemonic inclusivism, on the way to a "pluralism in principle" and toward a pluralist re-reading of Christianity. Assuming this basic option for a theology that is honestly pluralist in principle, the question that we posed—specifically for theology—is the following: In the evolution foreseen for theology is there any stage beyond that of a "pluralist confessional theology?"

Is the so called "comparative theology" sufficient? By this we refer to a theology in which the theologian is rooted in his or her own tradition and develops a theology of pluralism in dialogue with other religious traditions?

Is it possible think of a pluralist theology that is based on and works with categories, sources, principles, images and metaphors that come from not one religion but several? Is it possible to have a theology that is not mono-confessional, one that is open, pluri-confessional in addition to being pluralist?

What role would the poor, the golden rule and the option for the poor have in such a theology?

Finally, if the most important thing in the world today is urgent action in the face of:

- the poverty and injustice that half of humanity is suffering,

- the clash of civilizations and the religious fundamentalisms that hinder peace,

- the imminent threat of a planetary ecological catastrophe,

what would a theology such as the world needs today be like so that religions would then decide, for the first time in history, to work for the salvation of Humanity and Nature?

The consultation can be summed up in concise questions:

• Is an "interreligious, multi-religious, planetary, world theology possible?

• What are the concrete elements, themes and suggestions for developing an inter-faith theology?

• What is the relationship between an inter-faith theology and the universal "golden rule" and the option for the poor?

• Is an inter-faith spirituality possible? Beyond being pluralist, will it be secular? Post-religional?

The process of sending out and receiving the responses turned out to be more labor intensive and lengthy than foreseen. Not a few of the persons consulted did not like the questions; some considered them unusual and disconcerting; some rejected them as inappropriate. With still others we had to engage in a dialogue of clarification. Of course, others considered them pertinent and responded either positively or negatively. The widely-varied spread of the responses collected is a witness to that diversity. Obviously, this volume gathers up all the responses that we received, without any filter.

POINT OF DEPARTURE:

Toward a Pluralist, Secular, Planetary, Interreligious Theology

The future of theology as the point of departure for our investigation

The historical and theological journey covered by earlier volumes of the series "Along the Many Paths of God" has, on the one hand, placed before our eyes the profound evolution that theology has experienced in these latter years as it has encountered other religions, and, on the other hand, it leads us to suspect that this evolution is not concluded. Rather, new and profound transformations await theology in the future. This is the same evolution of societies and humanity around the world that is driving the incessant transformation of theology.

It is this vision and this intuition that inspired and guided the investigation gathered together in this fifth volume. We set it out in a "historical-genetic" form, knowing that it is not intended to establish any thesis but merely to help understand the context from which we engaged in this investigation and to create a framework that would permit the creative imagination to fly freely.

The words in bold print throughout the text indicate the principal landmarks marking the evolution of this theology.

Traditionally, theologies have in principle experienced the same evolution as the religions to which they pertain: when these religions were **exclusivist** and thought, that "extra me nulla salus," that outside them there is no salvation, the theologies also saw themselves as exclusivist and thought that, outside any one of them, there was no other real theology, or any theology in fact. In that exclusivist stage, the theology

of each religion was a closed world, circumscribed within its own religion, although each theology thought—and this certainly—that it was a universal theology, and unique as well (gifted with a salvific uniqueness). Paradoxically, the most closed among exclusivist theologies felt and thought of themselves in the most universal terms imaginable: they and only they were "the uniquely true theology in this world." Communication and dialogue among theologies was, at that point, quite unthinkable.

A few decades ago, the exclusivist perspectives and attitudes gave way, little by little and across the world, to others of an inclusivist origin, both in religions and in theologies. Theologies began to pay attention to the existence of other theologies although they looked at them from a perspective of "inclusive superiority." Inclusivism carried within itself a good dose of exclusivism, although it was tempered. For that reason, real dialogue with these other theologies continued being almost impossible since there could be no "parity" between the interveners that would make it possible. Also, in the field of inclusivism, each theology continued to be the exclusive path of its own religion.

The recent twentieth century was the century of Christian **ecumenism**. The Edinborough Conference of 1910 marked the beginning of a real blooming in this field.[1] Although it was an intra-Christian phenomenon, and so not properly interreligious, it offers very interesting lessons for the interreligious field. Christian ecumenism not only bettered relations between the Christian churches; it also allowed the emergence of an ecumenical spirituality and theology that were common and not restricted to a specific confession. Without losing the assignation to their own confession, theologians managed to share and live a truly and sincerely ecumenical spirituality without signs of confessional exclusivity. It was a theology that was directed to a Christian public that included different confessions.

As a further step, and quite different from intra-Christian ecumenism, **macroecumenism** needs to be mentioned as characteristic of Latin American liberation theology.[2] It was not simply intra-Christian but took in also other religions and even, more remarkably, included militant and committed atheism. Many texts and books of liberation theology, macroe-

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[1] Kenneth LATOURETTE, *Ecumenical Bearing of the Missionary Movement and the International Missionary Council*, in RUTH ROUSE & STEPHEN NEILL, (orgs.), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1986.

[2] Pedro CASALDÁLIGA - José María VIGIL, *The Spirituality of Liberation*, Burns & Oates, London 1994, chapter «Macro-Ecumenism», p. 165. ID, *Political Holiness*, Orbis, Maryknoll 1994.

cumenical in character, were not only "ecumenical," in the sense of transversally common to different Christian confessions and denominations, but also "macroecumenical," that is to say directed to a public that not only persons who were Christian but also people from another religion or even people who were positively "atheist," and who shared a common hope, with a "macroecumenical discourse" that not only did not separate but made a very powerful union possible.

This also raises a question whether something similar is not happening in world theology when the infrastructural and spiritual conditions of a society make a religious discourse possible that takes responsibility for the unity, destiny and hope that unites all humanity and its religions? Could there not one day be a "macroecumenical theology" at an inter-religious level?

During the last century, liberation theology was spontaneously inclusivist. During the decades in which it was born, nothing else was thinkable since the **pluralist perspective** had not even been raised as a topic in the geographical area in which liberation theology arose during the 60s to the 80s. This schematization and the initial elaboration of a pluralist theology of religious pluralism occurred during the same years in the Anglo-Saxon and Asian regions. In the last years of the twentieth century an encounter took place between some Latin American theologians and the Anglo-Saxon theology of religious pluralism. Only beginning in 2000—as far as we know—an entity like EATWOT, at its General Assembly celebrated precisely in Latin America, undertook to encourage an encounter and mutual fertilization between liberation theology and the theology of religious pluralism. As the reader probably knows, this project was crystallized in the series "Along the Many Paths of God,"[3] in a gradual progressive order of encounter, dialogue, union and creativity whose final volume you are now reading.

The first process of encounter and union quickly opened up to a pluralist theology of liberation,[4] or a theology of liberating pluralism. This was a way of doing theology that establishes itself in the pluralist perspective, on the one hand, and is rooted also in the "social location" of the option for the poor, not only in Latin America but also inter-continentally and globally.

Above all, in that global setting religious experience is religiously plural. World society, countries (including those that are traditionally

[3] Published by Abya Yala, Quito, beginning in 2003..

[4] This is the testimony of volumes II and III of the collection.

mono-religious), societies, cities, neighborhoods, residential city blocks, etc., have become decidedly **multi-religious**. It is not possible to address society as it is today and pretend to do so from a mono-confessionally perspective. It is no longer possible to undertake any sort of debate with public opinion in society as a whole and pretend to do so on the basis of an exclusivist reference in a religion or confession. Such discourse would quite simply remain outside the historical context, dislocated by its lack of understanding of the inevitably plural configuration of society today. Equally, a theology that wanted to address a word to society or to the world, to humanity, cannot do so at this point by circling the wagons and using only the provincial references of its own confession, taking into account only its confession vision and using only the references to its own symbolic patrimony. Not only does it risk not being listened to but it may not even be heard. Now that society is plural, social consciousness, public opinion and, we might even say, the "collective social subconscience" have incorporated the inevitable fact of plurality and also the rights and obligations of pluralism. Whoever wants to discuss with others outside that recognition, is marginalized, will not be paid attention to and probably will not even be heard.

Paul Knitter spoke of this already some years ago:

> Today theologians need to recognize, in theory and practice, that theology can no longer be studied or developed inside a single religious tradition. Certainly theologians need to be rooted in the faith of a religion; but if they remain entirely within that framework, they will not be up to what their work requires of them. They will not be doing theology in the world, in this pluralist world of today. They will not be pursuing the truth that includes, but rather what excludes others. Today, we cannot search for truth, we cannot even know ourselves or our own religion, unless we know that of others. [5]

Paul Tillich also said the same thing a few days before his sudden death. Along with Mircea Eliade, he had, for two years, been directing a seminar on the history of religions. It was a theme that profoundly touched him. On October 12, 1965, he gave a conference in which, on the testimony of Mircea Eliade, he "declared that, if there had been time, he would have written a new *Systematic Theology* oriented to the whole history of religions and in dialogue with them."[6] It is well known that the experience and contact with religious pluralism transforms our religious practice and experience. It leads to a new way of understanding the reli-

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[5] Paul KNITTER, *No Other Name?*, Orbis, Maryknoll 1985, p. 224.

[6] Mircea ELIADE, *Paul Tillich y la historia de las religiones*, introductory essay to P. TILLICH, *El futuro de las religiones*, Aurora, Buenos Aires 1976.

gious panorama and, as a result, to the need to rewrite theology as Tillich confessed. Today it is clear to us that a theology that develops its discourse on the basis of strictly confessional categories, of its own domestic sphere, disregarding the pluralist reality and the norms and rights of pluralism, will be a theology from another time frame, that it will not be adequate to the real conditions of societies in today's world.

Starting with this awareness of multi-religiosity, the possibility was quickly proposed for a **universal theology of religions** that would transcend and, at the same time, integrate the identity of each religion. It would be a world theology, appropriate to all humanity and without specific links to any particular religious community. It would rather be a theology with contributions from all religious traditions.[7]

We cannot fail here to quote Wilfred Cantwell Smith, one of the theologians who spoke most clearly in defense of this line of evolution toward a "world theology."[8]

> The day will soon come when a theologian who attempts to develop a theology without taking into account his or her position as member of a world society in which other theologians, who are equally intelligent, equally pious, are Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and without taking into account that their readers are probably Buddhists or have a Muslim partner or have Hindu colleagues, would create a theology that is dead in the water. It would be like someone who attempts develop his or her thought without knowing what Aristotle thought about the world or that existentialists have raised new questions.[9]

Ewert Cousins agrees:

> Systematic Christian theology has remained cloistered in Western culture and his intellectual history.... Christian theology continues to be impervious to the majority of the world's religions.... This situation has to end. The encounter between the religions of the world demands the construction of a systematic theology that can embrace within its horizon

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[7] TEIXEIRA, Faustino, *Teología de las religiones. Una visión panorámica*, Abya Yala, Quito 2005, p. 14, collection Tiempo axial nº 4.

[8] SMITH, Wilfred Cantwell, *Towards a World Theology*, Orbis, Maryknoll 1986, published previously by Macmillan Press, London 1981. See also SWIDLER, L., «Interreligious and Interideological Dialogue», in SWIDLER, L. (ed.), *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*, New York: Orbis Books 1987, 5-50.

[9] ID., *Faith of Other Man*, 123.

> the religious experience of the whole of humanity... It is a completely new task. Never before in the history of Christianity has this challenge confronted us.[10]

This task of rewriting theology and or recreating its content does not imply only a novelty in the object but also demands something new of the subject, that is to say it requires a new sort of theology with a new kind of awareness, one that is multi-dimensional and intercultural.[11]

In the current evolution, we can more and more say that we are moving toward a society in which there is no longer a "local religion" that excludes others. Rather, we find multi-religious, plural societies in which there can be a religion of the majority but not a religion that excludes. The plurality has come to stay and to stay with all its rights. Moreover, modern educated society has taken up those rights already. Beyond its own specific religious confession, an educated society—whether in the university, in politics, in the communications media or in public opinion—is no longer content to take into account the position of a religion on issues, but rather wants to know and take into account the distinct positions and opinions adopted by different religions with relation to those issues.[12] In the field of theology this creates a space for so-called **comparative theology**.[13] This is no a minor successor to Encyclopedism, nor does it imply syncretism but is instead an opening that is a democratic heir to religious plurality in society. It's a theology at the level of the society it is situated in and that tries to take into account the real situation of its social and historic context. It wants to participate in society responsibly and, for that reason, it recognizes its intervention honestly without pretending that the society it addresses has to accommodate to the unique peculiarities of a confessional theology.

But, there are still more variations in this journey. Even though it is something not a few religions fear, the fact that multi-religiosity often produces **inter-religiosity** is quite an ancient phenomenon.

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[10] E. COUSINS, *Raimundo Panikkar and the Christian Systematic Theology of the Future*, in «Cross Currents» 29 (1979) 145-146. See also: Peter SLATER, *Towards a responsive Theology of Religions*, in «Studies in Religion» 6(1977)507-514.

[11] «This new theology demands a new kind of theology, with a new kind of consciousness: an intercultural and multidimensional consciousness:" COUSINS, *ibid*.

[12] KNITTER, *Ibid*., p. 2ff.

[13] Wilfred C. SMITH (*ibid*. 126) defines comparative theology in this way: "The community to which as religious persons each of us is starting to belong is now the community of humanity. As human beings we have been religious in a wide variety of ways. The variety

There are believers who know and live multi-religiosity so profoundly that they sincerely feel they are living their spirituality not only in the fold of the religion to which they were born and in which they grew up, but also in the embrace of the religion or religions that they know well.

This is not the place to discern the much discussed phenomenon of **double belonging** or even of **multiple belonging** in order to distinguish it from the ever present phantom of theoretical syncretism or of the practical syncretism of utilitarian religiosity that, in some popular contexts, takes advantage indiscriminately of all the religious fonts that produce healings or cures. We are referring rather to the phenomenon of the double or multiple belonging that numerous and quite serious figures have explored and documented in these latter times.[14] We are also concerned with the phenomenon as it occurs, often massively, in populated areas of the world with a multi-religious presence. We are thinking, for example, of indigenous populations "evangelized" earlier by Christianity, who preserve and increasingly recover the stamp of their ancestral religion and who do not feel the need to renounce any of their inherited religious components. As another example, there is also the multiple belonging lived out in large regions of Asia and Africa, in which double belonging has always been lived with the greatest natural ease. Without becoming a double belonging, we can consider the experience of the enormous influence that Eastern religions in general are exercising over Western Christianity in recent decades. There are legions of Christians who have adopted methods of prayer and paths of spirituality from Eastern religions. They feel quite comfortable and very "identified" with those experiences and with a certain level of double belonging.

The abundant literature that exists about the obligatory uni-confessionality of theology[15] is well known, as is the difficulty of discerning the

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of faith has been prodigious. The task that derives from this is precisely that of a thinker who tries to formulate a theology that interprets and reflects on our multi-formed faith. Obviously, it is not yet possible to adequately describe such a theology: Comparative theology of religions has not yet been written. It is, nevertheless, a task that awaits us. I subscribe to it."

[14] Benedictine monks Henri Le Saux and Bede Griffiths are perhaps the best known names in this context.

[15] "A theology cannot be at the same time both Christian, Muslim and Hindu. It has to be one or the other. In other words, all theology is 'confessional,' in the best sense of the word, or it is absolutely nothing. Here, the attribute 'confessional' indicates adhesion in faith of the person or community that is the theme of doing theology;" J. DUPUIS, *Rumo a uma teologia crisã do pluralismo religioso*, Paulinas, São Paulo 1999, 19. ID., *Gesù Criso incontro alle religioni*, Citadella editrice, Assisi 1991, 345-347.

internal relationship of various belongings shared in the same person[16]. There are, for example, people who see themselves as Buddhist Christians and others who feel they are Christian Buddhists[17]... Which religion represents the substantive here and which is the adjective? In reality what does that difference mean? Or perhaps the belonging exists beyond the different confessional belongings made compatible by a double or multiple belonging, as another belonging, installed at another level, beyond that of confessions, one that is "unique" and not multiple?[18]

This phenomenon of multiple belonging or, to put it another way, the phenomenon of religious identity that manages to transcend its concrete confessional identity and establish itself beyond that and that feels equally at ease with other confessional belongings, is not only very ancient but is accepted by the most prestigious of religious testimonies, that of the mystics. Ibn'Arabi expressed it in an unforgettable way:

> There was a time when I rejected my neighbour if his religion was not like mine. Now, my heart has been converted into the receptacle for all religions forms: It is the meadow of gazelles and the cloister of Christian monks, the temple of idols and the Kaaba of pilgrims, the Tables of the Law and the pages of the Qur'an, because I profess the religion of Love, and I go wherever its mount goes, since Love is my credo and my faith.[19]

If we have witnesses, today and from the past, that interreligiosity is possible, and that multi-religiosity frequently lead to a religious identity that transcends its specific confession, and if we believe that this is not only an experience of exceptional people who have lived in limit situations, or that of great missionaries who have lived on the interreligious frontier, if we know that this is a relatively frequent religious as well as cultural experience that happens among many people and in social sec-

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[16] We do not enter here into the topic of the current inevitability of a certain inter-religiosity through a sort of "socio-religious osmosis" in current pluralist societies. "In a pluralist society like that of India, authentic religion necessarily implies a relationship with other religions (...); in a word: to be religious is to be inter-religious:" See the Declaration of the Indian Theological Association, which takes up the theme of the contemporary inevitability of a level of inter-religiosity, no 36, quoted by J. DUPUIS, *Verso una teología cristiana del pluralismo religioso*, Queriniana, Brescia 1997, pág. 19-20. Cfr. también: P. PHAN, *Being Religious Interreligoiously. Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue*, Orbis, Maryknoll 2004.

[17] Michael AMALADOSS expresses and nuances his own personal experience in this same volume, pag. 31-35.

[18] This is not the place to resolve the issue.

[19] Ibn'ARABI, Murcia, España, 1165-1240. See also. Emilio GALINDO, *Pluralismo religioso de los místicos sufíes*, in *Agenda Latinoamericana'2003*, pág. 154.

tors of scale, then what are the consequences for theology?[20] Along with traditional theology, developed by people or in places with less access to the experience of interreligiosity, could there not also be a place for another "theology"[21] developed by people who, though rooted primarily in the religion of their primary confession, live a **trans-confessional**[22] religious experience, an experience of a kind of multiple belonging? If so, their theology cannot represent a conventional confessionality. Will a trans-confessional theology[23] also be possible? It would be a theology that dares to speak theologically to people today, but not to those of a specific religious confession (properly, that of the theologian), but rather to those who already live a sort of inter-religious or trans-religious religious experience? We insist here again that this does not have to be "the" new model for theology; it will not have to replace the corresponding traditional theological forms for needs and tasks on a small scale.[24] However, we can see it as a new form of theology that will be viable and plausible in the increasingly plural and multi-religious societies we live in.

And we point out also that this trans-confessionality has not only the characteristic of going beyond confessional limits, but also and positively has the capacity to reflect through examination and grouping of religions, by bearing them along and helping them to move to a new perspective where cooperation and unity are co-natural.

There is an evolutionary wave that is surging and evolving along a different path and that we have been accompanying up till now. We refer to the recurrent and growing proposal of **going beyond religions**. As we have said, it is an old proposal that appears and reappears, with new and

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[20] In fact, from this point in the evolution of theology, it will have to cease being "theo"-"logy," in the sense that Greek rationality conceived it, because it will not longer necessarily be "theist," nor will it find its principal axis in the "logos." From this point on, even though we continue speaking of "theology" in order to understand one another, it is obvious that we are using a term that falls short.

[21] Although we speak of "theology" in order to understand one another, it is clear that we are referring to the reflection that carries that name in Christianity. It has other names and other characteristics in other religions.

[22] We are not giving to the prefix "trans" the meaning of improvement and abandon in a religious confession, but only that of liberation from the bonds that bind it as exclusive.

[23] We insist that we are not dealing with a theology that abandons confessionality but of one that transcends it to the point of taking it up in plurality.

[24] For example, consider the theological formulation of the vision of each religion, the elaboration of its corresponding "theological treatises" destined, for example, to the theological formation within each religion. These theological forms, confessional and specific by nature, will always be necessary within each religion and will always have their place. The full, open theology, at the level of the religious evolution of society, the vanguard theology whose frontiers we are trying to discern does not deny these minor forms with which it will have to share the space.

greater depth every time. The latest form that this proposal has taken has been the badly-named theology of the death of God, the various interpretations of the phenomenon of secularization, of "post-theism."[25]

To avoid a theological debate we can't enter into here with respect to all those theological positions, we can set forth the challenge from a terrain outside theology, such as that of cultural anthropology. Several studies of this sort suggest that we are in a very profound moment of cultural transition, similar to that other historical phenomenon, which Karl Jaspers called the "axial time," that that took place approximately between the years 800 and 200 B.C.E. It was the "moment" during which the consciousness of human beings was transformed and there arose a new religious awareness in humanity. It happened throughout the fringe of philosophical and religious advances during the era, including the Greek philosophers, the prophets of Israel, Zarathustra in Persia, Confucius and Lao Tse in China, the Upanishads and Buddha in India, and so on. It is the moment when the so-called "great religions" appeared. Even today they survive and we are still experiencing their legacy.

According to this interpretation of cultural anthropology, these religions are the concrete expression of human religiosity corresponding to the agrarian era, the Neolithic age. For that reason they are in crisis today, because the change experienced by society today consists precisely in that the agrarian society deriving from the Neolithic age is coming to an end. The last three hundred years of industrialization have been the preface to the current great crisis, provoked by the arrival of the end of agrarian society, pushed by the "knowledge society" that is already taking shape. The religions that we know, in so far as they are "agrarian religions," are not representative of "the spirituality of being human" as such. Rather they represent the concrete way in which that spirituality was taken up in the agrarian society. The spiritual dimension of human beings was lived for many millennia without religions. The (agrarian) "religions" are basically the socio-historical configurations that human society adopted in the agrarian period and that were articulated on the foundation of "beliefs." They incorporated in themselves the function of "programming" society precisely through the mechanism of "submission" of human beings to beliefs.

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[25] The most significant exponent at this point of the proposal for going beyond theism is probably John Shelby SPONG, with his prolific production as a writer and speaker Cfr *A New Christianity for a New World*, HarperSanFrancisco, New York 2000.

This well-known anthropological-cultural (hypo) thesis,[26] suggests that "religions" are a human socio-historical configuration coherent with the "agrarian" period of humanity, a period that is specifically ending and is being progressively replaced by the "knowledge society." We don't know how long this transition could last, but the hypothesis is that it is already underway and that a "non religional"[27] dimension is becoming present in many places. It is clear and draws attention in Europe. However, if you look closely, it is somewhat present everywhere on the planet. Obviously, humanity will continue being "religious," in the sense of "spiritual."[28] Still, everything indicates that the "agrarian religions" will continue agonizing throughout the process of moving beyond the agrarian period and the implantation of a knowledge society.

Constrained by this unique situation today, will the current world religions be radically transformed and become the socio-religious configuration of the spirituality of human beings in the future knowledge society? We don't know. To judge by the behavior they are engaged in today, the reply would seem to be negative. With all their strength, they resist transmuting as if by some genetic reflex.[29]

Faced with this future glimpsed by today's cultural anthropology, what will theology be? As we have already said, the traditional forms of theology will also have their place and meaning. However it is possible to think that, if this epochal tradition from an agrarian society toward a post-religional society is correct, there will arise a new theology and it will give rise to a new path: a **post-religional theology**. That is to say, it will be a theology beyond (agrarian) religions. Not only beyond "a" specific religion,[30] but also beyond the forms proper to agrarian religions as such, that is to say: a theology without "beliefs."[31] It will be without submis-

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[26] For a synthetic view of this point, we recommend: Marià CORBÍ, *Religión sin religión*, PPC, Madrid 1996, available at servicioskoinonia.org/biblioteca.

[27] We use this neologism to distinguish it from the post-religious and to avoid ambiguity. It can be beyond the religions we call "agrarian," without ceasing to be very religious in a profound sense.

[28] Even though it is an awkward word, we use it as the dedicated usage.

[29] The analysts and phenomenologists of religion insist that religiosity is not evolving or being transformed but that it is in a profound "metamorphosis." (See MARTÍN VELASCO, J., *Metamorfosis de lo sagrado y futuro del cristianismo*, Sal Terrae 1999). On the other hand, religions vaunt their sempiternal history, their "indefectibility to the end of time" and the unquestionable fidelity owed to their origins.

[30] This is what brought about the plural transformation of society.

[31] We are speaking in the technical sense in which this word is used in the anthropological-cultural interpretation quoted here.

sion, without social programming, without dogmas, without laws, without truths or doctrines. Theoretically, it is possible that today's agrarian religions will be transmuted into a new configuration. However, that may also not happen through a process of institutional continuity in which institutions undertake the task of their own transformation. It may rather happen through substitution. The agricultural religions will disappear and other forms of religions will appear independently. At this point it is this latter alternative that seems to be occuring.

In this context, what will a post-religional theology be? It's impossible to define it. Still, we can describe it as a **secular theology**, one that is simply human, centered in religiosity itself, in spirituality, in a service liberated from a "religion" as a hierarchically sacred institution with its system of beliefs, rituals and canons. A secular theology will be simply a human theology, simply for human beings as human, prior to or at the margin of their relationship with a religious "system, prior to or at the margin of any religion. It will be a theology that is in relation to the "religiosity" (in the sense of spirituality) of being human as such, as human, by the mere fact of being human in a secular way prior to or at the margin of all institutional religion.[32]

By its own movement, and without taking on the various transformation that we are listing here, this secular theology converges nevertheless, in some sense, with what is called public theology in so far as its pretends to be a theological discourse that is situated in an academic setting, in dialogue with the sciences and with an active involvement in the debates that are being developed in the public sphere of society.[33]

But, parallel to the evolution of phases and new demands that theology could confront in the future because of the evolution of our religious awareness, there is another dimension that also is going to affect the evolution of theology. It is the irruption of planetary consciousness in contemporary society. Human society is becoming aware that we

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[32] We insist, as has already been said in the last note, that this new major form of theology does not eliminate or substitute for the minor theologies. They are always necessary as the theology interior to each confession, the theology of the theoretic education of each religion or confession, in each of the branches of the "universa theologia."

[33] See the public theology program of the Humanities Institution of the Jesuit University of São Leopoldo, UNISINOS. This public theology, originating in the Anglo-Saxon world, is practically unknown in Latin America. It presents itself as a contemporary prolongation of liberation theology in so far as it brings about "liberation" in terms of citizenship and democracy. See Rudolf von Sinner, *Da Teologia da Libertação para uma teologia da cidadania como teologia pública*, original en *International Journal of Public Theology*, a.1, n. 3/4, p. 338-363, 2007.

constitute a unique species, that we inhabit the same planet, that we are bound together into an intertwined system of systems that make up the web of life and that, as a result, the fragmented and individualistic way of perceiving reality that has accompanied us up till the present, needs to be surpassed. It no longer makes sense to contemplate reality and the world through a fragmented consciousness that divides the world into countries, races, cultures... or into religions. We are one single Humanity, and we know that we are part of the community of life that has surfaced on this planet, a part that is indivisible, inseparable, not independent, absolutely tied to the whole community life that has appeared on this "living" Planet, Gaia that is not an inert rock wandering through the emptiness of the cosmos, as we we imagined for so long. More and more today we recognize the Planet and we feel more consciously united to its profound vital dynamics. We are returning to our natural planetary roots, returning to our shared house, our home... after having been distanced from it for a long time.[34] Does not this new, emerging awareness—at the same time planetary and ecological—have radical consequences for theology? Will an **ecological and planetary theology**[35] not be required? It would be a theology developed out of that new planetary awareness into which humanity is entering? "Planetary" here means, in a condensed way, many things at the same time:

- Planetary in so far as it unites all humanity,
- Planetary in so far as it includes also all its religions and spiritual positions,
- Planetary in so far as it reflects a new planetary awareness,
- Planetary in so far as it accepts our planet as the home to which humanity is returning,
- Planetary in so far as the Planet (more than simply the world, or humanity, or even life) can be considered as the new context, subject and framework of reference for a responsible theology at the level of this new awareness.

[34] The thesis that, as humanity, we made a mistake in the evolutionary moment of the agrarian revolution when we abandoned the cosmic synergy with nature that characterized the spirituality of the Paleolithic people, by a desacralization of nature and a projection of sacredness beyond the world, focused on a supernatural and unworldly "theos," is being increasingly accepted among scholars. See Diarmuid O'MURCHU, *Religion in Exile. A Spiritual Homecoming*, Crossroad, New York 2000.

[35] We believe this is a better name for what has so often been called *World theology*.

Thoms Berry has long defended this ecologiccal and "ecozoic" vision. Religions, like humanity, had lived in a "micro phase," in which each tradition was born and grew in relative isolation from the others. However, some time ago we entered a "macro phase" of history in which each religion is only going to be able to survive through inter-relationships with the other religions.[36]

In this way theology reproduces within in itself the very same prolific evolution that happens in human genes. From the cosmos, the Earth emerges, and from the geo-sphere and its atmosphere arises the biosphere, and then comes anthropogenesis, which gives rise to the human being and the noosphere. In the human being evolution takes a leap, and from being biological passes over to being cultural and spiritual. The noosphere, initially individualized and fragmented by the separation of human groups, has gone through a process of unification and "globalization" among these groups. Now it is becoming "planetary," with the planet and the whole community of life, that is, with those that Humanity incorporates as its own body and its own home, with those who become aware and who turn and become united with renewed consciousness. The noosphere is that sphere of the things of the mind—knowledge, beliefs, myths, legends, ideas—in which what is birthed mentally—geniuses, gods, strong-ideas, utopias—has become the new referential field, broader and at the same time deeper for Humanity. Thus it becomes a reference for a responsible theology. A planetary theology will be a **theology of the noosphere**, a noospheric theology. It will have the noosphere as its framework and centre of gravitation, beyond the short-winged visions fragmented into countries, races, cultures, religion, etc. It will not even have an anthropocentric vision or be limited only to what is human. Rather it will be open to nature, the planet, to the cosmos, to the mystery of all reality.

But, will such a pluralist, interreligious, trans-confessional, post-religional, secular, planetary theology continue to be "theology?" Certainly it will be neither "theo" nor "logy," in the sense that we have already described. Nor will it be that theoretical discipline that formed part of the symbolic systems of religious institutions. Certainly, the old confessional "theologies" will continue to exist since they have the same life expectancy as the "agrarian" religions they are a part of. What is being said here does not go against these old theologies. What emerges from the evolution we are trying to imagine and to traverse virtually is an essential theology, a profound theology, a theology that remains when theology is no longer either theo or logy, no official part of an agrarian religion, that

[36] Thomas BERRY, *Religious Studies in the Global Community of Man*, in «An Integral View» 1 (1980) 35-43.

is to say when it is the deep search for meaning in what is human, in society, in humanity, in the world, in life, in the planet and in the cosmos. This profound search that has driven and inspired all theologies will have been emancipated, and will have taken the form of a new theology.[37] It will now be "global, world-wide, planetary, post-religional, secular, etc," and will not belong to any specific confession and will not asume the responsibility of any other "religiosity" that is not that of Humanity itself and its planetary home.

Gordon Kaufman[38] states that, "If my concept of theology—radically rooted in the shared preoccupations of human experience—is correct, theology has a universal cultural meaning. There is no reason why it should remain confined within the narrow, parochial limits of a religion or that it should be looked upon as an esoteric or sub-rational discipline."

The profound preoccupations that lead people to look for theological wisdom are not questions related to formal religions but rather have to do with the meaning and the finalities of this whole world we live in. In common usage, people call those topics "religious." That "religion" is decidedly not dead. It has not succumbed at the hands of post-modern nihilism. A contemporary human being has no difficulty with the spiritual life, or with "theological wisdom," but rather with the way religions have treated it and have presented theology. Theology, asserts Diarmuid O'Murchu, has been experiencing a revolutionary reconfiguration. There are ever larger numbers of lay men, and above all women, who cultivate it and strikingly diminish the proportion of clergy among the theologians. To be member of a church is no longer held to be essential for the good quality of a theology. On the other hand, for a growing number of theologians—men and women—service to the world, to the planet and to humanity are considered more important criteria, at the moment of elaborating theology, than the criterion of service to an ecclesiastical reflection. The questions arising from the world, from its anguish and hopes, and the difficult task of humanizing humanity and of bringing it back once again to its home, toward the natural planetary placenta from which it erroneously separated itself in the period of the agro-urban revolution, are increasingly more important for the new theological wisdom that is emerging everywhere and that is bringing enthusiasm to new generations of men and women theologians. Perhaps Gordon Kaufman presents them

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[37] Failing any other more adequate word, we can continue using it with the reserves that have already been indicated.

[38] Quoted by O'MURCHU, *Ibid.*, p. 218.

well when he adds that "Whether the Church as an institution is living or agonizing, theology has an important role to play."[39]

These perspectives on the evolution of theology that it has been given to us to contemplate in our imagination remain very far from those that were common among us only a few years ago when we believed it was not possible to think of a theology that was not confessional, that was not bound to a religion,[40] and that was not a function at its service. We are given broad perspectives that theology cannot grasp, but that are given to us to contemplate.

So, this forward-looking vision has been the "departure point" for the investigation proposed here. It invited the collaboration of specialists in various parts of the world, chosen as representatives of different religions and trying precisely to embrace as much as possible the different tendencies and possibilities.

We had serious difficulties getting the representativity we wanted. Some were almost unsalvageable. Yet, we did everything possible. In any case, the most important thing is that they are contributions and reflections from these specialists. They will help us glimpse more clearly what is going to be the future of theology that this departure point has tried to outline in a tentative way.

International Theological Commission
of EATWOT

[39] *Ibid.*

[40] See above..

THE REPLIES

Being a Hindu-Christian

Michael AMALADOSS

Interest in Hinduism is something I grew up with. As a boy I grew up in Hindu villages. Hindu boys were my friends and playmates. They were not really 'others' for me, but friends. In the Jesuit boarding school, which I entered at the age of 11, Hindus were all around as students and teachers. Then I joined the Society of Jesus. While we were doing philosophy there was a two-fold interest: to know more about Indian culture, arts, etc. so as to become more Indian and to learn more about Hinduism, so that we can preach Christ to them. I read avidly books on Hindu philosophy and Indian art. Then I went to an Indian music school. I was the only Christian and I learned to admire my Hindu teachers for whom music was an act of devotion. While I studied my theology (1965-69), I went on a pilgrimage, with two Jesuit companions, to Hindu ashrams and pilgrim centres in the Himalayas and along the Ganges and I was impressed by many Hindu sannyasis. My concern was already how to become an Indian Christian, reaching out positively to the Hindus. Two of my papers written during this period were: *Towards an Indian Christian Spirituality* and *Gandhian Spirituality*. The Second Vatican Council had happened in the meantime, bringing with it a spirit of openness and dialogue. In May 1969 I participated as a student representative in a National Seminar that focused on making the Church Indian. Dialogue with Indian cultures and religions was its orientation.

After my doctoral studies (1969-1972) in Paris, I launched in 1973-74 an inter-religious dialogue group in the seminary where I was teaching, took part in a national seminar on *Inspiration of Non-Biblical Scriptures*, participated in a committee which explored ways of making the Eucharistic celebration more Indian and ran a prayer seminar which sought to introduce Christians to Indian (Hindu) methods of prayer. We began using, informally, Hindu scriptural texts in para-liturgies. We tried

to integrate symbols in worship, distinguishing between Hindu (religion) and Indian (culture) or giving a Christian interpretation to 'Hindu' symbols like OM. Our focus was on dialoguing with the Hindus and, at the same time, promoting Indian Christian spirituality in deep dialogue with Hindu spiritual tradition. Indian Christian Ashrams were being founded, and courses were held on Indian Christian spirituality. Praying together with Hindus in dialogue groups was common. The Jesuits promoted inculturation in formation in a planned manner focusing on the local social context (of the poor) and on Indian languages. Regional theologates teaching contextual theology in Indian languages were launched in 1979. I was actively involved in these projects, both creatively and administratively. I had to take some distance from the field, when I moved to Rome (1983-1995). But, my personal research, writing and practice in the area of Indian theology and spirituality continued.

Because of my ongoing dialogue with Hinduism and Indian culture my philosophical and theological approaches have changed over the years. I have moved away from a Greek, rational, conceptual, logical, object-focused, dichotomous (either-or) theory of knowledge to an Indian (Asian), symbolic, interpretative, narrative, subject-focused, inclusive (both-and) one. In this I was also helped by contemporary European philosophy with its turn to the 'subject' and to language. I have also abandoned a physics-based Aristotelian metaphysics in favour of a person-based, non-dual, relational ontology. To 'be' is to 'inter-be'. I speak no longer of things and causes, but of persons and transforming, empowering relationships. With these new approaches, I find it easier, not only to dialogue with the Asian Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist others, but also to be an Asian Christian. My latest book is *The Asian Jesus*. Of course, this is not making my intellectual life easy, since the 'official' Church is still tied to neo-scholastic epistemology and metaphysics. Starting with a positive approach to other religions as participants in God's plan of salvation, I have a new theology of history focused on the Kingdom of God, with the Church becoming the symbol and servant of the kingdom. I also have a new spiritual vision that searches for a personal and cosmic integration, which I have spelt out in a book *The Dancing Cosmos*. God, the Spirit, the Word and Jesus are experienced and seen in new ways.

But developments in India have not kept pace with people like me. After about 1978, inculturation in the area of liturgy was slowly choked, though the use of Indian music in the liturgy has developed very much. I have myself composed more than 150 hymns, besides more technical pieces for Indian classical dance on Christian themes. But indigenization in theology and spirituality has continued. No one, after all, can control

the way we think and pray. But it has not become main-stream. I have been a professional theologian. I do not know what I would have done and become if I were in an Indian Christian Ashram. Today I consider and call myself a Hindu-Christian, giving the term a special meaning. The term 'Hindu' in the phrase is not a noun, but an adjective. The process is not hybridity, but integration; not pluralism, but non-duality.

Socially and institutionally I am a Christian, a priest, a Jesuit. I do not look for a kind of hybrid identity of being both Hindu and Christian in a social, communitarian sense. But for me Hinduism is not simply an 'other' religion. It is also a part of my identity. It is the religion of my ancestors. God has spoken to my ancestors through it and what God has said to them has some meaning for me too – even today. So I am happy to integrate Hindu perspectives as part of my spiritual vision and practice. This does not mean that I feel obliged to believe the mythological stories of Hinduism or honour Hindu gods or participate in Hindu rituals or worship in Hindu temples. But I do inspire myself with Hindu scriptures, like the Upanishads, the Bhagavadgita or the devotional songs of Shivite and Vaishnavite saints. At a theologico-spiritual level I seek to integrate the vision and worldview of the *advaita* or non-duality. At the level of spiritual practice I seek to use music, not merely as decorative, but as *sadhana*, helping concentration and realizing communion. Yogic techniques of breathing and concentration are also helpful. Through these techniques I seek to integrate the wide world of energy (beyond science) that mediates between the spirit, the body and the world. Some of these techniques are not particularly Hindu, though Hinduism has developed them and it is from Hinduism that I am learning them. They are used also by Jains and Buddhists in Tibet, China and Japan.

Am I an inter-faith person or doing inter-faith theology or practicing inter-faith spirituality? I do not think so. I think that paradigms like "exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism" and "inter-faith theology" are abstract. They look at religions from the outside, as it were, having no living contact with members of other religions. There is no inter-faith or universal theology. Theologians of different religions can dialogue and move towards a consensus on the defense of common human and spiritual values. Today they need to. I would then speak of dialogical theology and, even more, of spirituality.

When I am actually dialoguing with a Hindu in the contemporary socio-political context in India what seems crucial is the recognition of and respect for identities based on difference. Dialogue does not consist

in looking for a common denominator but in developing an overlapping consensus that can animate common socio-political action. Religions are not something that we humans create and can play with. For a Hindu or a Christian his religion is a particular way through which God has reached out to him/her. It is a personal relationship. One does not compare personal relationships. They have a certain uniqueness about them. One does not seek to merge them in some way. Rather one celebrates their difference. Learning from the other, being challenged and transformed by the other, integrating the other is different from some sort of syncretism that easily mixes up symbolic worlds. I would be justified in re-interpreting a symbol like *OM* in a Christian context, because it is a sound symbol, more basic than even language. But I cannot borrow Hindu mythological symbols like Rama, Krishna or Shiva. They are their symbols and they will use them to define and protect and celebrate their identity. I relate to God through Christ and my Hindu friend relates to God through Krishna or Shiva. We may compare these ways. We may even consider them homologous. We may say something about the transcendent God whom both of us are trying to reach in and through our respective real-symbols. We do not experience God in some non-symbolic way in Godself. Christ and Krishna are not mere symbols for us. They are mediations. They represent a history. We cannot mix them to produce an inter-faith 'Krishna-Christ'!

Being a member of a religion is like speaking a language. One language can be influenced by another. It can borrow words and turns of phrase. But languages are different and incommensurable. We cannot speak both the languages at the same time, nor integrate them in some way that respects both their identities. Creolization is not enriching.

Just as I am Hindu-Christian – and there are others like me in India –, some Hindus, like Keshub Chandra Sen and Mahatma Gandhi – have been Christian-Hindus, deeply influenced by the example and teachings of Christ. Mahatma Gandhi said that if to be a Christian meant to follow the teachings of Christ, then he was a Christian. But he clearly distanced himself from the Christian community in a social sense. There are similar Christian-Hindus even today. To respect religions and their believers is also to respect their socio-political identities and differences.

I think that Hindu-Christians like me and Christian-Hindus like Gandhi are liminal people. We are people on the border lines, staying within our borders and yet open to the others, reaching out to them. We can be models and animators of dialogue in a special way. But any effort to have one leg on each side of the border will be a disaster. Brahmabandab

Upadyaya called himself a Hindu-Christian – Hindu socially and Christian religiously. But his later efforts to become a Hindu-Christian religiously ended up as a disaster because he transgressed the borders.

A more recent example, who lived in tension, was Swami Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux). He remained faithful to the celebration of the Eucharist and the praying of the psalms till the end of his life. But for many years he tried to have the experience of *advaita* or non-duality, which he considered 'Hindu'. In his diary he claims that he had that experience – more than once. His diary narrates the struggle he had to reconcile both experiences intellectually. I do not think that he succeeded. His French logical rationality and his neo-scholastic background may have been a problem. But in the last few months of his life, after a heart attack, he seems to have transcended this tension. In the last years of his life he often said that he ha gone beyond the symbols and rituals of any religion. Accordingly, his experience of the *advaita* or non-duality was beyond all religions, all 'name and form' (*namarupa*). Maybe he was making a mistake seeing it as Hindu and seeking to integrate it with his Christian *namarupa*. At the same time he felt free to experience the Absolute through the Christian *namarupa* – the Eucharist. I do not think that at any time he was practicing any Hindu ritual (namarupa). He must have realized in his last days that he was experiencing God – the Absolute - in two different ways and he did not have to integrate them rationally, but just enjoy the diversity. As a matter of fact there is nothing 'Hindu' about the advaitic experience, socially, ritually and institutionally, though it cannot be totally detached from the Hindu spiritual tradition either. This will be true of all mystical experiences which are rooted in one or other tradition. Negative theologies are negative in relation to something positive.

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Theology for a Trans-religious Spirituality
The fragile transparency of the Absolute

Marcelo BARROS

It seems absurd to say that the Absolute, who is always referred to as "All-powerful," is fragile. In what way is it fragile? We need to clarify that. In the 16th century, Rabbi Isaac Luria used to say that, to create the universe and make it possible for the universe to have its own life, the Eternal One agreed to diminish, to concede a degree of perfection, to withdraw, so that creatures could exist as autonomous beings.[1] Today I think that this view of a divinity that draws back or shrinks—the Hebrew expression is the divine *Tzim-tzum*—can contribute to the path of dialogue among religions. Taken alone, God is an impenetrable mystery. Religions try to represent God and even present God to the world. They do not exhaust the mystery but only try to make God more transparent. And that makes God fragile because everything depends on the response that the invocation of God provokes. God's call to love is translated into a thousand languages and takes on a specific character in every culture. The more God is identified with what is human, the more fragile God becomes.

At this point, the world is witnessing a spiritual quest. At the same time, religions are going through a crisis that includes not only questions about religious structure but one that affects faith itself. It is also a crisis about God. Thus it is that religions are stirring up a new display of fragility. When a Church opts more for dogmatism than for love, or when a current in Islam insists on intolerance, what is at stake is not just the survival of religion, which would in itself be serious; we are dealing with a witness to God that weakens the very divine image to which humanity has access. In the concentration camp of Auschwitz, a young Jewish girl, Etty

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1 Cf. Gershom SCHOLEM, *As Grandes Correntes da Mística Judaica*, Perspectiva, São Paulo, 31995, p. 290- 293.

Hillesum, wrote, "If God does not help me, I will help God. (…) My guiding principle will be 'to help God' as much as possible (…) Increasingly, with every beat of my heart, I feel that you are not able to help us. We have to help you and, with all our energy, to defend you in the resting place in us that watches over you."[2]

Today, this prayer of Etty Hillesum could be taken up again not just to defend God from the Nazi Holocaust, but to save the honour of God in face of fundamentalist groups that support wars and imperialisms as well as to save the divine image, made weak by positions on the part of some religious leaders that are hardly spiritual and by documents showing little love that are published by some members of the hierarchy.

Using the method of see-judge-act, I invite you to check with me how this situation affects interreligious groups and associations that are devoted to dialogue among religions. We will go deeper into the underlying theology that is present in interreligious organizations and we will propose a pluralist liberation and trans-religious theology designed to provide a foundation for the journey of intercultural and interreligious initiatives.

1. A brief history of interreligious initiatives

The history of interreligious relations has always had a few prophets or movements that sought dialogue. In the Middle Ages, men with philosophical knowledge like Abelard and Nicholas of Cusa, made dialogue their writing style. Even though they were fictitious interreligious dialogues and following what Panikkar calls "dialectic dialogue,"[3] in each case, they revealed the need to express faith as dialogue. Abelard wrote the *Dialogus inter philosophum, judaeum et christianum* (1141). Nicolas de Cusa wrote the *Dialogus de Deo abscondito inter Christianus et Gentilis* (1453).

In the 13th century, when the official Church preached crusades, the philosopher and mystic, Raymond Lull learned Arabic and tried to convince Rome to establish Coptic, Arabic and Greek chairs in Christian universities in order to understand the thinking of the other.[4] During that same period, Francis of Assisi adopted a loving attitude toward Muslims. At the beginning of the Modern Age, Erasmus of Rotterdam was a Christian precursor of intercultural dialogue. In the Muslim world, various

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[2] Paul LEBEAU, *Etty Hillesum, un itineraire spirituel*, Racine, Namur 1998, p. 110.

[3] Raimon PANIKKAR, *Pace e Interculturalità, una riflessione filosófica*, Jaca Book, Milán 2002, p. 44.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 53.

Sufi mystics like Ibn Arabi (IX century) and Rumi (XI century) practiced a spirituality open to all religions. Those dialogues promoted by al-Kindi under the Kalif al-Ma'mun (813-834) are well-known.

In the Abya Yala of the Indigenous peoples and of Blacks brought from Africa, contact with the religion of the dominant forces took place violently and by force. But the very fact that they were forms of worship that were not very centralized and that had no fixed dogmatic structure helped bring about a syncretism that was a synthesis of spiritual wisdom.

Even so, religions didn't have many experiences of dialogue. Only since the end of the 19th century has a preoccupation for the contribution of religions to building peace arisen. In 1893, in Chicago, on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the "discovery of America," the Presbyterian pastor, John Henry Barrows, disavowed by his Church, founded the *World Parliament of Religions* that, in its inaugural session, managed to bring together four thousand people. This initiative had no direct follow-up. However, throughout the world, the idea grew that dialogue among religions can be useful in building peace and justice. In the second half of the 20th century, the Parliament of Religions for Peace was revived. Its fourth general assembly took place in July, 2004, in Barcelona with the participation of many grassroots groups and many theologians from various religious traditions who were committed to peace and freedom.

The World Conference of Religions for Peace, created by citizens of the United States, India and Japan, had its first assembly in Kyoto, Japan in 1970. It dealt with question of peace, disarmament, the opposition against all discrimination, the work against colonialism and the defence of human rights. It brought together 139 participants from Asia and Africa as well as 77 Western participants. Among those giving conferences were Helder Cámara, Raimon Panikkar, Eugene Blake, Thich Nhat Hanh and Metropolitan Galitski Filarete from Moscow.

In 1999, William Swing, Anglican bishop of Los Angeles, the Dalai Lama and the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, put forward the proposal for a new world organization of religions, similar to the United Nations. They created the URL, "The United Religions Initiative."[5]

In Latin America, in the context of the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the conquest, groups linked to Churches and popular religions came together in a continental gathering and created a process called the *Assembly of the People of God* (APD). This initiative made the term "macroecumenism" official as "an ecumenism that searches for the unity of the Churches and also dialogue among religions, in order to bring religions

[5] Revista *Rocca*, 15 August/September 1999, p. 7.

and Churches together in the prophetic denunciation against neoliberalism and in the deepening of a macro-ecumenical spirituality." Still, the theology inherent in the APD process looked at religions from a Latin American Christian perspective (that of the theology of liberation). Even though it was based in a theology open to the other but with an implicitly inclusivist tendency, it was not able to deepen the macro-ecumenical spirituality it proposed. At first, the dialogue with popular religions took place with openness to syncretism with Christianity, or to the capacity of these groups to live together with the common culture of Christianity. When they went further along the path, some of the more autonomous Afro-American and Indigenous groups did not feel they were represented. Since the Christian ecclesiastical authorities did not take up the process of the APD either, it finally ran out of steam. There were three international gatherings: Quito in 1992, Bogota in 1996 and Santo Domingo in 2000. Following that, the process was no longer active.

In the turnover between centuries (from 1999 to 2001) there were countless interreligious gatherings and congresses. Various entities devoted to this objective of dialogue sprung up but they too failed to go beyond large congresses.

In the process of the World Social Forum (WSF), and beginning with the second WSF in Porto Alegre, there were ecumenical organizations and groups devoted to working for peace that pulled together representatives of different spiritual traditions in a witness to unity and commitment to Justice and Peace. In Brazil, various educational NGOs (Planetary Union, UNIPAZ and others) organized forums with the pretention of being a "World Spiritual Forum." Religious authorities were invited but very few accepted and only for very specific moments. The pastors of the Catholic Church and of other Churches were afraid of syncretism as well as of initiatives that seemed "drawn from the New Age."

Even a theologian like Michael Amaladoss, who considers himself a Christian-Hindu and is open to the search for a new path, criticizes an attempt at interreligious dialogue that tries to speak both languages at the same time.[6] . He is right in that those who live this spiritual and theological synthesis between two spiritual traditions normally don't speak of a "double belonging," since the different traditions are incorporated in an original way in a single spiritual path. For example, we may belong to a determined cultural or religious group. We stand out as professionals in another group and with an identity that would seem to have nothing to do with the first. In still another context, we are known as people with a specific social and political position. Almost all of us are, in some way,

[6] See the article of AMALADOSS in this same volume.

plural and, at the same time, we don't stop being a unique and original person. This same phenomenon has happened, and increasingly, on the religious level and even at the trans-religious level.

2. Let's try to understand the crisis theologically

Various scholars in religious sciences and in theology[7] point to the fact that a divorce currently exists between the majority of societies and established religions. Secular societies are, increasingly, based on technological innovations and communication. Religions remain faithful to the old languages. Feeling this lack of connection, they are tempted to go the route of a nostalgic restoration or a dogmatic fundamentalism that sets them apart from dialogue with humanity. Also, traditional societies, such as those of Indigenous peoples and Blacks, show the same signs of being in crisis. In the past, those popular traditions were victims of religions that condemned and persecuted them. Now, they don't want to wash out in the mass culture of "liquid modernity," as Zigmunt Bauman calls it. In an effort to consolidate their traditional customs, in a society closed to difference, these groups sometimes yield to the tendency to close themselves off in their rituals.

Another difficulty is that, as is the case with all dialogue, interreligious contact presupposes equality among the participants. It is difficult to bring together priests and pastors coming from universities alongside Indigenous shamans and "mothers of santo" who have an oral and popular culture.[8]

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[7] Cf. Márcio FABRI DOS SANTOS (org.), *Teologia e Novos Paradigmas*, (publication of a meeting of SOTER), Paulus, São Paulo 1998; Marià CORBI, *Indagacions sobre el futur*, Barcelona 1991; *Religión sin Religión*, PPC, Madrid 1996; J. Amando ROBLES, *Repensar la religión. De la creencia al conocimiento*, EUNA, San José de Costa Rica 2001; and others. Maria Clara L. BINGEMER (org.), *Violência e Religião, Três Religiões em confronto e diálogo*, PUC y Loyola, Rio de Janeiro 2002. Lester KURTZ, *Gods in the Global Village. The World´s Religions in Sociological Perspective*, Pine Force Press, Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, London, New Delhi 1995. On the crisis of Christianity see: VARIOS, *Cristianismo em Crise?*, en *Concilium*, 311/ 2005/3.

[8] The Inter-Church Meetings of Basic Communities in Brazil are national gatherings of Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs). Since the 1970s the model has been ecumenical and macro-ecumenical, in a way that is defined not so much as inter-religious as by the composition of its participants from the popular sector of the population. The meetings are open to people who make that spiritual synthesis between Christianity and other religions. More recently, the gatherings, coordinated by hosting Catholic bishops, have increasingly found it difficult to maintain that openness. Those who recall the 8th Inter-Church encounter in Santa Maria, R.S., in 1992, know that the priests and priestesses from Afro-American and Indigenous traditions were prevented from being present as participants at the meeting. In the 12th gathering, in Porto Velho (2009), the pastors of Evangelical Churches had the same difficulty and even more so those who came from other religions.

3. The underlying theology of official encounters

In spite of the risk of generalizing, it can be said that there are two basic kinds of interreligious initiative. The first consists in those encounters that are sponsored by official representatives of religions and Churches. This model is linked to projects of the religious institutions that sponsor them. The reference is theology itself. For example, in 1996, Pope John Paul II announced a Jubilee of the year 2000. It was oriented to a "new evangelization" of the world and a renewal of Christian faith in Catholic circles. In this Jubilee context, the Pope proposed an interreligious gathering that, on the occasion of the year 2000, would bring together the Abrahamic religions (Jews, Christians and Muslims) in order to be a sign of their shared faith in One God. This event never happened. It was conceived within the Jubilee project, whose most explicit content, along with the insistence on eliminating the debt of poor countries, was to receive in Rome an immense multitude of pilgrims who would come to get indulgences. The ecumenical desire of the pope at no point questioned the Roman-Catholic tradition of pilgrimages and indulgences. Being a gathering of the Abrahamic religions to witness to faith in One God, it seemed imply disregard for a relationship with other spiritual paths that did not make this same profession of faith. Even the Jews and Muslims could not have been happy with the proposal to meet "on the foundation of Jesus Christ" as was proposed by the encyclical *Tertio Millenio Adveniente*.

The underlying theology in these gatherings turns around the tradition of each Church, mainly those that organize them. It is not possible to take a step forward beyond what each religious group considers dogma. No-one is willing to question their way of thinking. For that reason, the gatherings are limited to expressing good relations and a desire for peace.

Ar the interreligious encounters of prayer for peace that the Pope convoked in Assisi (1986 and 2003), the invitations to those invited, indicated that the religious leaders would meet in order to be together and to pray. They didn't pray together; they came together to pray. There were moments together and a final declaration, but the prayers took place separately. The fact of gathering to pray, but not praying together, was so underlined that it seemed as important or even more than the meeting itself. It is as if, contrary to the proposal of Pope John XXIII, what divides was underlined more than what can actually unite.

In September, 2007, 128 important Muslim figures, among them the major muftis from 54 nations and even from various branches of Islam, wrote a letter to Pope Benedict XVI. In it they proposed principles for a common theology.

The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians. The basis of this peace and of this mutual understanding already exists. It is part of the principles that are at the root of the two religions: love of one God and love of neighbour...[9]

So far, the Vatican has not responded. And Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, who, in the Vatican, is president of the Council for Interreligious Dialogue, declared publicly,

This letter (from the Islamists) presents the two fundamental commandments of love of God and love of neighbour, as the shared word that offers to dialogue its most theological foundation. Nevertheless, at this point, it is not possible to have a theological dialogue with Islam because, unlike Christians who recognise human mediation in the writings of the Bible, Muslims believe that the Koran comes directly from God and cannot be questioned.[10]

The response contradicts what Pierre Claerie, the martyr bishop of Algeria, says, "Dialogue is a spirit through which the other reveals to me a part of the truth that is still lacking to me."[11]

In some of these official encounters, the main concern seems to be to respect the hierarchical pyramid and to assure that the gathering serves not so much to unite different groups as to reassert the sacred power of the leaders present. That being so, everything is prepared in line with the dogmas of each group and with respect for the hierarchy among those considered most "important." (There is a hierarchy between the Pope and an African babalaorixá, and it must be respected.)

The Dalai Lama has encouraged interreligious gatherings that strengthen his project to draw the attention of the world to the drama of Tibet. His theology is that religions are different and that this is a good thing. Each person follows the religions that best helps him or her to be a compassionate human being. What is normal for a Tibetan is to be Buddhist just as it is normal for a Brazilian to be Christian. This is an attractive and inoffensive theology but it doesn't help situate each religious group in the effort toward a deeper encounter with the other. Each group prepares to welcome the other but without questioning themselves.

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9 *L'appel au dialogue*, in *La Vie*, 3243, week of October 25, 2007, p. 66.

10 Response of Cardinal Jean-Louis TAURAN, in *La Vie*, nº 3243, week of October 25, 2007, p. 67.

11 Jean-Claude ESCAFFIT, *Défis du débat interreligieux*, en *La Vie*, 3223, 07/06/2007, p. 94.

In some countries of Africa, Muslim authorities invite representatives of other religions to commemorate important dates in the Muslim calendar. This is ideal as a sign of dialogue. However, at the same time, it is limited by the very context of the encounter.

4. Underlying theologies in more secular interreligious events

The second type of interreligious encounters is represented by initiatives and forums that are put together by secular organizations (devoted to peace for example), or by spiritualist groups with a *trans-religious* orientation. In this model, the people meet as believers and promoters of communion and not as official leaders of each religion. This approach allows the meeting to be more open and less preoccupied with attention to dogmas and to the limits of the canonical norms. In these encounters, the participants engage in gestures and rituals that are very expressive and moving such as signs of peace between Jews and Muslims or celebrations in which a "mother of santo" embraces an evangelical pastor.

Frequently, an underlying theology in these encounters is that religions are in themselves relative and that the most important thing is the spirituality that each participant lives and gives witness to. All religious traditions are rich, and in addition, through their diversity of languages or cultural expressions, all of them, at the deepest level, propose the same thing. They contain the same truth. Simply put, they are equivalent.

Most of the time this theological judgement on all religions is put forward by someone who, in general, doesn't belong to any of them. Sometimes it would almost appear to be a way of excusing themselves from the obligation of evaluating each religion in itself. Something is said of all of them "from the outside," without any concern about really going deeper into the originality of any one of them.

Although a theology like that is not explicit as such, the religious authorities see this ultimately as the dominant thinking in these freer spiritualist contexts or those that are macro-ecumenist. And some, mainly the leaders of the Christian Churches, the authorities in traditional Judaism and various Islamic groups, reject them in principle or have a relationship of mistrust or even a certain distain for them. They don't consider them serious groups. On the one hand, since the people who participate in these more open gatherings do not represent their religious group, nor do they ask permission of their leaders in order to participate, they don't commit their community to this path and it is difficult for these gatherings to have any concrete impact on the progress of dialogue and the integration of religions.

5. A brief evaluation of these theologies

It can be said that the interreligious encounters and forums have not yet managed to articulate a common theology, or minimally, a theoretical foundation that better grounds the experience of the gatherings and makes it possible to move toward communion and the construction of peace. Not only is this *inter-faith* theology lacking, but it is clear that the operating theology in the various religious groups still does not favour an encounter that would go beyond a shared collaboration in the problems of society and cordial relationships on the part of the religious representatives. While there might be good will toward the other, in itself the theological inclusivity does not favour a spiritual intention of learning from one another. In the case of the Catholic Church it must be recognised that the enslavement of Indigenous or Black persons, as also the condemnation of popular religions, was not a macabre initiative of some less human ecclesiastical figure but rather a natural consequence of the reigning theology in ecclesiastical circles. If this stagnation of narrow confessional theologies does not change, how can we hope to see a deepening in the new experiences of interreligious dialogue?

Both the first model of interreligious encounters, cited here, and those of the second type, can do a great deal for peace and the transformation of the world, if those who participate in them do so with a real spirituality of dialogue and communion. Certain elements of this spirituality are already part of the experience of many participants. The ethic of dialogue, humility in appreciating the other and, finally, a spirituality of peace as a utopia that we work toward, are tools in this path to the transformation of the world.

The absence of these fundamental spiritual principles among some participants, can explain the fragility of the process of dialogue and encounter. The most explicit spirituality avoids turning the encounters (in whatever model) into simple spectacles or instruments of propaganda for some group to promote itself. That same spirituality assures that the encounters are not limited to a diplomacy so prudent that prophesy is frozen.

In encounters and courses, it is common to hear from some Catholic missionaries who work in South Korea and in some countries of Africa that their efforts to dialogue and to be integrated with other religions have not met with the same interest in dialogue and in working together on the part of the other spiritual traditions. In interreligious dialogue it is not right for one side to define the others. It is not our place to say what others think or believe. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that, sometimes, interreligious dialogue seems to be more interesting to Christians than to

other religions. When asked, some people from other traditions accept dialogue and collaboration more as a concession than out of a conviction and spiritual or theological commitment. We need to look deeper into the theological reasons for this, whether these lie in the history of the colonizers themselves—Christians came as colonizers and now they want to dialogue?—or in elements of the faith. For example, how can religions with an oral and mystical tradition (intimate or secret) dialogue with a dominant religion that is accustomed to doctrinal clarity and that has no perception of the hidden character of faith? Then also, these encounters are frequently linked to preoccupations like, peace, justice and the care of nature. Religions do not always express the relationship between faith and a preoccupation for what is social in the same way.

Christian Churches have a tendency to work for interreligious dialogue in countries where Christianity is a minority or is marginal (for example in countries where Islam is the official religion of the State), and not to do so when the Church is in the majority. In Latin America, some popular religion groups think that, after a period when the Church persecuted and condemned them, the interest in them is geared to pull them in. Since Christianity seems to be losing ground, the Churches are thought to be inventing an Afro-American or Indigenous ministry in order to attract groups and individuals who are leaving back into the fold.

Unfortunately, both in interreligious encounters promoted by religious leaders and in gatherings in a freer context that are organized by spiritualist groups or those working for peace, the critical prophetic dimension is not always sufficiently strong. In the context of the Social Forums, whether on the world scale or those that are more local in character, those invited to the interreligious encounters tend to appreciate the socio-political insertion. Meanwhile, there still exists, in general, no series of interreligious encounters on the basis of the principles and style of popular communities and of liberation theology. This is not because the groups participating in these gatherings reject that influence, but rather because the popular groups are not yet sufficiently committed to the process of interreligious encounters and they don't know one another well enough.

So, the challenge to deepen the dimensions and tools of this trans-religious spirituality based on the options of liberation theology is urgent. «Trans-religious» should not be taken in the sense of abolishing religions or substituting for them, but rather in the sense of going further than the conditioning and limitations of each of them.

6. Fragmentary outlines of trans-religious theologies

Even if we cannot say that there "exists" a developed trans-religious theology common to the groups and entities that operate in this area, it is possible to state that, in macro-ecumenical events and among entities consecrated to this process, there are theological elements that can be put together as an outline of an inter-spiritual theology. (The term is not adequate but it does express a relationship between diverse spiritual traditions). This theology can also be trans-religious (in the sense of uniting elements of various religions). Traditionally, theology studies the expression of a faith that is the adherence to God in a specific path. Since it is the expression of an action that is always personal and communitarian, theology is normally either Christian—evangelical or Catholic—or Sunnite Muslim, Tibetan Buddhist, and so on. The more it is localized and rooted, the more possibilities there are of going deeper. For that reason, there are those who think that it is impossible to speak of a trans-religious theology. In one way that is true. Earlier, I made a critical allusion to a theology that is negative in its attitude to religions, a thinking developed by people who do not live their experience in any concrete religious community, and who therefore do not have sufficient knowledge to criticize them. A trans-religious theology is not based on this kind of assumption but rather on the concrete experience of individuals and groups who live their faith and commitment in search of divine intimacy in the relationship between religious and spiritual groups and who situate themselves in a trans-religious convergence.

Those who knew the Benedictine monk, Bede Griffith, formerly abbot of the monastery of Prinash (England) and who became a sayasi in India, without ceasing to be a Christian monk, know also that he lived a trans-religious experience, not out of disregard or uprooting from a concrete community, but rather as an inter-cultural and inter-spiritual vocation (in the sense that we are using it here). In his book, *Return to the Centre*, he states,

> Besides being Christian, I must be Hindu, Buddhist, Jainist, Zoroastrian, Sikh, Muslim and Jew. Only in this way will I be able to know the truth and find the point of reconciliation of all religions…. This is the revolution that has to happen in the attitude of Westerners. For centuries they have been turning outward, losing themselves in exterior space. Now they need to turn inward and discover their being; they need to undertake the long and difficult journey to the Centre, the deep interior of Being.

And it is important to know that he wrote this before any pluralist theology had been developed.[12]

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[12] Bede GRIFFITHS, *Retorno ao Centro*, Ibrasa, São Paulo 1992, p. 9.

On rereading the experience of people like Bede Griffiths, as also of so many Indigenous people and of Blacks, who for centuries have lived and still live a spirituality of belonging to two or three religions, without dualisms or ruptures with any of them, we come to understand the basics of a trans-religious and inter-spiritual theology. It won't be a theology that is unrelated to the specific theologies of each religion but rather a theology that can go beyond them. It won't be a theology that seeks an artificial synthesis that would end up being colonialist, but a theology that coexists with the fragments of each path and that cannot always be unified. With due respect for the positive and prophetic advances that Esperanto signifies for the Babel of languages in the world, in the field of specific theologies, a trans-religious theology would have to be more than a kind of "theological Esperanto," because it would have to be grounded. It needs to take, as its object of reflection, experiences that are often coming from concrete groups and beliefs that it does not pretend to replace. Rather it seeks to open them more to the other and to enhance them. In summary, a trans-religious theology sets itself up as a set of instruments to be taken up by specific theologies that are open to pluralism.

The disparate elements in trans-religious theologies refer, for example, to what is becoming known as eco-theology and the ecological spirituality linked to it. If you read books in this field, you will find that each tradition sets out from elements of its culture and points to complementary aspects in others. The reflections coming from the Hindu or Buddhist tradition, will point to the sacredness of the universe and the principle of compassion present in all creature. Those coming from the Christian tradition will probably have a basis in the Biblical theology of Creation and a reference to the Eastern patristic tradition that is much more open than Western theology in terms of the positive aspects of the reality of the world. If they come from the African-American traditions, they will insist on the sacramentality of the natural elements and on the incorporation of the divinity in each person. Still, starting with these specific points, a theology about the care of the environment is constructed in a way so similar in the various traditions that we can discern here an important element of a trans-religious theology. The same can be said of a theology of peace, or of the search for a shared planetary ethic, and so on.[13]

One of the main principles of a theology of liberation is to be grounded always in practice. A trans-religious theology takes its reference from the practice of the inter-spiritual encounters that bring together people from different religions. But it goes further than that. It not only

[13] BARROS, Marcelo y Frei BETTO, *O Amor fecunda o Universo (Ecologia e Espiritualidade)*, Agir-Ediouro, São Paulo 2009, pp. 73 ss. (Third chapter: El rostro divino de la naturaleza).

brings together people who have no religion, but also invites the believers from different traditions to go beyond their confessions toward the practical formulation or expression of a trans-religious spirituality. The prefix *trans* can mean "across," in the way a transatlantic is a ship that crosses the Atlantic Ocean. It is *trans* because it journeys across the different religious traditions (without however undoing or surpassing them) in order to bring them beyond themselves, as is the spiritual vocation of every person and group that wants to be of God. This trans-religious theology goes in the direction of theology of liberation when it assumes a critical stance with regard to reality and commits itself, on the basis of the powerless, to the march toward liberation. This theology can turn the great contemporary challenges—ecology, international justice, the question of gender and other challenges—into paths of spirituality, and in this case, a trans-religious spirituality, or a spirituality that goes beyond the reference to a single religion. The Spirit, who calls us all to go beyond ourselves, brings people and groups into a space beyond the institutions (*trans-religious?*).[14]

7. Elements of a trans-religious theology

If the writer of these lines came from a Buddhist or Shintoist tradition, the elements brought forward would surely be different. Those that appear here are some among others and I underline them merely to initiate a kind of classification that is still provisional, on the basis of my work experience and my commitment to the effort to have inter-spiritual encounters and other events.

7.1 The nature of a spiritual and apophatic theology

All theology, of whatever religion, is above all a confession of faith and adoration of the Mystery, one and multiple, that cannot be contained in any isolated tradition. A theology capable of being called "trans-religious," more than anything else, needs to take on the quality of a spiritual and apophatic theology. This means that it will be rooted in a silent reference and will not pretend to explain what is inexplicable. Its objective is to deepen theologically the intuitions and proposals of a pluralist and trans-religious theology. It appreciates cultural and inter-religious pluralism, not just as an inevitable

[14] In spite of the ambiguity of the term "inter-spiritual," I use it here in the sense of a search that integrates not only religious paths but also proposals that are freer and spiritual. For example, the encounter between Christian religious experiences and those of Buddhists can be *inter-religious*, can be *trans-religious*, in a way different from their being *inter-cultural*. A search for convergence among spiritual experiences in Xavante and Guarani are not in themselves inter-religious or trans-religious since there is a cultural and spiritual tradition in the background but not one or two organized and structured religions.

fact, but as a divine blessing for humanity. It appreciates religious diversity not only as a human right but as a spiritual value. And it is centred in interiority. This "interiority" is not to be confused with a merely individual path, and even less with an individualistic one. There is no question of denying the communitarian and organizational dimension of the spiritual traditions. Rather it is a matter of searching for a way to separate them from a culture that has only itself as reference and is only centred on itself.

7.2 Contemplation of the one and multiple Mystery

The question of God always has to be stated in order to help people who set out on this path to overcome a certain narrowness in the traditions, as for example, to want to define whether it is monotheist or polytheist, pantheist or syncretic. Categorizations like these oversimplify the concepts, can fall into dogmatisms and are not fair to the faith of many people who don't fit into those boxes. In general the Indigenous and Black traditions, for example, recognize a single source of everything, a major Mystery that could be called a unique God (Olorum, Zambi, Manitu or Tupa) and many manifestations and expressions of this divine mystery.[15]

Today pluralist apophatic theology has difficulties with worship traditions that, in a superficial or almost vulgar way, don't hesitate to name God as the All-powerful Lord and who re-read the texts of the tradition in a fundamentalist way. This includes a prayer centred on the oral tradition (reciting ancient texts) that, for many centuries, nourished generations, but that today not only creates ecumenical problems but serves only those willing to repeat confessions created in other cultural contexts.

In Europe, in some contexts influenced by secularism, Christian groups have made an adapted translation of the psalms, trying to use fewer divine attributes and so avoid patriarchal and exclusivist designations. This effort, still just beginning, embraces an option of love and care for the other that is a manifestation of trans-religious spirituality.

In many religions, as also in many trans-religious events, the underlying theology, and one that can be developed further, lies in the direction of a macro-ecumenical pneumenology. Even non-theist traditions feel comfortable when we speak of the Mystery as "Spirit" and as loving

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15 On God in a pluralist and inter-religious perspective, see : Marcelo BARROS and Luiza TOMITA, "Uno e Múltiplo, Deus numa perspectiva pluralista," third volume of the collection *Por los muchos caminos de Dios*, prepared by ASETT, in the collection «Tiempo axial», Abya Yala, Quito, Ecuador. See http://latinoamericana.org/tiempoaxial. [This article was translated and published as "One and Many, God in a pluralist perspective," *Along the Many Paths of God*, edited by José María Vigil and others, Munster, LitVerlag, 2008, chapter 13, pp. 195-206—Translator.]

energy. There is also an opening toward a macro-ecumenical feminist theology that sees Mother and Spouse in the figure of the Spirit. This is an image inclusive of feminine divinities and the symbolism of every woman.

7.3 Opening up to the new sacraments of the other

The poet and philosopher, Paul Eluard has said, "It is not appropriate to see reality as the way I am."[16] This philosophical statement is even more valid in the field of inter-cultural and inter-spiritual encounters. Unfortunately, the tendency in religious circles is to be self-sufficient and self-centred. As a result, many people do not find what they had hoped in their traditions. Already in 1965 the Second Vatican Council stated,

> People look to the various religions for answers to those profound mysteries of the human condition which, today even as in olden times, deeply stir the human heart: hope from the various religions, the responses to the profound enigmas of the human condition that today as in times past intimately moved their hearts: Who are we? What is the meaning and the purpose of our life? What is goodness and what is sin? What gives rise to our sorrows and to what intent? Where lies the path to true happiness? What is the truth about death, judgement, and retribution beyond the grave? What, finally, is that ultimate and unutterable mystery which engulfs our being and whence we take our rise, and whither our journey leads us? (*Nostra Aetate*, 1).

If, today, religions don't exercise this mission, we cannot pretend to substitute for this deficiency with a trans-religious or inter-cultural structure, as a sort of new trans-religious religion. Theo Sundermeier has said, "Religion is one collective response of human beings to the experience of transcendence that is expressed concretely in rituals and ethical norms.[17] And Raimon Panikkar says, "Religion is the path that a human being takes to find the ultimate goal of life. In short: religion is the path to salvation."[18] In saying this, both theologians seem to be referring more to a spiritual experience people have—one that is contained in religions—than to a religious structure as such. A spiritual trans-religious theology reaffirms this, but transposes the affirmation into the spiritual experience of the other. In a way, what religions offer for people's *salvation* doesn't belong to them. They are elements that, in Christianity, are

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16 Gaston BACHELARD, *A Psicanálise do Fogo*, Martins Fontes, São Paulo 1999, p. 1.

17 SUNDERMEIER, Th., *Was ist Religion? Religionswissenschaft im theologischen Kontext. Ein Studienbuch*, Gütersloh 1999, p. 27.

18 PANIKKAR, R., *Il Dialogo intereligioso*, Cittadella, Assisi 2001, p. 166.

called "sacraments," but that exist in all religions. In Judaism, circumcision and Yom Kippur have the characteristics of sacraments. In Islam, the alms during Ramadan, the journey to Mecca and other rites have a similar quality. In Candomblé, the rites of initiation and the feasts in which the orixás are adored in the various elements of nature… In the Santo Daime, the sacred drink… Finally, in all the traditions there are paths and instruments that unite us to the Divine.

Today, inter-spiritual dialogue and the very encounter with the other constitute basic sacraments for this new spirituality. Such events don't happen every day and for them to be deep and meaningful, they require a spiritual life in which the reference to the other is constant and structured. Inter-religious gatherings and forums can equip us to be nourished by the sacraments that come from others and they can unite us to the Divine Love that is communicated to us more through difference than through our own cultural and religious references.

7.4 A mysticism centered on Life

Trans-religious theology starts from the same assumption as liberation theology, namely to profoundly link faith and life, spirituality and transforming commitment. This happens when inter-religious encounters focus on matters like peace, justice and ecology. Nevertheless, it is not just a matter of broad topics but of care for giving witness to a kind of spirituality that is open to life and pregnant with hope.

Currently, in order for this to be able to be expressed in a really ecumenical way in the more secularized world, these sort of events (encounters, inter-religious acts and worship) will have to be extremely retrained and detached from forms that are not helpful. For the sake of justice and in an option for the impoverished, this trans-religious theology needs to give priority to spiritual expression and to the traditional paths of oppressed groups. In Latin America, and also certainly in Africa, as also in Australia, traditional Indigenous groups and Aboriginal religions suffered all sorts of persecution. The cultures of Indigenous people and of Blacks were considered practically extinct. Ten years ago, Father Comblin wrote, "In the West, modern Western culture has still not fisnished with the extermination of all the pre-modern culture, and the scientific movement, as such, is in contradiction with that traditional culture and is pushing it aside irreversibly."[19] A Brazilian sociologist confirmed this when he said,

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[19] COMBLIN, J, *Cristãos rumo ao século XXI. Nova caminhada de libertação*, Paulus, São Paulo 1996, p. 250- 268.

> "The expansionist power of the media of communication seems to have abolished, at some points and in some places, the expressions of popular culture, reducing them to the function of folklore for the benefit of tourism."[20]

Nevertheless, in spite of all this, these cultures not only resist but even grow stronger. The trans-religious movement is learning a lot from the spiritual vitality and the inter-cultural openness of these expressions. Similarly, even if they need to be reinterpreted, that in no way diminishes the dimension of mystery that is contained in the love and in the profound respect for the other that can take on a mystical quality.

The Italian spiritual philosopher, Ernest Balducci said it this way, "After the political universalism of the Roman Empire, we had a theocratic universalism. Rome became the Papacy. Don't forget that it was the authority of the Pope that gave legitimacy to the invasion of America and the genocide that was committed there and turned it into something Christian. Now we have a modern universalism that is secular and republican but that is also self-centred and makes no sense of the Other. Martin Buber said that humans today are homeless. But, do we accept this impoverishment or do we look for artificial security in systems that promise to strengthen our identity but without any meaning for otherness?" [21] Rabbi Abraham Heschel expressed this reality when he wrote,

Here lies the meaning of the sublime that we are called to place at the root of the creative activities of human beings, in the arts, in thought and in the nobility of life (…) The effort to communicate what we see and what we aren't able to speak, is the eternal theme of the unfinished symphony of humanity. It is an adventure whose realization will never be complete. Only those who live with borrowed words believe in their capacity of expression. A sensible person knows that the fundamental, the essential, is never expressed.[22]

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20 A. BOSI, *Dialética da Colonização*, São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 1995, 3ª ed., p. 328.

21 BALDUCCI, Ernesto, *L´Altro, Um orizzonte profético*, Ed. Cultura della Pace, Firenze 1996, p. 13 ss.

22 A. HESCHEL, *O Homem não está só*, Paulinas, São Paulo 1974, p. 16.

Theology and Religious Pluralism
Methodological considerations

Agenor BRIGHENTI

To even posit the present question presents an initial difficulty: to relate 'pluralism' to 'theology' might presuppose previously that theological pluralism is a legitimated fact. However, the first question that must be put to theology itself is whether it can be pluralistic, and in particular in the case of theology in the Roman Catholic Church, whether it is possible that different theologies can coexist without putting into jeopardy the unity or catholicity of faith.

Without entering into the question of the merit of discussing the phenomenon of pluralism in itself, a second necessary task is to define precisely just what is understood by "theology" and how it fits into the context of actual religious pluralism. The third task refers to the conditions for the possibility of a theology that is pluri-religious and pluri-confessional, or even more radically, a theology that is trans-religious and trans-confessional. This question nevertheless brings us back to another underlying difficulty: Given that all knowledge is contextual and that religion is the soul of culture, it is necessary to first question ourselves about the conditions for the possibility of a theology that is pluri-cultural and trans-cultural. Being pluri-cultural comes before pluri-confessional just as the possibility of being trans-cultural comes before the conditions for the possibility of a theology that is trans-confessional.

As can be noticed, these are themes that take us to the semantics (the what) and to the syntax (the how) of theology. Nevertheless, given the limited available number of pages, our reflection cannot pretend to be all embracing. We are going to limit ourselves to the semantics of theology as related to religious pluralism and because of the need of given circumstances, to cultural pluralism. In this way we will leave the field of syntax untouched and the theme of semantics will still be far from exhausted.

Actually the purpose of these reflections, instead of pretending to establish programmatic conclusions, is simply to indicate themes for a debate which will undoubtedly remain open for a long time.

1. Pluralism and theology

According to Mircea Eliade, the really great discovery of the twentieth century was the discovery of cultures[1] and with them the discovery of the religion of the other, the soul of one's culture. From there on, little by little, pluri-culturalism and pluri-religiosity have been acquiring an acceptable status with irreversible consequences in what are referred to as the paradigms of modern rationality – the sciences in general, including theology.

The mediate term consequence for theological science is its epistemological and methodological re-casting, certainly the most challenging task of theology for the near future but which is already well underway. This task begins with reformulating the very concept of theology. The re-casting of its syntax presupposes the re-casting of its semantic.

For a long time the term "theology" was considered in Christian circles to be the private property of Christians.[2] To speak about theology was to refer to the well regulated and normative discourse of the Christian churches. And in an even more restricted use, "theology" was understood as only the theology developed by western world Christianity, and only in the first world.[3] In other words, the term "theology" was limited not only to an ecclesial-centric branch of a mono-religious condition - a left over from the medieval theocracy – but was preempted by Euro-centrism, fruit of a ethnocentric myopia which ended up in mono-cultural Christianity.

Fortunately, the pluri-cultural and pluri-religious irruption in later modernism, imploded the traditional theological semantics, forcing the church and theologians to extend the concept of theology to be able to shelter it under the wings of newly emerging realities. And this is where we are at today, with partial results, some more satisfactory than others.

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[1] Cf. J. COMBLIN, *Evangelização e inculturação. Implicações pastorais*, in M. FABRI DOS ANJOS (org.), *Teologia da inculturalção e inculturação da teologia*, Vozes/Soter, Petrópolis 1995, p. 57-89, p. 57.

[2] Cf. J. B. METZ, *La teología en el ocaso de la modernidad*, in *Concilium* 191 (1984) 31-39.

[3] J. DUPUIS, *Rumo a uma teologia cristã do pluralismo religioso*, Paulinas, São Paulo 1999, p. 18.

One of these results is a theological semantic that passes from a mono-religious y mono-cultural theology to the other extreme: to a trans-confessional and trans- religious theology.[4] We are making reference to the position of W. Cantwell Smith: the passage from a Christian theology" to a "world theology", to a meta-account elaborated from the interaction of the different religious traditions existing on the planet.[5] It comes down to being a theology for which the different religious expressions are subjects and not objects of a discursive reflection on themselves and in which all the religions and all the religious communities of the world are recognized.[6] This type of project consists in a theology "of faith in all of its forms" or in a "theology of the religious history of mankind."[7] In this working hypothesis it's not that a trans-confessional or a trans-religious theology wouldn't be a Christian theology, but rather it would be a theology for everybody: Christians and non-Christians, in other words a theology that "is also" Christian, while at the same time it is equally Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, etc.

So now then, this type of theological pluralism comes up against two obstacles: On the one hand we have the singularity of the different religious experiences, and on the other hand, the singularity of the multiple cultural matrices which offer support to these traditions. In other words, as if it were not already a sufficient challenge of the singularity of the different religious traditions, now is added to it the singularity of multiple cultural matrices, not only in relation to the different confessions, but also in the very interior being of each confession. That's why we feel that a better path would be to set out from the hypothesis, not as being a trans-confessional and trans-cultural theology, but rather from a theol-

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4 Sometimes, it seems that, historically, there is no way to escape the 'law of the pendulum'.

5 Cf. W. Cantwell SMITH, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion*, Philadelphia, Westminster 1981.

6 Ibid., p. 124.

7 Ibid., p. 125. From a similiar point of view some European and North American theologians, as H. Küng, J. Moltman and David Tracy, recognizing the absence of the subject in the context of postmodernism, have postulated the need for a recasting of theology into a non-confessional theology which would still be ecumenical and macro-ecumenical, ecological and holistic. With reference to the paradigm "critical-ecumenical" of H. Küng, see H. KÜNG, *Teología para la postmodernidad*. Fundamentación ecuménica, Madrid 1989. Ver, também, ID., *A la búsqueda de un ethos básico universal de las grandes religiones*, in *Concilium* 228 (1990) 289-309. Regarding Tracy's position, see D. TRACY, *Más allá del relativismo y del fundamentalismo? La hermenéutica y el nuevo ecumenismo*, in *Concilium* 240 (1992) 143-153; ID., Dar nombre al presente, in Concilium 227 (1990) 81-107.

ogy that has the quality of being trans-confessional and trans-cultural. A trans-confessional and trans-cultural theology would lose sight of both the singularity and the specificity of each religious confession as also the singularity and the specificity of each culture, inclusive in the bosom of the very same religious tradition.

2. The confessional quality of theology

To start off from the side of religion, a meta account world trans-confessional type of "theology of comparative religion" or "world theology" worked up by everybody collides with the fact of the existence of "religious faiths."[8] These are distinguished for their proper contents with the result that the diversity of content of the different expressions inevitably gives rise to a diversity of confessional theologies. As the normative discourse and rule of faith, theology has to be confessional since the proper content of each religious experience is founded on the faith adherence by the person or by the community, which in final instance, constitutes the object of theology.[9]

It is quite evident that the confessional character of all theology is not exhausted in the mere quality of being confessional. On the contrary the very fact of being confessional is explained better in so far as it remains open to the totality of mankind's religious experience. Being confessional without an authentically universal horizon ends up as a quality of being confessional that is headed towards fundamentalism, incapable of recognizing and being recognized in the rest of religious denominations and unable to enrich itself with other confessional theologies.[10]

Nevertheless as R. Panikkar correctly points out, just as "faiths" differ substantially, so also theologies will be different. According to him, at the base of the actual imperative for theological pluralism, we do not experience the need for a "common theology" which would smooth out differences and lead to a common denominator. But rather we find the crying need for acceptance of a plurality and a diversity of beliefs and

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8 By "faith" we here understand the personal and communitarian experience of God in the bosom of a religious community.

9 Although as Saint Thomas Aquinas says, God is the object of theology, but since of him we have nothing but an understanding of revelation according to our capacity, in practice the object of theology comes down to being the personal and communitarian experience of God. From here in a very efficacious way, Latin American theology is understood as the next step: "reflection on faith-put-into-practice" or as "the practice of Christians and people in general" as Clodovis Boff liked to say.

10 Right here, for theology, lies the importance of dialogue, both ecumenical and macro-ecumenical.

reciprocal acceptance within a relationship of gracious differences and mutual enrichment. Instead of a reciprocal assimilation by means of a possible reductionism of the content of the faith of the different religious denominations, we feel the need for a dialogic opening which would permit mutual enrichment within the context of a diversity of traditions.[11] This would not destroy the possibility of a "general theology of religions" which would focus upon all together. But in this case, inevitably, it would be a theology of "all" confessions from a particular religious experience: a Christian theology of religions, or a Jewish, Hindu, or Muslim theology of religions and not a trans-religious or trans-confessional theology.

3. The cultural quality of theology

From the cultural point of view, a meta account, confessional, trans-cultural world discourse collides against the cultural beauty of religious experiences of the different religious confessions even within the interior of the confession itself. A pretended trans-cultural confessional theology would just be a mono-cultural theology, fruit of the universalizing of a certain particularity, in so far as its elaboration would not escape the contingent subject of a certain culture.

For this reason, theologies are not only confessional but also cultural, within a relation of being pluri-confessional and pluri-cultural, but not of being trans-confessional and trans-cultural. And this for two reasons: First because the entire quality of being confessional is present within a context that is cultural and multicultural; secondly because all religious experience inclusive within the very fact of being confessional, comes about in a singular cultural context, different from the context of the religious experience of other communities in the very fact of begin confessional.

It's true that the revealed contents of the faith are trans-cultural but they are always received and transmitted by subjects in a given context. *This brings to mind the Thomistic axiom: cognita sunt in congnoscente secundum modum cognoscentis*[12] (The things known are in the knower according to its way of knowing). A non-cultural "revelation" does not exist, so as a result, theology becomes a discourse about the Absolute and not an absolute discourse. Theology is always a human product,

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11 Cf. R. PANIKKAR, *Il dialogo intrareligioso*, Assisi, Cittadella, 1988.

12 TOMÁS DE AQUINO, S.T., II-II, q. 1, a. 2c – *"as coisas conhecidas estão, no sujeito que conhece, segundo seu próprio modo de conhecer"*.

inevitably tied into the "the epocal paradigm" as Thomas Kuhn affirms.[13] As much as we might like to, we can never ignore, prescind or detach ourselves from the package of convictions, values, ways of thinking and acting shared by a determined community.[14] This disqualifies any and all pretension for a version of Christianity that has not been passed through a culture or that is not trans-cultural. It also disqualifies any and all reception of a revealed message independent of the contingencies in which the receptors of the same are immersed. All this in no way detracts from revelation but on the contrary frees it from being converted into an ideology. At the same time it frees theology from becoming a generic or fundamentalist discourse.

4. Theological pluralism and unity of the faith

The Second Vatican Council establishes the "the legitimate differences" in the " Catholicity of the Church" by the fact that the work of evangelization assumes "the customs of the peoples", in other words, their cultures.(LG 13) The legitimate liturgical, spiritual and disciplinary diversity, the Council says, are also understood "in relation to the theological enouncement of doctrines," which "instead of contradicting, frequently mutually complement themselves." (UR 17,1)

The legitimacy of theological pluralism is due to two factors. On one side the fact that the reality of faith is trans-cultural besides the fact its formulation and expression are always cultural or contextual.[15] On the side of the mystery of faith we have the superabundance of meaning of the revealed text which goes beyond the possibilities of any comprehension and interpretation. On the side of its formulation we have the inevitableness of the material conditions of every practice including theoretic practice, and therefore theological practice, with the contingencies of subjects, places and interests.[16] As the philosophers of practice would explain, the contingency of the subjects vitiates the pretension of

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13 Cf. Thomas KUHN, *The Structure of the Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago, 1962, 1970, 1996.

14 Francesco BELLINO, *"Filosofia da ciência e religião. Panorama"*, in Giogio PENSO-Rosino GIBELLINI (org.), *Deus na Filosofia do Século XX*, Edições Loyola, São Paulo 1998, p. 567.

15 On this point, I am going to follow closely C. BOFF, Teoria do método teológico, op. cit., p. 493-521. Ver, também, K. RAHNER, *El pluralismo en Teología y la unidad de confesión de la Iglesia*, in *Concilium* 49/50 (1969) 427-448; C. GEFFRÉ, Diversidad de teologías y unidad de fe, in AA.VV., *Iniciación a la práctica de la Teología*, Madrid 1984, p. 123-148.

16 J. B. LIBÂNIO, *Teología de la liberación. Guía didáctica para su estudio*, Col. Presencia Teológica 55, Editorial Sal Tarrae, Santander 1989, p. 116.

total objectivity; every viewpoint is a view from a point. At the same time the contingency of places does away with the pretension of universalism; every theoretic production is a contextualized practice. And the contingencies of interests destroy the pretense of neutrality; every discourse is in a certain manner ideological in the sense of being "interested."

On the other hand, faith is always greater than theology, it is truth, but it is not absolutely ineffable and therefore it is susceptible to being experimented and critically reflected upon. When it is experimented or put into practice it turns into culture. As a result, as far as being a reflection of the experience of faith, every and any kind of theology is a cultural product and all theology is a determined vision of a confessional quality, the expression of a form of inculturation of the faith and therefore a particular discourse. That is why confessional communities within the bosom of the different cultures not only can, but ought to have their own theology, without this–in principle–in any way going against the unity of faith. "Since if the faith is one, many are the ways of living the same faith," (Saint Anselm) and consequently many will be the theologies. Diversity of theologies is not only legitimate, but it is really necessary that different theologies exist in order to express with new insights the superabundance of the meaning of the revealed text when accepted in multiple faith experiences.

Nevertheless, theological pluralism ought not fall into theological relativism, under pain of jeopardizing the trans-cultural quality of the revealed message. In such a case theology would become not only a cultural product, but would also reduce revelation to a mere cultural datum and so jeopardize its quality of being transcendent. Taking into consideration the crisis of the meta discourses, theology can not resign or restrict itself to mini-discourses fragmented and autonomous by themselves. We can not forget that unity is the central axis around which all differences revolve so that a theology can be legitimate only when it is in harmony with the essential content of revelation.[17] It's on essentials that differences must be founded. In the depth of revealed mystery not everything has the same value nor implies the same binding power. A healthy theological pluralism must be founded upon the universal bases of the faith so that these can serve as a model of mediation and confessional unity which must always be built around the truth - not that which we posses nor that which we will posses, but rather that which posseses us.

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[17] Cf. K. RAHNER, *O pluralismo teológico e a unidade da Igreja*, in *Concilium* 6 (1969); J. B. LIBÂNIO-A. MURAD, *Introdução à teologia. Perfil, enfoques, tarefas*, Loyola, São Paulo 1996, de modo especial p. 245-284; Philippe DELHAYE, *Unité de foi et pluralisme des théologies dans les récents documents pontificaux*, in *Esprit et Vie* 82 (1972) 561-569.

Concluding considerations

Keeping in mind what we have just expounded, everything seems to indicate that from a religious point of view a trans-confessional theology is problematic but a pluri-confessional theology is both possible and necessary. Therefore even though the term "theology" seems to be of Christian origin, from a religious point of view, when Hebrews, Muslims, or Hindus assemble their own interpretation of the faith, whether it be in relation to their own confession or in relation to the pluralism of religious traditions, they also are doing theology. And since from a cultural point of view, these intra-confessional interpretations, including the Christian, are born of different cultural matrices, we inevitably come up with a theology that besides being pluri-confessional is also pluri-cultural.

A theology of pluri-religious or pluri-cultural character, in relation to a theology that is trans-confessional and trans-cultural, is different in so far that such a theology tries to give priority to reality over abstraction, existence over essence, and finally it tries to give priority to the living experience of persons in their communities and concrete circumstances over against generalities and reflections of a religious and cultural myopia.

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Is Interfaith Theology Possible?

Edmund Kee-Fook CHIA

Is *Interfaith Theology* possible? My instinctive response is an emphatic *No*! That response, however, will have to tempered with a cautious but persistent *Yes*! This is the task of the present paper. I will discuss why I think the notion of *Interfaith Theology* seems, in the first place, like an oxymoron and then proceed to suggest why I also see it as very much the way forward.

Interfaith theology: an oxymoron!

Let us begin then with why *Interfaith Theology* sounds like a contradiction in terms. Theology, if we go by the traditional Anselmian definition, is "faith seeking understanding." It presupposes faith. This faith is in the main parochial, a product of confessional apprehensions of life and of Ultimate Reality. Each religious community has its own specific faith. This faith is something shared only by in-group members, i.e., fellow believers. Outside of it the faith makes no sense or may even seem like nonsense. Add the prefix "inter" to faith and we have what amounts to something between or among faiths. Thus, "interfaith" implies the crossing of faith traditions to develop something which encompasses all or at least several faiths. Interfaith Theology, therefore, is that theology which belongs to all but at the same time belongs to none. Turning around Max Mueller's axiom on religion, *Interfaith Theology* seems like a theology which knows all but knows none. It is particular in that it makes claim to universality. But does its claim to universality abrogate its particularities? Can an *Interfaith Theology* be, at the same time, a Christian, Islamic, or Hindu theology, or does it become yet another theological system, a totally new entity, a *tertium quid*?

Turning specifically to the issue of theology, the most crucial question is "can there be a theology which cuts across faith traditions?" Can theology, which develops out of specific contexts and with their own histories, values, worldviews, and visions of life, be universalized? Concretely, if we look at theology as, in keeping with the Hellenistic tradition, the "study of God," is this study construed in the same way by peoples of different faiths and across religious traditions? To begin, even the very concept of *Theos* is already not universally held. If anything, theology makes no sense to religious traditions which are organized differently, especially those which do not have theistic concepts and, even if they do, might deny that the *Theos* can ever be studied through reasoned discourse.

What is more, even if theology is understood more generically as the disciplined and systematic reflection of life and the world in general we still would not have a consensus as to whether an *Interfaith Theology* is possible. To be sure, each religion has its own epistemologies, metaphysics, cosmologies, anthropologies, soteriologies, eschatologies, etc. Many of these do not have one-to-one correspondence with one another. For example, if Christian theology helps us understand the beginnings of life on the basis of Genesis, some religions do not have linear conceptions of time and thus have no alpha or omega. Even if they do, their creation myths may not involve Adam and Eve or even a Creator God. Furthermore, if Christian theology offers an explanation to sin and the need for redemption in Jesus Christ, some religions have their own theories about the negativity and dysfunction of the world and in most cases the necessity of a messiah does not feature within such soteriologies, i.e., if they even have one to begin with. To be sure, salvation as a religious end is not necessarily a universal doctrine.[1] We could go on and on in this compare-and-contrast analysis, but suffice it to say that one would be hard-pressed to even discern basic theological themes which cut across all or most faith traditions. Even if these could be found a consensus on a theological appropriation of the themes would be next to impossible.

Without venturing out across the religious traditions one already finds that even within a single religious tradition there is no such thing as a single theological interpretation on a variety of issues. Think of the many intra-faith debates within the Christian community alone, such as the divinity of Jesus, or the necessity of Christ/church for salvation, or

[1] See Mark HEIM, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995); John HICK, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale, 1989), 233-96.

the Creationism versus Evolution debate, or moral controversies such as cremation versus burial, or the morality of homosexuality or stem cell research, or the pro-choice versus pro-life conflict. Again, we could go on and on in this and find that, if anything, there is more diversity within traditions than homogeneity. That is why it is a fallacy to speak of Christianity (or Islam or Judaism or Sikhism) in the singular as if it was a monolith or as if there was only one version of it.

Now, we have not even begun to speak of the diversity due to denominational differences, which would multiply the plurality within religions exponentially. Even within specific denominations we already have to deal with the conflict of conservatives versus liberals, literal versus historical-critical interpretation of Scriptures, low versus high Christology, or redemption-centered versus creation-centered approaches to theology. It would be naïve to imagine that these differences in interpretation are of no consequence. To be sure, people have been burned, wars have been waged, bombs set off, and people still crucify one another in the name of these theological differences. Now, if this is the case within particular religious traditions, can we even dare dream of an *Interfaith Theology* which implies a theological consensus across the variety of religions?!

Interfaith theology: good idea!

Don't get me wrong. Notwithstanding the difficulties I am by no means suggesting that the idea of an *Interfaith Theology* is bad. On the contrary, I think it is a fabulous and laudable idea. It is especially welcome in an age where religions continue to be pitted against one another. Also, as far as Christianity is concerned, this seems very much a logical progression in its Theology of Other Religions. If, at one time, Christianity saw the other religions as repositories of evil awaiting conquest and then later as incomplete versions of truth awaiting fulfillment, we are now at the stage where Christians seem to accept other religions as basically true even if the question as to whether this is a matter of fact (*de facto*) or of principle (*de iure*) is still a topic of much debate.[2] Seen in this context, the very act of evolving an *Interfaith Theology* suggests that not only is the truth of these other religions no longer in question but that we see them as *locus theologicus* for our own Christian theology. In a way, it is a

[2] See Vatican Declaration *Dominus Iesus: On the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*; also, see Jacques DUPUIS, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 9-13; Paul KNITTER, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002).

move forward, towards discerning how Christianity needs to understand itself in light of the reality of religious pluralism.

Note that my example above is from the Christian tradition. It is deliberate. Not only because I am more familiar with the history of Christianity's attitude towards other religions but also because I see the *Interfaith Theology* enterprise as a specifically Christian one. Why? Because other religions, especially Eastern ones, do not have such preoccupations. Not that they lack interfaith consciousness, but because such consciousness is already deeply rooted in their religious psyche and built into their theological structures. Hinduism, for example, has always been accommodating of religious pluralism. That is why it is called the religion of many gods, 330 million to be exact. The Rig Veda's axiom that "Truth is One, but sages call it by many names" has often been quoted to account for Hinduism's openness to pluralism not only across religions but also within. There is no one way to truth in Hinduism, just as there is no one true religion, and therefore no one theology for all. Suggesting an *Interfaith Theology* for Hindus, therefore, is irrelevant, since their theology, unlike Christianity's, is premised on diversity.

Now, if the proposal for an *Interfaith Theology* is precisely to eradicate this diversity then that's another matter. Here, plurality is conceived of as bad or at least difficult and the ideal is for an overarching theological system which explains everything, is universal, and applicable to all. Again, this is a peculiarly Western preoccupation, akin to obsessions with creating a one world government, a singular currency, a world market, an inter-network of global communication, a universal declaration of human rights, or even a universal Catechism. We are also reminded of the many efforts at developing a World Theology, an Ecumenical Esperanto, a Universal Theology, a World Ethic, and the mushrooming of centers for Global Christianity, all of which are Western enterprises.[3] The common thread running through these ambitions is the creation of a singular system which can account for the many and diverse ways. This craving for universality is as much a craving for understanding as it is a craving for power – power to define and control, and power to subsume variety under the super-structural umbrella of *Interfaith Theology*!

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[3] See Wilfred Cantwell SMITH, *Towards a World Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981); Leonard SWIDLER, ed., *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987); David KRIEGER, New Universalism: *Foundations for a Global Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991); Hans KÜNG, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

Interfaith theology: theory and method

Again, don't get me wrong! I am in no way suggesting that *Interfaith Theology* is wrong. In fact, I think it is absolutely necessary, especially given the pathetic state of interreligious relations in society today.[4] But, instead of conceiving *Interfaith Theology* as a product of theological reflection I would like to regard it as also a process. It is as much a method as a theory. *Interfaith Theology*, therefore, is at once a methodology for doing theology as a theory for apprehending the diversity across religions. As both theory and method *Interfaith Theology* facilitates interfaith relations and especially interfaith dialogue. Let me enumerate four conditions.

First, *Interfaith Theology* has to be done in an inter-faith fashion. It cannot be the product of a single scholar sifting through the theologies of various religions and attempting a synthesis of them. Instead, *Interfaith Theology* must be done together and with persons of other religions. It is inter-faith in that the interpreters come from different faiths, all of whom are in dialogue with one another in an effort to discern areas of convergences and divergences.

Second, *Interfaith Theology* has to entail authentic and holistic dialogue, not merely at the level of the head but also at the level of the heart. Each dialogue partner brings to the table not only doctrines and theologies but also their flesh and blood, life experiences, feelings, and passions. All of these constitute the "stuff" of dialogue. Needless to say, trust and respect must govern such dialogical encounters.

Third, *Interfaith Theology* has its limitations. As alluded to earlier certain theological themes are probably beyond resolution due to mutually irreconcilable worldviews. Issues such as whether there is a God or no God, or whether God is personal or non-personal, or whether there is life after death are so radically divergent across religions that attempting to synthesize them under a single grand narrative is reductionistic at best. Thus, *Interfaith Theology* ought to cultivate a spirit of epistemic humility in acknowledging that faith and religion transcend *logos* and understanding and that our finite minds cannot know it all.

Fourth, *Interfaith Theology* should be attending to common concerns, especially those which affect people before death. Issues such as poverty and oppression, injustice and marginalization, are scourges which all religious communities strive against. Liberation, after all, is an aim

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[4] See Edmund CHIA and James HEISIG, eds., *A Longing for Peace: The Challenge of a Multicultural, Multireligious World* (Bilbao: Associacion Haretxa, 2006).

which probably cuts across the religions. Even if there is no consensus as to what an afterlife liberation looks like there is certainly greater clarity as to what liberation before death entails. Following hermeneutical keys developed by liberation theologians *Interfaith Theology* will do well to espouse a preferential option for the poor and suffering.

In conclusion, as both theory and method *Interfaith Theology* has the potential of bringing religious communities together in peace and harmony rather than in discord and conflict. The eventual product of such dialogues should emphasize and cultivate attitudes of openness and trust, respect and tolerance, and humility and non-absoluteness. These are the 'stuff" of the theory of Interfaith Theology. It is this theory which should shape our reflections on all other aspects of theology.

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A Bahá'í Contribution to a "Trans-religious" Theology

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The Bahá'í Faith is recognized as the most recent of the independent religions. It was founded in the mid 1900's by Bahá'u'lláh and today has followers all over the world. It maintains as its basic principle the fundamental unity of religions; its theology is on-going revelation; it envisions religious phenomena as civilization's driving force towards spiritual and social progress and as the fundamental agent to achieve unity in the human race. All this offers a unique and daring perspective whose theological elements could well serve efforts to reach points of understanding, respect and mutual acceptance among religious traditions. In the situation of today's world such bridges are especially necessary since religious tensions and conflicts are our daily bread and they threaten to submerge ever deeper our endangered humanity.

This article intends precisely to present a quick glance at some of the elements of this theology.

The starting point: God and the human person

From the Bahá'í perspective, the relation existing between God and his creation is a relation of emanation, but not of a pantheistic type. Creation proceeds from the divinity but the divinity does not form part of creation.

Although the human person is just another element of this creation nevertheless it stands out from it in so far as it is the recipient of an autonomous purpose: to get to know its creator.

Bahá'u'lláh affirms that:

"Having created the world and all that liveth and moveth therein, He, through the direct operation of His unconstrained and sovereign Will,

chose to confer upon man the unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him – a capacity that must needs be regarded as the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of creation."[1] "Attaining unto the Presence of God and His recognition" is the "highest and most excelling grace bestowed upon men,"[2] the "most excellent aim", and the "supreme objective", to which "all the heavenly Books and the divinely-revealed and weighty Scriptures unequivocally bear witness."[3] Together with the duty to know and love our creator Bahá'u'lláh also states that the purpose of all humanity is "to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization."[4]

At the same time the Bahá'í sacred books categoricaly insist that God is un-knowable and so set the base for an apophatic theology.

"The door of the knowledge of the Ancient Being hath ever been, and will continue for ever to be, closed in the face of men. No man's understanding shall ever gain access unto His holy court."[5]

"…nor can the bird of the human heart, however great its longing, ever hope to ascend into the heaven of Thy majesty and knowledge."[6]

So then just how can the human being achieve its reason for existing if God is essentially un-knowable? Just what can be known about God and how? Is it possible that God "unmeasurably above and beyond every human attribute" is able to intervene in history?

Bahá'u'lláh establishes a difference between the essence and the divine "attributes" which are ultimately nothing more than an emanation of that unknowable essence.

"Were I to attempt to describe Thee by Thy names, I would readily recognize that the kingdom of these names is itself created through the movement of Thy fingers, and trembleth for fear of Thee. And were I to venture to extol Thine attributes, I would be forced to admit that these attributes are Thine own creation, and lie within Thy grasp."[7] God therefore remains "sanctified above all attributes and holy above all names."[8]

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1 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 65

2 Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 137

3 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 70

4 *Ibid.*, p. 214

5 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 49

6 *Ibid.*, p. 3

7 Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 273-4

8 *Ibid.*, p. 320

What we are interested in here is that from the Bahá'í point of view, these divine qualities and not His essence are the object of knowledge by the human being.

"Reaching the "presence" of God "means the comprehension and knowledge of His attributes, not of His Reality" and this knowledge –which as we have seen is the primary purpose of human existence– is "*proportioned to the capacity and power of man*; it is not absolute [*emphasis added*]… All that man is able to understand are the attributes of Divinity, the radiance of which appears and is visible in the world and within men's souls."[9]

Divine Manifestations

Now that we have reached this point it's time that we take into consideration the element that is the corner stone of Bahá'í theology.

God intervenes in history but in an indirect manner:

"The door of the knowledge of the Ancient of Days being thus closed in the face of all beings, the Source of infinite grace… hath caused those luminous Gems of Holiness to appear out of the realm of the spirit, in the noble form of the human temple, and be made manifest unto all men, that they may impart unto the world the mysteries of the unchangeable Being, and tell of the subtleties of His imperishable Essence."[10]

These divine emisaries are "*one and all*, the Exponents on earth of Him Who is the central Orb of the universe, its Essence and ultimate Purpose," the "Treasuries of Divine knowledge, and the Repositories of celestial wisdom. [*emphasis added*].[11] They are the "primal Mirrors which reflect the light of unfading glory," "expressions of Him Who is the Invisible of the Invisibles,"[12] the "Day Spring of the manifold grace of God,"[13] "Repositories of the pearls of His knowledge,"[14] "the focal points where the signs, tokens and perfections of that sacred, pre-existent Reality appear in all their splendour" and on whom "dependeth the everlasting life of humankind."[15]

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9 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221

10 Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 99

11 Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, pp. 99-100

12 *Ibid.*, p. 102

13 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 12

14 Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 13

15 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 49

These emisaries between God and mankind – definitely the Founders of the great religious systems - "are the recipients and revealers of all the unchangeable attributes and names of God"[16] and therefore it's by means of them that the human person is able to reach a certain understanding of the divinity: "The knowledge of the Reality of the Divinity is impossible and unattainable, but the knowledge of the Manifestations of God is the knowledge of God, for the bounties, splendors and divine attributes are apparent in Them. Therefore, if man attains to the knowledge of the Manifestations of God, he will attain to the knowledge of God…"[17]

Besides, they have been favored with a twofold condition. On the one hand they have been sent to mankind "in the image of mortal man, with such human limitations as eating and drinking, poverty and riches, glory and abasement, sleeping and waking…"[18]

On the other hand at the same time they perfectly manifest the qualities of God, to such an extent that "whatsoever is applicable to them is in reality applicable to God, Himself, Who is both the Visible and the Invisible,"[19] so that "were any of the all-embracing Manifestations of God to declare: 'I am God!' He verily speaketh the truth, and no doubt attacheth thereto," states Bahá'u'lláh, "for it hath been repeatedly demonstrated that through their Revelation, their attributes and names, the Revelation of God, His name and His attributes, are made manifest in the world."[20]

Among them there not only exists no rank or distinction, but rather such an essential unity that "they are all but one person, one soul, one spirit, one being, one revelation. They are all the manifestation of the 'Beginning' and the 'End,' the 'First' and the 'Last,' the 'Seen' and 'Hidden' – all of which pertain to Him Who is the innermost Spirit of Spirits and eternal Essence of Essences."[21]

Religions

God has revealed himself to mankind by means of these theophanies in order to offer the human person a guide to fulfillment of its two-

16 *The Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 141

17 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 222

18 Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 71

19 *Ibid.*, p. 142

20 *Ibid.*, p. 178

21 *Ibid.*, p. 178

fold ontological purpose: to know God and to move forward civilization in a continual progress.[22]

In the worlds of Bahá'u'lláh, these emisaries of God have been entrusted with the mission to "nurture the trees of human existence with the living waters of uprightness and understanding, that there may appear from them that which God hath deposited within their inmost selves,"[23] to "impart unto the world the mysteries of the unchangeable Being, and tell of the subtleties of His imperishable Essence,"[24] in order to cleanse the souls "from the dross and dust of earthly cares and limitations,"[25] to educate people in such a way that "at the hour of death, ascend, in the utmost purity and sanctity and with absolute detachment, to the throne of the Most High."[26]

As divinely ordained promotors of a human civilization in constant evolution, these Manifestations of God also have the mission to "endue all men with righteousness and understanding, so that peace and tranquillity may be firmly established amongst them,"[27] "safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men,"[28] bring about "that the world of man should become the world of God, this nether realm the Kingdom, this darkness light, this satanic wickedness all the virtues of heaven – and unity, fellowship and love be won for the whole human race, that the organic unity should reappear and the bases of discord be destroyed and life everlasting and grace everlasting become the harvest of mankind."[29]

Thus we see that Bahá'u'lláh neither considers the messages of each of these divine emisaries as disparate elements or something isolated, nor does he set up differences in rank among the founders of religions. All religious messages proceed from one and the same source and have a common pre-established purpose that fits into a single divine plan which is universal and not bound by time. Religion is "eternal in

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22 "God's purpose in sending His Prophets unto men is twofold. The first is to liberate the children of men from the darkness of ignorance, and guide them to the light of true understanding. The second is to ensure the peace and tranquillity of mankind, and provide all the means by which they can be established." *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 79-80

23 Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 138

24 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 46

25 *Ibid.*, p. 67

26 *Ibid.*, p. 156

27 *Ibid.*, p. 205

28 *Ibid.*, p. 215

29 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 30

the past, eternal in the future."[30] Then just how to explain differences in religions?

Divine Revelation is not exhausted in each one of its Manifestations. Rather it is adapted and limited to the time and place of its destiny: "The All-Knowing Physician hath His finger on the pulse of mankind. He perceiveth the disease, and prescribeth, in His unerring wisdom, the remedy. Every age hath its own problem, and every soul its particular aspiration."[31]

Consequently each revelation presents two aspects: one which is essential and common to all religions and touches on spiritual considerations of the revelation (for example: "the golden rule", the teaching of the spiritual aspect of human beings, etc.); the other aspect is accidental, changing and concerns social and material considerations of the revelation (for example: dietary norms, norms concerning matrimony, etc.) and these are bound up with the context in which they are made. But also differences among religions arrise because of "blind imitation of ancestral forms of belief and worship"[32] on the part of those who believe in these religions. Bahá'u'lláh goes on to describe this with:

"There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God. The difference between the ordinances under which they abide should be attributed to the varying requirements and exigencies of the age in which they were revealed. All of them, except a few which are the outcome of human perversity, were ordained of God, and are a reflection of His Will and Purpose. Arise and, armed with the power of faith, shatter to pieces the gods of your vain imaginings, the sowers of dissension amongst you. Cleave unto that which draweth you together and uniteth you."[33]

Bahá'u'lláh afirms that at this point in the course of humanity God has once more deigned to intervene personally in history. Its advent "hath been heralded in all the sacred Scriptures,"[34] and the purpose of His Revelation is no other than:

"…to proclaim that the ages of the infancy and of the childhood of the human race are past, that the convulsions associated with the present stage of its adolescence are slowly and painfully preparing it to

30 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 136

31 *Ibid.*, p. 212

32 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 443

33 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 217

34 *Ibid.*, p. 5

attain the stage of manhood, and are heralding the approach of that Age of Ages when swords will be beaten into plowshares, when the Kingdom promised by Jesus Christ will have been established, and the peace of the planet definitely and permanently ensured. Nor does Bahá'u'lláh claim finality for His own Revelation, but rather stipulates that a fuller measure of the truth He has been commissioned by the Almighty to vouchsafe to humanity, at so critical a juncture in its fortunes, must needs be disclosed at future stages in the constant and limitless evolution of mankind."[35]

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In April of the year 2002, in a message directed to the religious authorities of the world at the Universal House of Justice (seat of the world-wide governing body of the International Community of Bahá'í, Bahá'u'lláh stated regarding interfaith interchange:

"…if it is to contribute meaningfully to healing the ills that afflict a desperate humanity, (interfaith innterchange) must now address honestly and without further evasion the implications of the over-arching truth that called the movement into being: that God is one and that, beyond all diversity of cultural expression and human interpretation, religion is likewise one."[36]

So, these are some of the elements that Bahá'í theology could offer to efforts to understand religious pluralisim in order to strengthen inter-religious dialogue. Accepting them does not necessarily imply an "abandonment of faith in the fundamental verities of any of the world's great belief systems."[37] But it does invite us to comprehend that religious truth is relative and that Truth is one, even though its manifestations are many and therefore whatever pretension or claim to be "exclusive" or "absolute" actually contradicts the very definition of religion and of course goes against those spiritual principles of brotherhood and progress which it proclaims: "Beware, lest ye make it a cause of dissension amongst you. Be ye as firmly settled as the immovable mountain in the Cause of your Lord, the Mighty, the Loving."[38]

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35 Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. v

36 The Universal House of Justice, 2002 April, To the World's Religious Leaders, p. 6

37 *Ibid.*, p. 4

38 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 136

Foundations for a Multifaith Pluralistic Theology

Paul F. KNITTER

The central question that was posed to the authors of this issue of the collection "Along the Many Paths of God" was: "Is it possible to imagine a theology that is grounded in and works with categories, sources, principles, images and metaphors from not just one but several religions? Is a theology that is not mono-confessional but rather open and multi-confessional really posible"[1] Or, in the terms used by Wilfred Cantwell Smith when he proposed a similar project more than 25 years ago: Can we have a "world theology" that is a pluralistic theology?[2]

Although Smith's project has been roundly criticized over the years, and more recently has been thrown into the refuse bin of postmodernism, I do believe that Smith's project, which is resurrected in this book's project, is not only valid but urgent. Without in any way diminishing the distinctive profile of each religion, I believe we can find "family characteristics" within all the religions that provide the foundation for a multifaith, world theology that sets aside claims of superiority of one religion over all the others and calls all religions to engage each other for the well-being of all sentient beings, and of the planet itself.

To make my case, I follow the lead of Paul Tillich's observation that of the three "polarities" in all religions, it is the role of the *"mystical"* and the *"ethical-prophetic"* to make sure that the *"sacramental"* polarity does not absolutize itself and so fall prey to the demonic.[3]

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1 From the project proposal sent out by José María Vigil.

2 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion*. London: Macmillan, 1981.

3 Paul Tillich, "The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian," in *The Future of Religions*, Jerald C.Brauer, ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 86-87. Also, Paul Tillich, *What Is Religion?* James Luther Adams, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp.88-92.

The mystical in all religions

All religions recognize that whatever word or image they may use to speak about what they are after, or what they have experienced, it has to be preceded by the adjective: *mysterious*. The Lakotas' *Wakan Tanka –the Great Mysterious*. Religions, by their very nature, and I would add by their very self-description, deal with Mystery. It is especially the mystics that make this clear. They remind themselves and their communities – especially the leaders and hierarchs of their communities – that to truly experience that which their community seeks to experience is (as Tillich puts it) to grasp or be grasped by a Reality that is "infinitely apprehensible, yet never entirely comprehensible,"[4] as mysterious as it is real, as truly transcendent as it is truly immanent.

Whether mystics choose to speak about the content of their experience and so use words like God or Tao or Brahman, or whether they want to speak only of the experience itself and so use words like Enlightenment or Emptiness or No-thingness – they all recognize that what they are experiencing is both real and ineffable. That's why Christian mystics have spoken of God as the *notum Ignotum* – the known Unknown. In the very moment of knowing something about Mystery, they know for sure they can never know everything about Mystery.

Some religious traditions are better then others at recognizing the incomprehensible, ineffable nature of what they are dealing with. Asian religions seem to have a better track record in respecting Mystery. Taoism's reminder that those who can talk of the Tao don't really know what they're talking about.[5] Hinduism's admonition that we must put "neti, neti" before everything we say about the Ultimate – "not this, not that." And the Zen Buddhists' readiness to burn all scriptures and even kill the Buddha so as not to get caught by any one way of talking or teaching.

But even the loquacious Abrahamic traditions, which have associated Word, Dabar, Logos, or even a written text with God, have also admitted, in their better moments, that God can never be captured by words. For me, some of the best of these moments were back in 1215 in the Fourth Lateran Council and then in 1875 in the first Vatican Council when the Catholic Magisterium officially defined the "incomprehensibil-

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[4] Tillich, *What Is Religion?* James Luther Adams, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 15.

[5] *Tao Te Ching*, 1,1

ity of God."[6] For us Catholics, it is a defined dogma that God can never be defined! (We've had a few popes and theologians who seem to have forgotten that!)

There is an evident tension, if not a downright contradiction, between this mystical recognition of mystery within all religions and the theological affirmation of superiority within most religions. We can't have it both ways. We can't be mystics in our private life of prayer, and "superiorists" in our public life of discourse. Stated forthrightly: if Mystery, by its very nature, cannot be known fully, or adequately, or definitively or unsurpassably, then we have to seriously and creatively question, revamp, or discard our theologies that make claims that our revelation or our savior or our teacher is the only, or the final, way to know the Great Mysterious.

In other words, mystical language about mystery trumps theological language about superiority and finality. No word, no revelation can be the only or the final word on Mystery. There's always more to come. (I think that's what the Christian belief in eschatology and the Buddhist belief in impermanence and constant change imply: don't get stuck in thinking you've arrived.)

But if the experience of the Great Mysterious, of that which is ever more than we can know, is at the heart of religious experience, where did all these exclamations of "only" or "full and final" that populate sacred or liturgical texts come from? That, as uncomfortable professors are wont to say, is a topic for another lecture. I would begin such a lecture with an observation that Ernst Troeltsch made in his famous book, *The Absoluteness of Christianity*.[7] He pointed out that for religious people to make "absolute claims" about their experience is as natural as it may be naïve. This is because what religious or mystical experience cannot do intellectually, it does do existentially: while it cannot provide our heads with absolute, knowledge about the Divine, it does make absolute claims on our hearts. The message of Jesus, the teachings of Buddha, the revelations of Muhammad – no matter how limited or relative or socially constructed they may have been – are able to turn peoples lives around. Conversion or enlightenment is an experience in which people naturally resort to absolute or superlative language: "Wow! This is it. God has spoken. The Truth has arrived. There can be no other or higher God." – Conversion never comes in half-doses. It arrives full-blast, and overwhelms.

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[6] Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitionum et Declarationum* (Barcelona: Herder, 1963), nos. 428 and 1782.

[7] *The Absoluteness of Christianity* (Richmond: John Knox, 1971), pp. 131-63.

So religious language, as it comes out of the womb of experience, is, as Krister Stendahl notes, confessional or love language.[8] It gushes, spontaneously, with both superlative and exclusionary language. In situations of intimacy, it won't do to tell your lover she or he is "great." What you feel is "greatest" and "my only." And that's what you say. But you use that language not to put down others, but rather, to express what you feel and think about the person who, despite all his or her limitations, has claimed your heart and your being. – We dishonor and abuse such religious language when we turn it into philosophical or theological language and then use it to exclude or subordinate all other religious figures.

Holy Mystery takes form and appears or incarnates in particular places in particular people with particular power and, yes, with unique insights. So we can use superlatives and perhaps even announce that "only here" does Holy Mystery take this shape or deliver this message. But they have to be superlatives and "onlys" that allow for and are eager to learn from other superlatives and "onlys."

The prophetic in all religions

If the mystics remind us that we can never know the Divine or the Great Mysterious fully and finally, the prophets assure us that we don't have to.

What I'm suggesting here presupposes that the terms "mystics" and "prophets" point to realities you'll find in all, or most, religions. Although, as I've tried to explore elsewhere,[9] we have to be careful of making too neat distinctions between mystics and prophets (I believe that they're really two ends of the same continuum, so that if you scratch a prophet you'll find a mystic) – still distinctions are valid. Prophets are those God-sent gadflies, usually living most of their lives on the streets or in the villages, that keep reminding us that unless our "mystical experiences" of God or enlightenment are being lived out in daily life and in some way leading to the well-being of others, such experiences are incomplete, if they're there at all. The mystical experience that leads to personal transformation must also embrace or lead to communal or social transformation.

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[8] "Notes for Three Biblical Studies," in *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, Gerald Anderson and Thomas Stransky, eds. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), pp. 14-15.

[9] "Religiones, mysticismo y liberación. Diálogo entre la teología de la liberación y la teología de las religions," in *Por los muchos caminos de Dios II*. José María Vigil, Luiza E.Tomita y Macelo Barros, eds. Quito: Ediciones Abya-Yala, 2004. pp. 91-108.

Translating the message of the prophets into the language of the philosophy of religion, according to John Hick, if religious experience does not include a shift from self-centeredness to other-centeredness, it's probably not authentic.[10] Or theologically, it's probably not faithful to the original message of the founder or tradition. (Feminists would remind me that such a shift must presuppose a "self" to begin with.)

This is why for Jesus, the two primary commandments are just two ways of observing one commandment: you can't love God unless you're loving your neighbor. That's why for Buddha if your *prajna* (wisdom) is not producing *karuna* (compassion), you don't have *prajna*.[11] That's why for Mohammad, as for Ezechial, to know Allah is to do justice.

Let me once again dash in where postmodern angels fear to tread and take a next step. I venture this modest meta-claim: According to the prophets – or you might say, the "activists"—within the different religious traditions, whether Abrahamic, Asian, or primal, *it is much more important to do the truth faithfully than to 'know' it fully*. While orthopraxis (or right-acting) and orthodoxy (or right-believing) are intimately connected, the prophets claim that orthopraxis holds a certain priority.

And if you allow me a philosophical aside: I believe that that priority is both epistemological and ontological. It is by *doing* the truth as best we know it and as best we can, that we come to *know* it ever more adequately. And it is also by *doing* the truth as best we know it, in community with others and with Holy Mystery, that we *create* or *bring forth* the truth. It is in the living of the truth that the truth becomes real, as the scholastics put it, both *quoad nos et quoad se* – both in our understanding of it and in reality.

Whatever the value of such philosophical reflections, it is clear that those who carry out this ethical role of prophets in the different religions not only *allow* but *urge* their co-religionists to set aside claims of superiority. For it is much more important and urgent to put the message of Jesus (or of Muhammad or Buddha or Kishna) into practice than to know that this message is the only or the final saving path. In fact, it is *not necessary* to know for sure that Jesus is the "only way" in order to give ourselves fully to walking that way. Indeed, expending energy and time in trying to convince ourselves and others that Jesus is the only or the best can become a distraction, or an excuse, from following Jesus in the hard work of loving our neighbor and reshaping our world. Insisting that "ours is the best" is, I truly believe, an impediment to "doing our best." Trying to

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[10] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 299-315.

[11] This was the reformational reminder of Mahayana Buddhism.

be sure that our religious model is the best on the lot may easily distract us from what really matters – getting in and driving it.

Here the Holy Qu'ran offers us some sound, realistic advice: "If Allah had so willed, He would have created you one community, but [He has not done so] that He may test you in what He has given you; so compete with one another in good works. To God you shall all return and He will tell you the truth about that which you have been disputing." (5:48)

So we can put our concerns about whose religion is best on the shelf marked "eschatology." If such questions are ever going to be answered, it will have to be later; it can't be now. Now we have to talk together, walk together, act together and "compete in doing good works."

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Buddhist Reflections on Interfaith Theology

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Today a truly interfaith theology is not only possible but absolutely necessary. From a Buddhist perspective, however, the phrase "interfaith theology" does not quite express what is needed. Because it is not theistic, Buddhism does not have a *theology*; nor is Buddhism well described as a *faith*, since emphasis is not on belief but on following a spiritual path.

More important than the phrase, of course, is the fact that all religions now face the same basic challenge. Part of this challenge is other religions. Like it or not, every religion finds itself in increasing contact with others, which means that the "growing tip" of development for each is how it responds to alternatives that undermine its own "naturalness." What do our truth-claims have to do with their truth-claims? The other can no longer be ignored: either religions will learn from each other, or they will end up fighting each other.

At the same time, globalizing humanity faces a crisis (or set of crises) greater than anything ever experienced before. It is no exaggeration to say that the very survival of civilization may be at stake. Ecological systems are breaking down and interacting with social problems including overpopulation and the growing gap between rich and poor. The future looks bleak if this issue does not very soon become our primary concern and collective focus.

It is a mistake to see these as separate challenges. The technological and economic transformations of modernity have led to a secular understanding of the world that can still be characterized as religious, insofar as its value system offers the promise of a new salvation in ever-increasing production and consumerism. From this perspective, the "religion of the market" is quickly becoming the first truly world religion, and the greatest challenge to every other one. How should we respond to it?

This crisis is also an opportunity. To remain relevant, traditional religions must engage in a comprehensive self-examination, in order to distinguish what in their teachings and customs is historically contingent (thus can be replaced) from what remains essential (and thus needs to be re-emphasized, perhaps in new ways). Since religious institutions tend to be very conservative, such a re-assessment is often a painful process, yet the alternative is a slow or rapid decline into insignificance.

For Buddhism, the Buddha is not a god but a model for what each of us needs to achieve. He emphasized that his teachings are not "revealed" and are valuable only as a roadmap to help us get somewhere. He also encouraged inquiring doubt rather than unquestioning faith. The important point is that Buddhist doctrines and practices are not sacred in themselves but function to assist self-transformation. Today it becomes increasingly obvious that this individual transformation must also have a collective dimension.

Such an approach accords well with what many scholars now emphasize: that religious language is metaphorical. What does that mean for how we understand the Buddha, Christ, Satan… even God? According to a Zen saying, "If you meet the Buddha, kill him!" In one of his last sermons Eckhart declared "I pray God to rid me of God." If all concepts are heuristic, they become idolatrous when we identify with them as sacrosanct and not open to interrogation.

What does that realization mean for our conceptions of salvation: nirvana, enlightenment, heaven and hell? Ultimately, the criterion is the kind of people we become when we follow a spiritual path. Buddhism emphasizes wisdom and compassion. Wisdom involves "waking up" from the delusion of a separate ego-self, to realize our interdependence with other people and with the earth. Compassion is living in ways that manifest that insight. If the Kingdom of God is right here, right now, what is needed today is not a new version of Pascal's wager but a refusal to wager on an afterlife that may or may not be literally true. In either case, how I should live, here and now, remains the same. The Buddha's understanding of karma was revolutionary in its time because it emphasized motivation. Although often understood differently today (e.g., accumulating merit for a better rebirth), karma is the key to self-transformation. The quality of my life can be improved now by transforming what motivates me now: by replacing greed, ill will and delusion with generosity, friendliness and the wisdom that emphasizes our nonduality. To do this is to experience the world in a different way.

That certainly includes living by the Golden Rule, yet a Buddhist perspective has special implications for how we respond to the plight of the poor and exploited, who experience a degraded quality of life

through no fault of their own. Today a traditional Buddhist response – that they are reaping the fruits of their own misdeeds in past lives – is not acceptable. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we should identify with the oppressed while rejecting the oppressor. Like it or not, we are nondual with both. For Buddhism the fundamental issue is not good-fighting-against-evil but awakening from ignorance to realize our essential interconnectedness with everyone. Our efforts to overcome the sufferings of the exploited must be grounded in concern not only for the poor but also for the secluded and deluded rich who don't care about those who go to sleep hungry. We are called upon to have compassion not just for the victims of violence but even for the self-destructive perpetrators of violence, who brutalize themselves by brutalizing others. This does not imply that we should relate to both sides in the same way, yet identifying only with the oppressed tends to reproduce the same basic problem: the ignorance that discriminates them (the bad) from us (the good).

There is something ironic about our eagerness to dialogue with other religions. It is usually easy to relate to open-minded representatives of other religions. It is more difficult to talk with the more conservative members of our own traditions, who may feel less threatened by other religions than by the liberal tendencies within their own. Is the greater challenge today not inter-religious dialogue but intra-religious dialogue? The fact that this split between traditionalist and liberal, between literal and metaphorical, keeps reproducing itself in almost every denomination suggests that human religiosity involves a tension between two different functions.

To be self-conscious is to be a self conscious of its mortality, and – with few exceptions – devising ways to resist that inevitable fate. A religious worldview is our main collective way of resisting it. Religions locate us within a larger metaphysical reality that denies death by transcending it. We don't really die (or need to die) when we die. That is why other religions are such a threat: their different worldviews challenge our own immortality project.

As this implies, death-denial has major consequences for how we live. Psychologically as well as logically, life and death are two sides of the same coin: to deny either is to deny both. "The irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive" (Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*).

This amounts to a powerful critique of religion … but is collective death-evasion its only role? Religions are not only umbrellas for evading a terrifying truth; at their best they help us *overcome* death-denial by overcoming the ego-self that is so terrified of death. I conclude by outlin-

ing a Buddhist understanding of how that happens, but there is nothing uniquely Buddhist about this process. Since other religions have their own ways of describing something that seems very similar, I believe they share a common focus that could and should become very important in any future inter-religious theology.

Buddhism emphasizes the relationship between our *dukkha* (suffering in the broadest sense) and the delusion of self. That the sense of self is a psychological/social/linguistic construction (as we would now express it) means that it is by definition ungrounded and therefore intrinsically insecure. We usually become aware of this basic insecurity as a persistent sense of dis-ease or *lack* that haunts us. In response, we feel compelled to (try to) become more real, in one way or another. For religious people, this often means qualifying for eternity by *being good*, so that God will take care of us and fill up our sense of *lack* in the hereafter. More secular alternatives involve pursuing the enhanced reality supposedly conferred by a lot of money, power, fame, or sexual attractiveness. It is important to realize that these religious and secular preoccupations (or obsessions) are different ways of responding to the same basic problem: a sense that something is wrong or lacking at one's core.

That the sense of self is a construct implies that our fundamental problem is not really death – something that threatens us in the future – but our "emptiness" right now. This emphasis on the here-and-now points to a possible solution: if the sense of self is a construct, can it be deconstructed? Reconstructed?

The Buddhist resolution to this predicament is rather simple although not usually easy to achieve: instead of running away from that emptiness at one's center, to *yield* to it. The inherently-insecure sense of self can let go of itself, leading to an "ego-death" that meditation (among other religious practices) promotes. This allows a "turning around" (*paravrtti* in Sanskrit) that occurs at the core of one's awareness, in which the groundlessness that was so uncomfortable is revealed to be the place where a reconstituted sense of self "can begin to relate to powers beyond itself," as Kierkegaard puts it. At the core of what "I am" is something beyond name and form that can never be grasped or understood because it is the very source of my own awareness. No words can ever express it adequately, of course, but many have been used: Buddha-nature, the Atman, God …

Buddhism emphasizes this awakening: "the Buddha" literally means "the Awakened." Nevertheless, that experience is not in itself the end of the spiritual path. The sense of self is not only to be deconstructed; it must also be reconstructed, which brings us back to the task of transforming our motivations so that they are consistent with the loss of ego-

self-preoccupation. This is where the personal religious quest intersects with concern for social justice. To "wake up" is to realize that we are not separate beings but interdependent parts of each other. Then how can "I" be fully enlightened unless everyone else is too? How can I distinguish my own suffering from that of others? To live in an awakened way is to live compassionately.

This demythologized perspective on the spiritual path amounts to a challenge for Buddhism to grow up – but not only for Buddhism. Other religions face the same choice: either to continue as death-denying/life-denying institutions, with all the *dukkha*-suffering that entails; or to emphasize their transformative role as spiritual paths that help us to awaken.

Given the extraordinary crises of our time, which require the best of us in response, it is becoming more apparent that religions need to mature into new approaches that de-emphasize traditional dogma and the hereafter in place of ego-self deconstruction and reconstruction here and now. Unless we do so I do not see how we can expect or hope for a very positive future for humankind. Is this the primary task for an inter-faith theology?

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Inter-faith Theology:

The African Indigenous Contribution to the Discussion

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Theology, religion and faith

Theology, by definition, cannot be done without some kind of divine "Idea" or, even more concretely, divine "Figure" in mind. Likewise, religion cannot exist as a human phenomenon without reference to such Idea or Figure, expressed concretely in prayer or worship. As the theologian works, he or she as a rule starts from some characteristic(s) of the Divine, which are more or less definite and known to him or her. What the theologian elaborates are therefore these divine characteristics or attributes, and what the Divinity (or divinities) requires or does not require of humanity and creation in the practical order of existence. Differences of theology and, further, of religion (which is both a manifestation and source of theology) arise at precisely these two points: firstly, at the point of understanding Who or What the Divinity (or God) is, and secondly, at the point of recognising what God's requirement for in human behaviour entails.

A religion is a phenomenon expressing a degree of theological and moral concurrence among adherents in these two areas. This concurrence is faith, so called because often it does not and indeed cannot enjoy concrete demonstration in physical or logical reality, as in the restricted sense of the physical sciences. Yet it does not mean that faith and religion are ipso facto irrational. Both may and often do serve very useful, rational purposes in human existence. But since there is not one, uniform approach to God, there are varieties of religions, faiths and theologies in the world. Unfortunately, this variety has often been a source of conflict and violence in human history, and continues to be so. The question for religious faiths in the contemporary world, where inter-religious violence looms large, is whether this is and must remain a necessary aspect of religious difference. Is inter-faith theology whose goal is inter-religious

peace and harmony possible? On the contrary, is it rather nothing but a betrayal of what religious faith is all about, in which no self-respecting theologian should engage?

The object of this short discussion is to show, from the indigenous African experience, that inter-faith theology is both desirable and indeed possible. It seems evident now that this is necessary for human existence itself: peace in the world appears to require peace among faiths and religions. What we wish to discover here is the African indigenous approach to religious difference as a catalyst of inter-religious understanding and tolerance.

The current situation: religion as ideology

To make inter-religious theology possible we need to avoid turning religion into an ideology. It is a very small and easy step from religion and faith to "ideology." Ideology with reference to faith implies turning a particular perception of the divine reality into a programme of practical action which permits no diversity and to which everyone is compelled to subscribe. Ideology demands that everyone within view (and potentially beyond) should participate in its perception of reality. To be sure, "ideologies" is what many religious faiths have become in practice, knowingly and deliberately or not. And this is what much of current theology of many religions turns out to be: it makes God it contemplates and tries to articulate into an ideological tool, desirous only for either conformity or destruction of the different other. Understanding, tolerance and co-existence are qualities which hardly feature into that religious picture.

How violence becomes a part of this picture should be immediately clear. It comes in the form of coercion, where religious freedom is in effect denied. Coercion can be psychological and subtle, as in the case of a certain kind of proselytising methods, where threats of divine punishment feature prominently as a reason for conversion. Perhaps without being fully cognisant of the violence inflicted on people, this is and has been standard practice in various major faiths. It consists also in calling "the different other" names, which are not very flattering. Worse, such names imply wrong-headedness and moral depravity on the part of the one thus labelled. Whenever religious belief reaches this point in the ideological process, overt physical violence used against the "unbeliever" becomes not merely a possibility but a probability. Tragically, it is at the same time seen as virtue on the part of the person who metes it out.

As well as psychological coercion (and therefore violence), we are aware of physical coercion in the history of religions, used either internally against a religion's own members to conform or externally against

others to force them in or eliminate them. Both forms of violence are now surfacing again worldwide in religious phenomenology. Once more, this is nothing but a consequence of the "ideologization" of faith and religion, the utter and absolute conviction of the accuracy of certain mental and moral positions which are intolerant of any other. More often than not, religious ideological positions of this sort are used also for political or even economic ends. This is why the distinction between religious faith and political expediency has become extremely blurred in our day. For an effective inter-faith theology which might lead to inter-faith and inter-religious dialogue, understanding, and peace between and among religions, the "de-ideologization" of religion and faith is an absolute necessity. The African spiritual worldview, the understanding of and attitude toward God in indigenous Africa, may help to direct us in a new approach.

Africans' perception of God, religion, and theology

Ideologies are usually mental constructs, often with very little basis, if any, in reality. Religious ideology works in the same way. It begins with speculation, with mental or philosophical notions of God, and subsequently applies them in a wholesale manner to human reality universally. Ideas of God and of salvation in many missionary faiths in Africa have proceeded in this way, and religions have acted similarly in their evangelization work.

African reflection on God, that is African indigenous theology, begins differently. It starts not exactly with the idea of God but with the experience of life, or, if you like, with God perceived in and related to life in general, and human life in particular. Here in life is God's self-manifestation made evident, since African spirituality traditionally believed that what God desires most for humanity is "the enhancement of life in the community." Thus Africans regarded "those things most closely connected with procreation" as sacred. The list was comprehensive: "land or soil…, planting, harvesting, blood, sex, marriage, birth, second birth, relationships between persons, initiation ceremonies marking entry into the different stages of life, different councils for maintaining justice and peace, diviners, blacksmiths and their workshops, contracts and oaths, and the like" (see S.G. Kibicho, *God and Revelation in an African Context,* Nairobi: Acton Books, 2006, 20). Religion celebrated these experiences in ritual and instituted some of them as taboos to protect their sacred character.

This approach reduces significantly, even if it does not completely eliminate, the ideological element in the faith experience of religion, that of total rejection of the validity of other religious experiences. Notice that the experiences prized here are in various ways universal to all humans.

And if it is through them that divine presence can be extrapolated with relative certainty, as Africans held, then the approach to God cannot be an exclusive privilege of one person or one group of people. The African belief that there is only one God but different manifestations of and approaches to God finds its basis here.

It is important to mention in connection with God's presence among human beings that, although there is unfailing belief in divine benevolence, in the sense that God intervenes in human affairs for human benefit, no one – not even the diviners who are the priests and theologians of African religion – can dare predict its manner or timing. Ancestral benevolence or wrath may be more or less predicted, but not the divine. Although ancestral action among humans is associated with divine action, it is not equated with it. In the final analysis, and especially towards God, the only human attitude that counts as "virtuous" is total faith in God's benevolent presence: "It is up to God." God is God, and human beings are human beings. God acts as God wills and no one has the right to question this will. This is a view which honours God's majesty and recognises that the human mind and all existing reality cannot totally encompass God.

Inclusiveness of the indigenous African approach

This perception provides for a more inclusive approach to God, one which respects at the same time God's majesty and human limitation, especially with reference to human "knowledge" of God. It accepts different valid ways of divine presence and action in the world as given, and can more easily allow, as it does in fact allow without a sense of betrayal but with a sense of fulfilment of faith, the possibility and reality of various saviour figures. This perception grants the possibility and actual existence of people among different societies throughout the world whose central characteristic is to indicate and help bring about in the most profound way the fullness of life which God desires and inspires in the world and all people hope for. Is this inclusive approach, thereby relativistic as it might appear on the surface?

Not so. There is a subtle distinction here which the African religionist senses but does not often articulate. Relativism says that one position is a good as another, that all religions are equally good or salvific. The African religious and theological inclusive approach does not say that, at least not in such categorical terms. Rather it asserts that *your* approach to God is good if it orders life *for you*, for the goal is human life and the good order of the universe. It demands of you to be respectful of my approach for the very same reason. Change (or what we call "conversion") in the faith position of each one of us, from this perspective, can

only come from within, from one's internal conviction, one which often is born of concrete, observable evidence that the other approach produces better "fruit" for life than mine. The element of freedom in the process of conversion is here quite evident.

But even then, conversion or change in this perception is often not one of "radical discontinuity and replacement," as required by many ideologically orientated faiths and religions. On the contrary it is, as already mentioned, fundamentally one of fulfilment. This has been described accurately as the "both/and" approach to reality and God which completes and makes whole, rather than the "either/or" one which totally excludes (and consequently impoverishes) reality. Rather than underlining competition, domination and hegemony among faiths and religions, it stresses mutuality and what we might refer to as "cross-fertilization" between and among them. This is what is conducive to inter-faith dialogue and theology.

Accounting for the faith we hold

In this African approach to faith and religion, there is a sense of intelligent "discrimination," but not the crusading, hostile exclusiveness of the different other that is characteristic of the ideological religious approach. This means that although the believer starts from a sense of identity, a knowledge and esteem of his or her own belief, a desire to hold on unto it because it has served life well he or she does not stop there. Taking into serious account the greatness of God, one recognises that his/her religious identity, once again, does not and cannot exhaust the reality of God. The question that the believer must ask constantly upon encountering another faith, another religion, therefore becomes how these new phenomena experience and express God's presence. Do they in practice manifest elements for the fulfilment of human life that my own religious experience and faith lack or do not show as clearly?

The degree of the depth of elements in favour of life and harmony will therefore determine the direction of faith and religious "conversion" from within of the partners in dialogue. But the concept of conversion is dangerous here because of its historical religious ideological associations. In the sense the African religionist instinctively understands it, conversion involves not primarily an abandonment of a religious position but a *process* of "fulfilling" oneself in those things that matter most in life. In short, in African religiosity, this means being on the right side of God and the ancestors upon whom all life depends. Conversion in this sense may accordingly be partial in the sense of amalgamating my own present religious identity; but it may also be complete in the sense of accepting

completely another identity for which, in turn, one must give account through the experience of life.

Conclusion

While there is a lot of truth in the statement that theology is always "confessional" on account of the theologian's identity and the necessity of accounting for the faith he or she holds, this does not necessarily mean that theology has to be a closed, ideological process or system. If the indigenous African perception of the faith and religious process is of any value in this matter, it is to show us that the whole purpose of theology, especially in our multi-religious world, is not only to speak and explain about God but also to listen and learn from what others say about this ultimate Reality. One important service that theology can offer the modern world is to take seriously its character as "word" or story about God, one that must be shared so as to enrich and be enriched. This is the essence of theological, inter-faith and inter-religious dialogue, and the African approach to God captures it well.

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"Religions in general"?
Is an Interfaith Theology Plausible on the Campus?

Jacob NEUSNER

Arguments in favor of decorating the public square with religious markings of a non-sectarian character — raindeer but not a creche, "in God we trust" but never in the name of Jesus Christ, and, for the side of Judaism, a Hanukkah doughnut but not a religious rite — appeal to the notion that we can be religious in general. By that idea people seem to mean that there is such a thing as religiosity without religion, generalized affirmation that there is a God in the world without specific confession of anything about God. And it is important for people to insist that you can be religious without the specific piety of a particular church, synagogue, mosque, or temple, because religion is perceived as individual and not social, personal and not cultural. Consequently, many individuals may share a rather generalized attitude, and they all may respond with a common emotion to a given circumstance. Then religion, perceived as individual, is not divisive, not partisan, not sectarian — and also not very important. The generic religion is always private and individual, what I believe, what you believe, and rarely appeals to what we have in common or makes demands upon us on account of what we do together.

Generic religion evades responsibility. We say that all politics is local. By that we mean, the exercise of power matters when it matters in the here and now. The same is true of religion: if all politics is local, all religion is social. Religion that is purely personal and private makes no difference in the world; and that is why people in a pluralistic society resort to the privatization of religion, insisting that it is whatever you personally make it to be.

Generic religion also contradicts the character of religion. The reason is not only that what is important to us is always particular: it is the town in which we live, the work that we do every day, and, in the case of religion, the family and the church or synagogue and the social group that embody the particular religion we affirm. The reason is that we can point,

in the here and now, to religion only in its particularities, in its expression in the locality of everyday life. True, Protestant Christianity and Reform Judaism lay heavy emphasis upon the individual and God's direct encounter with her or him. Roman Catholic Christianity and Orthodox Judaism lay much greater emphasis upon the corporate community that, in covenant, all together stands before God and is sanctified by God. But Protestant as much as Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christianity, Reform as much as Orthodox and Conservative Judaism, form churches and communities, insist on shared doctrine, treat religion as something that matters because it is something that we do together.

But religion is treated as generic and also private not because people misunderstand the character of religion as corporate and public, always defining the social group. It is precisely because they do understand that religion is social that they wish it were otherwise, because religions — no longer religion — have much difficult thinking about the other, the outsider, and tend to divide their believers apart from the common society. When universities, for example, of Roman Catholic or Protestant or Judaic foundation, wish to "de-sectarianize" themselves, it is to make themselves more acceptable to a broader constituency of students and professors. Last year for example Brandeis University made provision for food for non-Jewish students, not only kosher food; and the laicization of many Roman Catholic colleges and universities exemplify the same movement. But we have to ask ourselves whether these efforts to accommodate pluralism — and to exploit it — by removing the marks of what makes us special and different really serves the purpose for which the Judaic, Roman Catholic, and Protestant foundation of colleges and universities are meant to achieve.

For when we pretend to be "religious in general" but not in particular, we deny what is important about ourselves, which is the families that bring us into being, the communities that draw us together, the things that evoke memory and impart sense to lives that otherwise come from nowhere and make no sense. "Religion in general" represents all religions as equally right, but no religion in particular can make such a meretricious concession. If Jesus Christ rose from the dead and is the Messiah of the world, then my Judaism, which yet waits for the Messiah, is wrong. And if the sacrifice of the Mass mediates God's blood and flesh to the faithful, then the Lutherans (not to mention the Baptists) are terribly wrong. I refer to matters of doctrine. But in things that count, like politics, any claim that religions are all right and therefore do not matter and should not divide us contradicts the dreadful facts of the ten counties of Ulster, in Ireland, where Protestants and Catholics kill each other; the Middle East, where varieties of Muslims kill each other; the Land of Israel and Kashmir, where Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Muslims, compete

for the same territory; and on and on and on. Open the newspaper any morning — and then try to persuade yourself that "religion in general" forms an option in interpreting the world we actually face!

But if, as I claim, religion is always and only particular, then how are we going to live, on the campus in particular, with religious diversity, pluralism, difference? The solution that requires us to deny difference also defies the reality of religious faith, but the recognition that religions are always local, always particular, always divisive because of their particularity, hardly helps to answer the question of the here and the now. In the university in particular we had better face that question, because here we have the chance, in full rationality, to meet the problems of society. Outside conditions scarcely permit. Here we can talk in a reasonable way, negotiate difference, explore possibilities and try out alternatives. We scholars are used to argument and difference, and our stock in trade is to try things out: check out this possibility, explore that alternative. And students on the campus too have a whole life in front of them; here there are few risks, and if you make a mistake, you can learn from it. Outside of the campus the stakes are higher, and people are not at all so used to experiments that don't work and theories that prove false — but therefore fructifying.

So here on the campus we have the opportunity, and also the task, of exploring how to be religious in full confrontation with religious difference. And that I take to be the principal problem facing all religions in the twenty-first century: not secularism but success. For it is clear the wave of the future is not with materialism or atheism, but with churches and synagogues and mosques and temples; religion has survived two hundred years of militant secularism, both in politics and also in intellectual life. But can the world survive the now-manifest triumph of religion — and therefore of religions? Here on the campus we had better deal with these questions, and there is no better location than a university such as Redlands, which, after all, was founded by American Baptists and was intended to provide a Christian setting for higher education, but, like Brandeis and Notre Dame and other schools, has tended in the recent past to stress only generic religion (if that). The opportunity facing the Protestant, Judaic and Roman Catholic colleges and universities is to demonstrate how we can be authentic to our heritage without excluding the other by reason of that difference.

Having defined what I conceive to be the single most urgent question facing religion — coping with difference — and the ideal setting for experimentation with that problem, which is the campus, let me turn to the practical issues that have to be faced. Three questions seem to me to demand attention to begin with.

First, what lies beyond relativism, the notion that everybody is right for somebody, but nobody but me is right for me? Second, if not relativism, then what am I to make of difference? Third, can people learn together, play together, work together, if they cannot pray together? Beyond relativism lies the uncomfortable work of affirming we are right when other people disagree; relativism saved us a lot of work, but that labor-saving device has now proved too costly to maintain. But we in universities are used to difference: we argue with each other all the time, if we stand for anything and are doing something as scholars. If not relativism, then what am I to make of difference? As a scholar I celebrate difference, it is what makes work interesting. If in writing my books all I did was rehearse what I read in other peoples' books, I would find life very boring. And the same is so of opinion, and especially, opinion and belief about what matters. Religious people have avoided what divides altogether too long, so the Roman Catholics tell us less about Mary than they would like, and the Jews have tended not to affirm their deepest belief in Israel, the Jewish people, as holy and covenanted, and Protestant Christians have found embarassing the evangelical, Bible-believing Christians' insistence on the Scriptures' inerrant truth. But public debate on what matters to us opens the gates to honesty, and evasion in the end corrodes. Our lives together are not healthier when we deny difference; we only begin to live together when we tell the truth about ourselves.

Then to the heart of the matter: what is to be done, or, as I frame the question, can people learn together, play together, work together, if they cannot pray together? Yes, there are things we can do together, even while we recognize that there are other things we cannot share. I will not eat some of the food you eat, but I can share with you what it means to live a life in which every meal forms the occasion to affirm my life in accord with the Torah. My favorite novelist and co-author, Father Andrew Greeley, will not marry, but he will tell you a great deal about the meaning of love and sacrifice and service through celibacy, so much, in fact, that in dialogue with him you will appreciate what it means to love a woman in ways you cannot have otherwise imagined. My Protestant colleague, wrestling with the dilemma of works in a Calvinist religion can tell me things about the centrality of grace that for me open possibilities I did not know were there.

What we can do together when we cannot pray together — recognizing the particularity of the religious life — is learn together and teach one another about the potentialities, the choices people make who are not like ourselves. But that seems to me precisely what colleges and universities do best: tell us things we did not know, things we could not even have imagined, so as to open our minds (and also our hearts and souls) to worlds we should otherwise have never known, worlds that

change us because we have known them. In the class room we study histories that are not ours, and overcome the limits of the narrow and provincial repertoire of choices we think we have, in politics and public policy, for instance, and in the organization of society and culture. In literature we see how language serves to embody imagination beyond our capacity, ourselves, to dream and to say what we have seen. Difference in religion, too, opens ways to make ourselves, in all our particularity, more than we knew we were, to become more than we thought we could be. In the language of Christianity and of Judaism, which see humanity "in our image, after our likeness," and look for God in the face of the human being, difference in religion shows us the many ways in which, quite plausibly, people propose to be "in our image, after our likeness."

We have affirmed relativism and we have denied difference in quest of a basis for mutual acceptance. The university claims to seek truth, so we can no longer claim that everybody is right about a mass of mutually contradictory and incoherent propositions concerning ultimate questions. The university claims to deal with facts, and we can no longer deny the facts of difference. But if everybody else is wrong and I am right — and that proposition contains the faith that, until now, none has dared to confess, at least, not in public — then what am I to make of the other? My answer is, I must not make the other over into my own image and after my own likeness, but I have to learn to see in the other another way to be in God's image and after God's likeness. True, that is an uncomfortable proposition. But it is an honest and a necessary one. And that proposition proves remarkably congruent to what we are here to do together, in this particular place, the university, which is to learn. To affirm difference because from it we learn forms the finest religious response to the questions raised when we recognize that religion, like politics, always is local; we cannot be religious in general, because there is, out there, in the world at large, not religion but only religions; and the facts that religions are plural and we are diverse present to universities the challenge to become what they claim to be: places in which we entertain a variety of proposals about various subjects, places in which we are one in dialogue, but multiple in perspective, united in respect for reason, utterly divided on all else. Argument is to be enjoyed, not avoided; difference of opinion explored, not evaded — and all for sound, theological reasons: each of us is, after all, "in our image, after our likeness," showing, from God's perspective in Scripture, just how things are meant to be. And that is, alas, precisely the way they are.

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Is Interfaith Theology Possible? If not, Why not? Contribution from a biblical perspective

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The collection of essays in this book enquires into the possibility of an interfaith theology, one that would go beyond pluralism and inclusiveness to full integration as it addresses the needs of contemporary world. This integrative theology would call upon peoples of all faiths collaboratively to make their theologizing address the common needs of the human family which transcend creed, religious affiliation and all the other human categories that contribute to the weakening of the unity of the human family. This current brief submission, written without opportunity to refer to secondary literature, makes a contribution to this interfaith theology from the biblical perspective. It asks: What is theology? Is an interfaith theology possible from the biblical perspective? If not, why not? If yes, what would be the characteristics of such a theology, one that would serve the needs of the entire human family and invite its participants to focus on these needs as the hermeneutical keys for engaging in collaborative theology?

Etymologically, theology is the human discourse or word about God (theos logos). Anselm described it as "faith seeking understanding through philosophical discourse." He belonged to an age when philosophy was considered the handmaid of theology. But within every philosophy is a cultural dimension, the DNA of a given people which informs their outlook on and understanding of life, creation and the Creator. Culture shapes how a given people live out their interconnectedness with God, with other human beings and with creation. It shapes their value systems, customs, rites and rituals and the sum total of what it means to be human. The same applies to theology. Perhaps today we would define or rather describe theology as "faith seeking understanding of God from the standpoint of the belief systems, informed by the cultural values, of its adherents." While religion speaks generally to how one relates to God, theology seeks to discover, deepen and develop one's concept of God based on one's belief systems.

Rationale for an interfaith theology

Here we consider two key but not exclusive rationales in support of an interfaith theology. Namely, the God who creates and the unity of what God created.

One God, Creator of all. At the heart of theology, stands God about whom the human discourse is concerned. Consequently, no matter how limited and conditioned theology may be from the particularity of one's culture and belief systems, it has within it a universal character and scope in so far as it is a discourse about God. While different peoples may express their understanding of God in different ways, the one God remains the constant in each theologizing. While in the past people believed in different gods, the world is getting nearer and nearer to the belief that there is only one God, though known by different names in different cultures and contexts by different peoples. Paul reminded the polytheistic Athenians of this, citing their own poets in support (Acts 17:22-30).

The idea and possibility of an interfaith theology, therefore, rests on and presupposes that there is only one God whom different faiths approach in different ways. Without such a common, basic understanding, it would be impossible to envisage an interfaith theology, since such a theology would lack a basic common denominator. Scripture, as I said in my submission at the first World Forum on Theology and Liberation (WFTL), is "God's Owner's Manual" for humanity. It lets us know where we came from as a human species, our identity in creation and in relation to God, God's purposes in creating us and how we came to be the way we are now: not only diverse but also divided. The story of Genesis 1–11, called prehistory, deals with the myth of our origins as a human family. The historical section of the Bible, from Genesis 12 onwards, points out and guides us on the way forward till God's plans and purposes for us are fulfilled in the new heaven and the new earth (Revelations 21–22).

The Human Family. Another rationale for an interfaith theology is the reality of the human family. The idea of the human family is neither a construct of the imagination; neither is it an invention of the twenty-first century. It is a given of Scripture. Scripture assures us that the human family is a species created by one God from one and the same stock, created male and female in God's "own image and likeness" (Gen 1:26-27) and given the same endowment and responsibility for the earth. Though Scripture is a book of the Jewish and Christian religions, its scope outstrips these two religions and embraces the entire creation. The genesis of the book (OT) is the origins and history of a specific people, the Israelites viewed as God's special, chosen people; for the Christians (NT) Jesus is the culmination of all the promises that God made in the Bible, both to

the Israelites and to humanity as a whole. Its origins notwithstanding, the Bible is not an exclusively Jewish or Christian book. At almost every stage of its more than two thousand years span of history, the book kept an open and all embracing, underlying theology of God's concern for all nations. Not just concern; it showed how God involved peoples of other nations in the divine plan to save humanity from its sins, that is, its deviations from the original purpose that God had intended for it at creation; it also showed how God required deeds of justice from all, as people made in God's own image and likeness, and called all to be accountable for their deeds.

On the involvement of non-Jews in biblical history, we may think of such key players as Hagar and her and Abraham's son Ishmael; the Egyptian midwives who defied the order of their own Pharaoh to save the Israelite male children, one of whom was Moses, so named by Pharaoh's daughter, the "initiator" of biblical religion (Exod 2:1-10). Other women in Moses' life pulled him through in his trying moments: the daughters of the priest of Median and his Cushite wife. We think of the Mesopotamian diviner, turned prophet, from whom came the first Messianic Oracle (Numbers 22–24); of Assyria whom God calls "the rod of my anger" against his own people (Isa 10:5). Or of Cyrus, king of Persia, whom God calls his servant, perhaps for the post-exilic prophet, the first Messianic figure worthy of the name (Isa 45:1-8). Examples are innumerable. The creation psalms (e.g., Ps 24:1) uphold that "The earth is the Lord's and its fullness thereof; the world and all its peoples."

It is probably not by chance that in the New Testament, the genealogy of Jesus, the Messiah, has four gentile women who, taken together, seriously break the myth of the purity of the Jewish race even before the deportation to Babylon (where this purity would have been even more diluted). Prior to that, the authors of the Exodus inform us that during the Exodus itself, a whole group of people from other nations joined the fleeing or expelled Israelites (depending on which tradition of the Exodus one adopts) when they left Egypt (Exod 12:38). So Scripture itself does not guarantee the exclusive purity of race of the chosen people. What it guarantees is integration from the divine perspective, however one may interpret the traditions and however the traditions themselves may want us to believe that the chosen people were exclusively of one tribal family. The New Testament makes it even more plain that the scope of God's redemption is universal: "God loved the world so much that he gave his Son so that any who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life" (John 3:16). Paul comprehensively assures us that all human beings, Jew and Gentile, sinned and went astray and that all are saved by God's act of love as a grace (Rom 3:21-23).

In the infancy narratives, the Magi from the East came to seek out and adore the one who was born "King of the Jews" (Matt 2:2; not their own king!), because they were open minded enough to recognize his greatness when they saw his star arising. By contrast, the Messiah's own people who knew where he would be born and who had waited for centuries for his coming were the very ones who sought him out to kill him. When they did not succeed in identifying him, they killed all the male children who would have been about his age, both in Bethlehem where he was born and in all the surrounding countryside (Matt 2:1-18).

All that has been said so far is simply by way of creating awareness of the integrative nature of the Bible itself and the call for us today to rediscover this integrativeness, especially from the New Testament perspective. The same God who created the world and the human species is the same God who came in the person of his God-Word as one of us (John 1:1-4, 14) to redeem us all. "Not only the nation [Israel], but to gather into a unity all God's scattered children" (John 11:52). Jesus lifted up, glorified, "draws all peoples" to his divinely human self (John 12:32). More comprehensively still, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to the divine self and has entrusted to us the good news that they are reconciled" (2 Cor 5:18-20). It is all God's work.

Characteristics of interfaith theology: Jesus as teacher and model

The point of the foregoing is that Scripture itself, God's Owner's Manual invites us to do an integrative theology, one that would lead the human family to know and celebrate the fact that God has done for us in the fight against sin and evil what we could not possibly do by and for themselves. Jesus came to proclaim God's goodness or this liberation, to be himself this good news (Rom 1:1-4, 16). Having completed his mission on earth, he asked his followers not to begin to act on their own; but to wait till they were transformed and strengthened by the Holy Spirit to go out to proclaim his good news to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:4, 8); and to do this in the same way as he proclaimed it–totally free of charge (John 20:21-23). The theology which developed from this mandate over the years may not always have remained true to its universalistic focus and mandate. It is perhaps this "deviation from the gospel" to cite a phrase of John Paul II, which makes it imperative for us at the dawn of the twenty-first century to seek to "launch into the deep" ("duc in altum") for an integrative, interfaith theology; to begin to catch the fish in broad daylight because it is Jesus, not humans, directing the fishing, Gospel proclaiming operation (cf. Luke 5:1-11).

If it is true that Jesus is God-Word incarnate in our world, who came for the sake of humanity as a whole, not just for believers, then we

need to look to him and to his example for what it means to develop an interfaith theology. A theology that would help all of humanity to come together to work to make the world a better place to live in; where none of its members (of the human family) would be in want; and where the greedy tendency to despoil and exploit nature and the poor would be rejected and abandoned. This search can take different dimensions. A key one would be to study his interaction with those who, in the judgment of James and John, were to be consumed by fire for not receiving Jesus (Luke 9:54); or who according his disciples, "were not one of us." They wanted to stop them from casting out demons in the name of Jesus; but Jesus forbad them telling them that nobody who casts out a demon, an unclean spirit, in his name could soon speak ill of him; adding: "Anyone who is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:38-40). This is different from self-styled disciples who do not follow his ways yet cast out demons in his name. Of such Jesus would say, "I never knew you; depart from me you evildoers" (Matt 7:21-23). Casting out unclean spirits in Jesus' name is more than a ritual. It is a call to do as Jesus would do; to act in persona of Jesus.

In the gospels Jesus welcomes Gentles, outsiders, and praises them as models of a faith he does not find even in Israel (Luke 7:9; the Roman centurion). He says that the people of Sodom would receive less severe judgment on the last day than the chosen people because they lacked the opportunity which the chosen people had but threw to the ground (Matt 10:20-24; Luke 10:13-15); the Queen of the South would stand in judgment over the chosen people because her faith led her to seek out the wisdom of Solomon while the people had Wisdom itself in their midst speaking to them but paid no attention (Matt 12:42). Jesus allowed himself to be moved by the theologizing, the native wisdom of the Syrophoenician woman (Mark 7:22-30; Matt 15:21-28). He asked the Gerasene demoniac whom he had cured of a legion of unclean spirits not to physically become his disciple but to remain with his people and proclaim to them God's goodness to him and to them as well (Mark 5:1-20). For, as long as the man was possessed, the entire town was under siege by the possessed man. When he was liberated, the entire town was liberated and became recipients, and hearers of the good news. These examples too could be multiplied.

Comprehensively, it is intriguing that the criterion for the last judgment, what would determine whether or not one is counted as a sheep to enter eternal life or a goat to go into eternal fire, is how one meets the needs, the basic needs of every human being. It is as a human being (a son of human, in my language Ibibio "Eyen Owo" literally "the child of a human being") that Jesus passes judgment: I, a human being, was hungry, and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me to drink,

naked and you clothed me, sick and in prison and you visited me". Then he added "As long as you did [or refused to do] it to one of these little ones you did [or refused to do] it to me" (Matt 25:31-46). Here we have a theology that rejoins and is located in God's own never-ending activity of sustaining the life which God had given in the first place. It is deadly opposed to a theology of fundamentalism that kills, destroys the life God has so lovingly and freely given, ironically in the name of God and of religion. Yet religion by its very name is that which rebinds peoples together or which makes people re-choose to belong to and claim one another as part of themselves.

This criterion for the last judgment is tied up with the content of the Good News which Jesus commissioned his disciples to preach, even as he himself preached it: God's Spirit is upon me; for God has anointed me to proclaim the good news to the poor, to give sight to the blind, give freedom to the oppressed, liberate those in prison; in sum to declare God's year of salvation, God's general and jubilee amnesty to all (Luke 4:18-19). In this optic of the jubilee year, all debts are cancelled (see Numbers 25). It includes not only the liberation of slaves but also of the land itself so that it is not exploited to death and despoiled, its forests ravaged through reckless industrialization for profit, all to satisfy human greed and the urge to serve rather than to be served by money.

Way forward

These brief reflections establish a God-given rationale for an interfaith theology. But how is all this connected with the need to make the earth a more habitable place for humans and to address the issue of injustice to the earth itself, to the poor and other sectors of humanity (those from the so called two thirds world, women and the disabled in society)? If all who believe in God sought in their different faith traditions to discover a God who cares for the poor and the lowly, who made and sustains the earth because God loves it and God keeps it (Wisd 11:24-12:2; also Juliana of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love) then people of all faiths would do a theology that is truly integrated, not just tolerative. Such a theology would rejoin God's original purposes at creation; it would provide food for all creatures and would exercise on behalf of God for creation the same love and care and even delight which God showed and experienced when God first created everything in harmony each within itself and in their interrelatedness. Such an interfaith theology may not be specifically Christian in profession, but it would enact in its own way the uniqueness of Jesus who came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many (many signifying open-endedness, not exclusivity). This theology would not be alien to the traditional African belief in

the interconnectedness of humans and creation (ubuntu: I am because we are and because we are I am; and because I am, we are); where the earth is considered sacred; and where people have the obligation to care not only for the living but also for those yet to be born.

I may cite here a story which I have told before in one of my writings. It was in the early eighties when Nigeria was rife with the religious fundamentalism of the Maitatsane group of Muslim (they were not so much against Christians as against other Moslems whom they thought were not orthodox enough in living the Islamic faith). I was aboard an Egyptian flight from Cairo to Lagos, Nigeria, from a conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). In flight I sat beside an Egyptian who said in the course of our conversation on the religious crisis, "The earth is for you and I to till; religion was for God". When I sought to understand what he meant, he explained that what I believed was between me and God and what he believed was between him and God. But God had given both of us the earth to till and make it livable for all. Perhaps a theology that does this, in the spirit of hospitality, "giving the other the room and the freedom to be", would be one that is truly interfaith. It would embody faith in the one God who created all human beings in the divine image and likeness, who generously provided for every creature and who saw and found all that he had created with the provisions he had made to be very good. Accordingly he entrusted it to humanity (man and woman) to take care of and find in it not only a resource for their material needs but also their opportunity to become like the Creator God (Gen 1:26-4:2) by caring for the earth.

This theology of creation and hospitality is not alien to the Christian faith. Of the Word Incarnate, Scripture says: All things were created through him and for him and in him all things hold together (Col 1:16-17). He is the image of the God of infinite and unfathomable wisdom, from whom, through whom and for whom are all things; to him belong glory and praise for ever (Rom 11:33-36). Such an interfaith theology, though not specifically sacramental, would rejoin the Eucharist, thanksgiving, which is the heart, the height and summit of the Christian, Catholic faith: thanksgiving to God for the gift that is creation and all created peoples. It would ensure that all human beings pledge themselves to be stewards, not owners or exploiters, of one another and of creation as a whole. That they pledge themselves to break the bread of their lives so that others may have food to eat and live better human lives that truly image God.

An interfaith theology, which would embody the characteristics here briefly outlined, would be solidly based on Scripture, both the Old and the New Testaments. It might move and even free people to explore the more sacramental aspects of the Christian and Catholic faith. At the

same time it might even lead those who do not share that faith, on their own, to explore without any sense of inferiority, the infinite goodness and kindness of God our Saviour which has appeared in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God in our human flesh (Tit 3:4-8). They might come to realize that in the last analysis, what Jesus left us was not a creed to be professed in the liturgy but a way of life which invites all to the holiness of God himself who provides equally for all without discrimination (Matt. 5:43-45) In him all are called to become "a new creation" (2 Cor 5:17), sons and daughters of God, the very "heirs of God and co-heirs of Christ" (Rom 8:14-17; Gal 4:4-7). It is all God's work, God's gift to all humanity given free of charge. Since it is God's work, human beings should not in anyway cajole one another into believing. They should rather intensify their efforts to become truly like the God who created them. In that way, they will be light in God with no trace of darkness. In that way all would be transparent in their dealings with one another and would give glory to God in the whole of their lives, perhaps only surpassing one another in showing hospitality and care. Or owing one another nothing except the debt of love (Rom 13:8-16).

Last but not least, an interfaith theology would be Spirit-inspired and Spirit-filled. Gal 5:13-26 among other NT passages spells out what it means to live by the Spirit (as opposed to the flesh, the ungodly human) and the characteristics of a life led by the Spirit. A close look at the list of virtues urged here (love, peace, joy, kindness, gentleness, and so forth), reveals that there is nothing specifically Christian about them. Like those urged in the wisdom literature, their concern is on how human beings should lead a life worthy of the God in whose image and likeness they were created. The observation is even more striking if, as scholars hold, this and similar in the NT were taken from the household codes prevalent at the time; though given a Christian dimension (for instance, by their direct address to women, children and slaves).

Conclusion: If not, why not?

In view of all this, an interfaith theology is not only possible but desirable. The burden of proof would be on the person who contests its possibility. An interfaith theology would not nullify the existence of other specifically faith-based theology. But it would enrich and stand to be enriched by these particular faith-based theologies.

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World Interfaith Theology of Religious Pluralism: A Muslim perspective

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> One day Mulla Nasruddin was seen searching for something on the ground outside his house under the streetlight. A neighbor approached him and asked, "what are you looking for?" Nasruddin replied that he was looking for his key. The man also joined in the search. When key was not found anywhere, the neighbor asked, "Where exactly did you lose it?" Nasruddin replied, "Inside my house." The neighbor asked, "Then why are you looking here?"
>
> "Well, there is more light here, isn't there?", replied Nasruddin.

The anecdote above highlights the central problem in considering the question posed in this essay, namely, can there be a "world interfaith theology of religious pluralism?" The question is relevant, no doubt; however, it is important to also ask whether we are looking for answers to this important question in a place where it is *most likely to be found*, or where it is *easier to search*? In other words, is it a methodology question or a question of substance that we are concerned with? From the outset it seems that any attempt at constructing a global interfaith theology that will solve the problems of inter-religious friction and effectively deal with differences is to approach the problem from a wrong angle.

The question remains: is it possible to conceive a pluralist theology that transcends any particular religious tradition and yet is connected to each of the major religious traditions, *and* that can also be validated from the perspective of Islamic theology? In other words, is it feasible to develop a "trans-confessional" or a "trans-religious" theology that is inclusive of all religions? (alternative terms referred to are: "trans-religious" "pluri-religious," "macro-ecumenical," or "inter-faith").

Indeed, the question appears rather problematic because theologies are specifically (and, some would say, *only*) appropriate within the purview of the particular religious traditions, their beliefs and history? If so, how can one conceive of a world theology which is non-confessional?

By this *would-be* "trans-confessional" theology do we mean that there will be a new religious tradition - an amalgamation of all others, and thus enabling us to speak of a world theology of this "new" religion? Or does it mean that such a "world theology" will be in a way "trans-religious" and hence it would be a step removed from all existing religious traditions, allowing members of each religion to create an appendage if you will to connect their religion-specific theology to the "world theology?"

It is the contention of some that such a project if successful can help bring peace in the world by creating a sense of greater common ground between various religious traditions. Others have argued that it is possible to maintain traditional confessional based theologies of each specific religion and still connect them all to a "world theology" if and only if we understand the confessional content in symbolic and metaphorical terms. Yet others would deem such an attempt to deflate religious content from its theologies as a self-defeating and a very dangerous move.

The problem in conceiving a theology that is inter-religious is that theology as part of religion is culture specific. In each religion theology/ theologies came about as a result of particular theological attitudes and political and social circumstances. It is not possible to apply theological attitudes from one tradition to another, let alone to apply them to all religions irrespective of their histories and locations. Thus even the word "theology" is problematic from the perspective of many religions. Hence we find an obstacle even before we begin to construct a theology of "pluri-religions."

Perhaps what one may hope for is an inter-religious theology that seeks parallels in areas where such are possible. For example, Christianity and Islam have a similar history in terms of the development of their interpretive traditions, i.e. the view that meaning of the text is to be understood primarily as literal as opposed to mystical or allegorical. At the same time such comparison may not be possible in the case of other religions. Thus it might be futile to try to have a philosophical meta narrative or theory which could be applied in an attempt to understand all religions. Rather, by working through a case by case approach, we may be able to develop an interfaith theology, allowing for comparisons and parallelisms between traditions emphasizing common ground and shared universal values.[1]

As one grapples with the criterion for a possible "world theology" one has to contend with the increasingly pluralistic reality of our world. Religious pluralism of our time almost forces us to try to come to terms

[1] Hans FREI, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

with the truth claims of other religious traditions or face continued conflicts in the name of religion.

What is Islam's answer to this pluralism? To begin with, the Islamic tradition acknowledges that there are other faith traditions (communities, to be precise) with their specific "scriptures" and these should be recognized by Muslims. The Qur'an informs its readers that the Jewish and Christian communities as well as the Sabians, known as *ahl-i-kitab* or "people of the book" received revealed messages from the same divine source whence the Qur'an, which is believed to have been revealed by God to Muhammad. Further the Qur'an speaks of diversity of faiths as "divinely ordained" and indeed beneficial to humankind. In the same vein, the Qur'an affirms that there have been numerous other communities and faith traditions since the creation of humanity. In fact each of these communities has been a recipient of divine message/revelation in its own languages and through messengers and prophets (sing. *rasul* and *nabi*) who came from amongst them.

What is the current state of a possible Islamic theology of pluralism? As one prominent scholar of Islam, Mahmoud Ayoub argues, the Qur'an is far more pluralistic in its outlook than the Muslim community in history has been willing to acknowledge. In other words, while the sources for a pluralist theology from an Islamic perspective are present, the will to identify and interpret these sources through the lens of pluralistic principles is often missing, especially in the modern period when many Muslim societies are facing challenges which are seemingly more pressing than questions regarding theological and religious pluralism. As is the case with all peoples, in times of trial and loss, insularity and isolation, however unwise, are naturally preferred choices.

In the twentieth century, in response to a variety of trends and movements, a genuine Islamic theology of pluralism began to emerge, although it has not been taking hold in the broader Muslim world due to a general politicization of religion as well as the geopolitics of the Middle East and Asia in connection with the alleged "clash of civilizations" which in reality is rightly termed as a "clash of fundamentalisms."[2]

The most crucial and critical Muslim response to pluralism has come as a result of the rise of interfaith dialogue meetings held since the 1970s and also due to the increasing interactions between Muslims and people of other faith communities in many western countries. While in Asia and Africa, many Muslims and people of other faiths have coex-

[2] Tariq ALI, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity* (London: Verso, 2003).

isted for centuries, engaging in what has been called a "dialogue of life," Muslims in the West have only begun to consider such dynamic alternatives as part of their being in western societies.

While there are several Muslim responses to the reality of religious pluralism from an Islamic perspective (like the multiple Christian responses offered by Gavin D'Costa, Paul Knitter and others) there is no solid attempt to deal with the question of whether there can be a "world theology of pluralism." Some of the main Muslim pioneer attempts to incorporate pluralism in Islamic theology in the last few decades are manifest in the work of Mahmoud Ayoub, Riffat Hassan, and Mohammad Talbi. In addition there is long list of later, somewhat younger scholars who are engaged in inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-spirituality dialogue throughout the world.

So, what would a "world theologian" look like? If by a world theologian we mean what Wilfred Cantwell Smith referred to in his Catholic Theological Society of America plenary address in 1984, where he argued that to be a Christian theologian one had to be a "world theologian" of a sort, then perhaps it is not only probable but also necessary for us to work towards a "world theology." Because such a world theologian would not necessarily be engaging all of world's theologies but rather as Knitter states, be engaging and familiar with at least one other tradition besides one's own.[3] Because in the 21st century era of global encounters where the probability of running into our designated "other" is greatly enhanced, it is imperative that we are not only aware of one's own tradition and culture, but one must have some level of familiarity with if not competence in this other's religious tradition and culture.

But perhaps at the same time as we strive to become "world theologians" we ought to work towards preserving diversity of theologies. In an age of economic and cultural "globalization" where homogenizing elements are far more forceful, and impacting our lives rather rapidly, the urgent need is to see that the "local" does not succumb to the "global" to a point of no return. And yet there can be a "unity in diversity," and in this context it is quite clear that diversity always rules unity and not the other way around. Diversity is the way of nature – or, in religious language - the way of creation. God intended it as a primary principle of creation.

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[3] Cited in Paul KNITTER, "The Vocation of an Interreligious Theologian: My Retrospective on 40 Years in Dialogue," *Horizons* 31, 1 (2004): 135-49. The full quote from Knitter is as follows: "To be a theologian in any one tradition -- or, let me be more careful: to be a 'relatively adequate' theologian in any one tradition -- one must be, at least to some extent, a theologian of another tradition."

> And among the signs of God are the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and colors. Verily, in that are signs for those who know (*Qur'an* 30:21).

And again,

> O people, We have created you from a male and a female and made you into races and tribes so that you may know each other. Surely the most honored of you in the sight of God is the one who is the most righteous of you (*Qur'an* 49:13).

In an era of the global dominance of the forces of capitalism, we see an attempt is being made to reverse this principle: unity in diversity has been forcibly becoming "diversity in unity." In other words, unity (of the supposed essential consumerism or materialism) is considered the underlying dominant aspect and diversity is deemed as the derivative. This can be seen in the push for ideologies such as the "global market," "global ethic," and "global dialogue." Consequences of such attempts are in many ways devastating. Such attempts in the past have resulted in resurgence of religion or resurgence *in the name of* religion. Suppression of diversity in the hope of creating a possible yet cosmetic "unity" (of all religions? cultures? or even of all markets) is dangerously unrealistic. For the Qur'an, the diversity of religions is meant to give humanity a modality for checks and balances between various religious communities. Each community among many is to strive for peace, justice and righteousness. And in this, each becomes a model for others. The differences are there so that we can "race" against each other in doing good, which in its ultimate outcome would be the common good.

> To each among you We have prescribed a law and an open way. If God had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (He plans) to test you in what He has given you; so *strive as in a race in all virtues*. The goal of you all is to God; it is He who will show you the truth of the matters in which you dispute (*Qur'an* 5:48).

Similar to what the market sense tells us that there are differences in the way people shop, celebrate, eat, and dress, we need to realize that people also differ in how and what they "believe." More than the unity of belief or theology, we need an affirmation and a unity of the *acceptance of differences*.

Furthermore, these differences themselves should be celebrated in divergent ways. This would be a true unity in diversity – a unity in the celebration of diversity. This celebration is primarily about the need to respect, acknowledge, and accept particularities. Because as is evident from all data (experiential as well as empirical), diversity - as a principle of nature - rules unity, and not the other way around.

And yet the thought of having a common "pluri-religious" theology is tempting. The hesitation that may be detected here is not due to any lack of commitment to what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called an "overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole" but rather due to the problematic of having a uni-theology of all the world's religions.[4] In the spirit of Dr. King's words, it may be agreed upon by all that it is certainly possible and even necessary to have an overriding commitment to concrete actions leading to peace and solidarity against injustice, and in favor of universal human values, framed within the context of each individual religion's theology. And this will in effect constitute what might be loosely termed a "world theology of religious activism" - grounded in action, based on the golden rule:

> Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself (*Analects*, 15.23).

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[4] The quote from Dr. King is as follows: "Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies." See Martin Luther KING, Jr., *The Trumpet of Conscience* (New York, Harper & Row, 1967), 190.

Liberation Theology and the Liberation of Theology

You were poor and I heard your cry.
(Cf. Mt 25)

Raimon PANIKKAR

I am in full accord with the laudable effort and the counter-current of EATWOT (the fish in the river swim upstream). Space, however, forces me to confine myself to just a few brief reflections.

1) Liberation theology perhaps should begin with the liberation of theology, liberation from the western enclosure (ghetto?) as well as from the constrictions of the word. As Jainism, Buddhism and other religions teach us, the customary theos of theology is not universal. Furthermore, the Christian theos is neither monotheistic nor Docetist but rather Trinitarian. The Trinity is also not a form of tri-theism which means therefore that God is not substance bur rather relational --- a relation that involves us and the world (cosmotheandric intuition).

Let us not forget that western history has been a history of colonization, generally of good faith (which makes it all the more dangerous) and its protagonists believed that they were defending universal values that were often called "development", "civilization", and even Judeo-Christianity. The phenomenological characteristic of colonialism is the conviction of one culture that is interpreted simply as the revelation of all human culture. The so-called "globalization" is an example of this and its roots are as ancient as the myth of the Tower of Babel which Yahweh took charge of and brought to destruction. On Pentecost it was not one language that was spoken but rather every person spoke and understood according to their own language. In this sense, the theos of theology, if it does not want to become a sect, cannot be limited to just a symbol of those who call themselves believers because they believe they know that which by definition is Infinite. One of the Fathers of the Church said blessed are those who have come to the point of infinite agnosticism (agnôsia).

This liberation of theology also implies the liberation of the theologian --- liberation from every fear and apprehension not only of their critics but also of their apologists. This also implies a liberation from pessimism and from the most subtle temptation into which even the best intentioned persons can fall: the desire to make this earth a paradise --- something that was foreseen by Yahweh who placed his angels at the gates of Eden to present those individuals who longed for the past from returning and making the earth a paradise. In no way does this mean that we cease to make every effort to create a more just world. Rather we must overcome the myth of history --- a myth which our mortality reminds us of and which should not discourage us. "All theology is a hermeneutics of hope" (Gustavo Gutiérrez). Therefore, hope is not a hope for the future but a hope for the Infinite.

2) "Inter-faith theology" is an ambiguous expression. Faith is a human constant: all people have faith and this faith is a conscious openness to the unknown, to the Mystery. Paradoxically we can say that faith is an awareness of our ignorance. Thus we should distinguish faith from belief even though we cannot separate these two realities. As rational beings (though not exclusively rational), as people aware of our openness to the infinite and as children of history, we attempt to formulate our beliefs according to our cultural and religious categories. Thus beliefs arise, beliefs which are distinct and which can also be contradictory. In the course of human history the confusion between faith and belief has resulted in disastrous consequences. The martyrs give witness to their faith. People do not die for a belief unless they are convinced of an unbreakable bond between belief and faith. Faith is generally expressed in an action (symbolic) before it is expressed verbally. Faith without works is death (James 2:17). In past eras of Christian history we have seen the example of those who refused to offer sacrifice to the gods. Fanaticism is characterized by this confusion between faith and belief which is almost inevitable when faith loses its mystical roots and thus becomes an ideology. Perhaps misunderstanding has something to do with the ambivalence of the word "to believe" which is the verb form of two nouns: faith and belief.

The expression "inter-faith" is also disorienting because it seems to suggest that one can swim in two different waters and thus serve two masters (Matthew 6:24) since one does not take seriously what one believes. Here I do not speak about making belief an absolute which results from forgetting the reality of our con-tingency. Faith enables us to touch the Infinite but only tangentially.

3) The expression of every human attempt to draw near to the Mystery has to be professed, sincere, personal and therefore relative to

the cultural and religious parameters of the one professing. An unprofessed faith that is simply theoretically formulated is not faith. Similarly faith is not identification with doctrine. A song is a song only when it is sung. Faith is faith only when it is lived and this is a recurring theme in the Christian Scriptures since those who are just live by faith (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38, which repeats the words of Habakkuk 2:4). When the symbol of the apostles became apostolic doctrine because of the changing conditions of western culture, Christian micro-doxy began. This is reductionism and the minimalization of the message of Christ. Here I say Christ and not Jesus (who for Christianity is Christ). Every profession of faith is inscribed in a context and context has a meaning only within the horizons in which the profession is made. Relativity, inherent to the human condition (we are contingent beings) is not relativism which destroys itself in the very act of profession. Faith, in contrast to rational evidence, is free. Two and two are four and once the postulates on which this affirmation is based are accepted, an affirmation that in most cases is based on infallible evidence, then there is no other solution.

4) The awareness of relativity leads not only to overcoming fanaticism but also leads to an openness to the other and allows us to be made fruitful by him. This fruitfulness is productive if there is love, which spontaneously arises when we are pure, that is, when we empty ourselves of all prejudice. Then together with the effect (love) we also receive knowledge, which is equivalent to understanding the other, that is, an entrance into the world of the other. This can appear to be not only difficult but also impossible to those who have not overcome dialectical reason. &Modern science has accustomed a small part of humanity to think in this way and has come to believe that because of the power that it has acquired this small group of people represents all of humanity). The dialectic method is very helpful in the field of logic but human life cannot be reduced in this way as if thinking dialectically will reveal to us reality as it is. This is the thinking of one of the Western fathers, Parmenides of Elea.

What we call theology is a spiritual discipline that demands total consecration to the task. Those who do not hunger and thirst for justice will find it impossible to be theologians because this is a free activity of the Spirit. In another context Saint Paul says that theology (the word of God) is free and not chained (2 Timothy 2:9).

5) The liberation of theology is not possible without inter-cultural exchange because the divine mystery is not the monopoly of any one culture. Every culture is aware of the existence of a Mystery over which they have no exclusive right. Cultures are not “folklores” but distinct ways of

thinking, being, living (in the world) and drawing near to the Reality: one of whose symbols we know as God. Inter-cultural exchange is not multiculturalism (we cannot leap over our own shadow). Rather from the perspective of our own contingent culture inter-cultural exchange demands an openness to the other not as an aliud but as an alter (the "other part" of myself). Otherwise no one would be able to love the neighbor as self but would love the neighbor as another self, with the same human rights, as has been interpreted by the western individualism. This diabolical idea was not so irrational because it was this form of reasoning that denied humanness to the Indians (savages) and so with no fear of punishment they were able to be hunted and exploited like animals.

6) Theology cannot be a specialization that is the fad of scientific influence in order to classify everything and better dominate it. Theology is the vocation of all persons who are aware of their place in the cosmos and who desire to live as full complete human beings and thus move toward this end and utilize all the means within their reach. Thus no human longing and of course no legitimate desire of the body can be dispensed with (desires which many times have been ignored by a certain spirituality).

7) The liberation of theology is not libertinage nor is it the whim of some theologians: it is the inherent fruit of the exercise of the freedom of those who do not allow themselves to be enchained by the structures that human beings have erected. Freedom does not have law but demands a purity of heart, a requisite that is affirmed by every religion. The truth will make you free, but not our concept of truth. Sacred scripture tell us that truth becomes (cf. John 1:17; 3:2; 4:21; 8:32; etc.)

8) With this the method of comparative theology has surfaced. This can only be cultivated from within by one who is outside. Thus one enters into another religion without abandoning one's own religion. This is not achieved by dialectical thinking or by reducing religion to doctrine. The golden rule of every hermeneutic is that that which is interpreted is recognized in our interpretation and it is impossible to formulate this sincerely if we are not convinced that the interpreter also speaks the truth, and we with him. Authentic theologians do not limit themselves to speaking what others say or think unless they subscribe to their respective assertions. Theology is not an abstract science or a purely descriptive science. We see a direct application of this in that we cannot defend an option on behalf of the poor if we ourselves do not live poorly, and today this is not limited to economic poverty. I repeat that theology is a difficult and risky activity that commits us and that at the same time is also liberating.

9) Thus I respond to the question concerning the possibility of a transformational theology. What is possible and necessary is that our

profession be open and not fanatical, humble and not apodictic, dialogical and not solipsist. Theology is communitarian and does not trespass on professions of faith but interprets them, though differently, enriching orthodox perspectives. This is something that would be impossible if religion were only a doctrine.

But I will stop here in this discussion of what has been one of the primary occupations of my life.

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An interfaith Christology: A possibility and desideratum?

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At first sight, "interfaith Christology" is an oxymoron since by definition Christology is a faith-based reflection on the *Christian* confession in Jesus as the Christ. Yet, in a globalized age such as ours and within the contemporary context of religious pluralism, it would seem that such theological reflection can no longer be done only confessionally. Hence, the question of the possibility and desirability of an "interfaith Christology." By this expression I do not mean simply a Christology undertaken by Christians on the basis of the Christian faith in dialogue with the beliefs of other religions which might be termed "dialogical Christology." Rather, I would like to consider the possibility and desirability of a Christology constructed by Christians and non-Christians alike, ideally together, on the common beliefs and practices of different religious traditions. Such a Christology replaces neither the classical Christology based solely on the Bible and the Christian Tradition, which still retains its necessity and validity, nor the dialogical Christology which considers the Christian beliefs in Jesus as normative and seeks to enrich itself from the insights of non-Christian religions.

Within the very narrow space allotted to it and given its highly experimental nature, this brief essay is more a programmatic manifesto for than a systematic elaboration of interfaith Christology. I begin with reflections on the conditions of possibility for such a Christology, its limitations, and its desirability. Next I outline its main features. Finally, I refer to some salient pioneering works pointing toward an interfaith Christology.

Interfaith Christology: Possibility, Limits, Desirability

The possibility of interfaith Christology by necessity rests on the kind of interreligious dialogue in which participants genuinely respect

differences and try to understand religions other than one's own as they present themselves, on their own terms, and avoid interpreting them through the lens of one's categories and belief-system. These differences do not of course preclude commonalities, or at least analogues, among religions, but they must not be papered over or minimized, much less homogenized as simply various ways of talking about God, or the Ultimate, or the Real.

Concerning the possibility of interfaith Christology, it will be objected at once that "Christology" is by definition a Christian category and therefore calling the projected interfaith enterprise a "Christology" already violates the above hermeneutical principle. The point is well taken, but the objection can be obviated by the following considerations. First, "Christ," both as a term and a concept, is per se not restricted to Christianity; it is found in Judaism (the "messiah") and the figure of Jesus is also present in the Qur'an. Consequently, at least as far as Judaism and Islam are concerned, an interfaith Christology is legitimate and not a prima facie impossibility. Secondly, it is possible to speak of "Christology" without making the Christian claims about Christ such as his divinity, resurrection, unique and universal role as savior and so forth the starting point and norm of the interreligious discourse, even though these claims must not be dissimulated by the Christian partners-in-dialogue. In other words, it is possible to discuss the *meaning* of a statement (which concerns *understanding*) and thereby enriching our understanding of it without affirming its truth at the same time (which is an exercise of *judgment*).

In this kind of interfaith Christology, which is, to use Bernard Lonergan's distinction of functional specialties in theology, "systematics" and not "doctrines," the Christian claims about Christ are not denied a priori.[1] They are theologically assumed but methodologically bracketed with the goal to arrive at a richer and pluralistic understanding of what constitutes the Christ on the basis of what Christianity and other religions say about the "Christ." Thirdly, strictly speaking, just as a Christian speaks of an interfaith Christology, a Buddhist can rightfully speak of an interfaith "Buddhology," a Hindu an interfaith "Krishnology," a Muslim an interfaith "Qur'anology" and perhaps "Muhammadology," a Sikh an interfaith "gurology," and so on. The point of interfaith Christology is not to demonstrate that the Christ of Christians is unique, universal, and superior to all other religious figures, or vice versa. In principle, a rational demonstration of such a claim is not possible since it is essentially

[1] On Lonergan's distinction, see his *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 132-33.

an affirmation of faith. Rather it is to obtain as profound and diverse an understanding as possible of the Christ on the basis of the most varied and even contradictory affirmations of different religions on what makes a particular being (e.g., Siddhartha Gautama, Jesus of Nazareth or Muhammad) the "Christ."

Thus conceived, interfaith Christology no doubt has limitations. The most obvious one is that it is not a dogmatic Christology and hence would be judged by those seeking an orthodox Christology theologically inappropriate and even heterodox in light of, for instance, Chalcedonian Christology. Nor is it a "historical Christology," a "Christology from below," or an "ascending Christology" insofar as it is not based on the gospels' account of Jesus' life and ministry and is not designed to show that Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. In this respect it lacks the historical specificity characteristic of, for example, liberation Christology of various stripes (e.g., black, Latin American, Asian, feminist, ecological, etc.). Finally, it does not perform the apologetic function of a "transcendental Christology" such as that proposed by Karl Rahner, intended to explicate the conditions of possibility for the faith in Jesus as the Christ on the basis of a metaphysics of human knowledge and love.

Nevertheless, interfaith Christology, while distinct from the three above-mentioned Christologies, does not exclude them but rather helps clarify some of their key concepts, one of which is of course the "Christ." Given the religiously pluralistic situation of our time and the urgent need for mutual understanding and collaboration among followers of different religions, such interfaith Christology arguably is a desideratum if not a pressing necessity for contemporary theology. Whether it is feasible or not cannot be settled a priori nor should it be rejected simply because of potential errors and weaknesses. At least an outline of its general features may be attempted.

Contour of an interfaith Christology

The central concept to be elaborated in interfaith Christology is of course the "Christ." Here an apparently unsurmountable challenge immediately surfaces. The term "Christ," and more crucially, the concept of "Christ"—at least as it is understood in Christianity—are not espoused by all religious traditions, and where the concept is used, it is far from univocal. Hence, a major task of an interfaith Christology is to determine the meaning of "Christ" and its place, if any, in a particular religion. In this conceptual elaboration of the "Christ," the Christian understanding of Jesus as the Christ, as pointed out above, can play a heuristic role but not a normative one. It must be correlated with concepts and images present in other religions that exhibit significant similarities or functional analo-

gies with it. A new and enlarged understanding of the "Christ" may thus be construed out of these critically correlated concepts and images, and the result may be termed a "comparative" or "interfaith" Christology.[2]

Which are, to begin with, the main features of the Christian concept of the Christ? A straightforward answer to this question is impossible since it is universally acknowledged that the Jesus of the gospels fits no single description. He is, yet is not, in the usual sense of the words, a priest, a prophet, an apocalyptic seer, a rabbi, a teacher of wisdom, a miracle worker, a political leader. In the eyes of New Testament scholars, as Colin Greene notes, Jesus was variously a cynic, a mystic, a healer, a *hasid*, a prophet or the eschatological prophet, a reformer, a sage, personified Wisdom, and a/the messiah.[3] Until modernity, Christology, Greene goes on to show, emphasizes Jesus as the eternal Logos made flesh (cosmological Christology), as "Lord of lords and King of kings" (political Christology), and as the New Adam (anthropological Christology).[4] Here, my interest is not to show how these three traditional Christologies have been challenged and emended in modernity and postmodernity,[5] but to use them as a launching pad for outlining an interfaith Christology.

Underlying these divergent Christologies, I suggest, is the notion that somehow in Jesus, however his historical role is interpreted, humans are given the possibility of fulfilling their nature and reaching their ultimate goal, referred to in theistic language as union with God and in non-theistic language as self-transcendence (e.g., liberation, enlightenment, salvation, redemption, transformation, etc). This is central to the notion of the "Christ," apart from the concrete and historical way(s) in which such possibility of self-realization is realized. The basic question then is

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[2] On comparative theology, see Francis X. Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), especially 153-208.

[3] Colin J. D. Greene, *Christology in Cultural Perspective: Marking Out the Horizons* (Grand Rapids, Mic.: Eedrmans, 2003), 6-15.

[4] Ibid., 30-71.

[5] For this, see Greene's study cited above. Of course, contemporary studies of Christology are legion! For our purposes, the following are especially useful: Anton Wessels, *Images of Jesus: How Jesus Is Perceived and Portrayed in Non-European Culltures* (Grand Rapids, Mich.,: Eerdmans, 1990); Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology*, trans. John Bowden (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001); Clinton Bennet, *In Search of Jesus: Insider and Outsider Images* (London: Continuum, 2001); Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christology: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2003); Gregory A. Barker, ed., *Jesus in the World's Faiths: Leading Thinkers from Five Religions Reflect on His Meaning* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2005); and Michael Amaladoss, *The Asian Jesus* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2006).

whether such a notion is found in religions other than Christianity (the answer to which is of course affirmative), and how they can be used to construct an interfaith Christology.

Concomitant with the notion of the Christ is that of a supernatural or superhuman power by which the Christ achieves his or her mission of bringing humans and the cosmos to fulfillment. The Christian faith confesses that this superhuman power is a gift of the risen Christ and that together with the Father and the Son, this personal power, who is named the "Holy Spirit," constitutes the Trinity. Various symbols and images such as breath, wind, fire, water, and dove have been used to describe the Spirit's transformative power. Since the Spirit is the power by which both the Christ himself and all humans achieve their goals, it is theologically proper to preface interfaith Christology with pneumatology.[6] In fact, methodologically, from the Christian point of view, Christology, especially an interfaith one, makes more sense if we begin with the Spirit, then move to the Son, and end with the Father.[7]

Since the Spirit is not embodied in any particular historical person, it is easier to find analogies—not identical entities—for the Christian concept of Spirit in non-Christian religions, such as *atman/brahman* in *advaita* Hinduism, *shakti* in classical Hinduism, *antaryamin* in *bhakti* Hinduism, *ch'i* in Daoism and Confucianism, the *yin* of the *yin-yang* polarity, and spirits in general. Nor should an interfaith pneumatology limit itself to religious and philosophical sources. Since the Spirit is associated with freedom, she has often functioned as the source and inspiration for revolution and the struggle for personal and national independence.[8]

This interfaith Christology, as its name implies, will be forged in the crucible of interreligious dialogue. However, dialogue here does not

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[6] One of the best studies of contemporary theologies of the Holy Spirit is Kirsteen Kim, *The Holy Spirit in the World: A Global Conversation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2007).

[7] I wrote in 1988: "With regard to the structure of the treatise of the Trinity, I suggest that we reverse the traditional order. Rather than beginning with the Father, then moving to the Son, and ending with the Holy Spirit, given the principle that we should root our trinitarian theology in our experiences of salvation, we should begin with our present-day experiences of the Holy Spirit, and then show how this Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, and end with Jesus' revelation of the mystery of God the Father." See Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004), 38. It is gratifying to note that Kim writes in a similar vein: "We may be able to put the gospel message across more meaningfully if we begin from the Spirit, rather than the historical Jesus. And after all, it is the role of the prevenient Spirit to prepare the world to receive Christ" (*The Holy Spirit in the World*, vi).

[8] This is particularly true of Korea. See Kim, *The Holy Spirit in the World*, 112-21.

refer primarily to theological exchange among religious elites and experts, in which certain dogmatic issues such as the uniqueness and universality of Christ loom large. Rather, it is a dialogue of shared life, common action, and shared religious experiences among people of different faiths; it is this threefold dialogue that will determine which issues in Christology will be of significance for an interfaith Christology and what contour it will take.

Forerunners of Interfaith Christology

An interfaith Christology is essentially a Spirit or pneumatological Christology consisting in an elaboration on the work of Jesus as the Christ by virtue of the Spirit in bringing about humanity's union of God and/or human self-realization. With pneumatology as its prolegomenon, interfaith Christology can move forward to consider the many titles that have been ascribed to the Christ in the Christian tradition and inquire whether similar titles are also found in non-Christian religions, not to establish their conceptual equivalence, much less their truth, but in order to obtain a richer understanding of what the Christ means.

Mention has already been made of the figure of the Christ in Judaism and Islam, and studies on this theme are plentiful.[9] In addition, comparative studies between Jesus and Krishna, between Jesus and Confucius, between Jesus and other religious figures abound.[10]

An irony in the development of such interfaith "Christology" is that its most significant pioneers were not Christians but Hindus. The writings of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Keshub Chunder Sen, Mohandas Gandhi, Swami Akhiananda, and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan are well-known. Among Christian Indians, Manilal C. Parekh and Bhawami Charan Banerji (also known as Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya) were influential.[11]

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[9] The literature is immense. On Jesus in Judaism, see the comprehensive articles by Susannah Heschel, "Jewish Views of Jesus" and Jacob Nesner, "Why Jesus Has No meaning to Judaism," in Barker, ed., *Jesus in the World's Faith*, 149-160 and 166-73 respectively. On Jesus in Islam, see Muhammad Ata ur-Rahim, *Jesus Prophet of Islam* (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, Inc., 1991) and Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[10] For an overview, see Clinton Bennet, *In Search of Jesus: Insider and Outsider Images* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 292-344.

[11] See the studies by M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1970) and Stanley Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ* (Bangalore: IISRS, 1974).

Among contemporary Buddhist leaders, the works of the Dalai Lama and the Zen Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh should be noted.[12]

Among contemporary Christian theologians M. M. Thomas,[13] Stanley Smartha,[14] George M. Soares-Prabhu,[15] Raimon Panikkar,[16] Samuel Ryan,[17] Michael Amaladoss,[18] Aloysius Pieris,[19] Roger Haight,[20] Thomas Thangaraj,[21] *Minjung* theologians, and Asian women theologians[22] to cite only a few, have offered valuable insights into how an interfaith Christology can be constructed. Such a Christology is still in its infancy, but its future looks bright.

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12 See The Dalai Lama, *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1996); Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995); *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999). See also Marcus Borg, *Jesus and Buddha: The Parallel Stories* (Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press, 1997).

13 See his work cited above.

14 See his work cited above.

15 See George M. Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2003).

16 Raimon Panikkar, *A Dwelling Place for Wisdom* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

17 Samuel Ryan, *The Holy Spirit: Heart of the Gospel and Christian Hope* (Maryknoll, N.Y." Orbis, 1978).

18 Michael Amaladoss, *The Asian Jesus* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2006).

19 Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988).

20 Roger Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999).

21 Thomas Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru: An Experiment in Cross-Cultural Christology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).

22 See Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, *The Jesus of Asian Women* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2006).

Toward a Theology of Religious Pluralism
Fidelity and fairness in inter-faith fellowship

Aloysius PIERIS, sj

A Christian 'theology of religious pluralism' has to be a blend of two obligations: *fidelity* to what is unique in Christian faith, and *fairness* towards other religionists' distinctive otherness. But the theologians who promote this ideal are not unanimous as to what constitutes Christian uniqueness! Hence I allow the two parts of my discourse to revolve around two Christological confessions, which, in my view, define the essence of Christianity.[1] A few other view-points, which are not consonant with mine, have formed the background of this presentation, wherein I strive to clarify and confirm the "liberation theology of religions", which some of us advocate and practise here in Asia.[2]

1. The "Common Religiosity" that Justifies Religious Pluralism

Jude Lal Fernando is enthused by Regina Schwartz' thesis that the constitutive dimension of biblical revelation, (almost a canon within a canon) is the pluralism and plenitude offered by the whole of creation to humankind, and the gift of land which is never to be partitioned and

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[1] As demonstrated in my monograph, "Christ Beyond Dogma: Doing Christology in the Context of the Religions and the Poor", *Louvain Studies*, 25, 2000, 187-231. Spanish version: *Revista Latinoamericana de Teologia*, 52, (XVIII), January 2001, 3-32 (Part One); 53, XVIII, May-August, 2001, 107-124 (Part Two).

[2] See A. Pieris, *God's Reign for God's Poor: A Return to the Jesus Formula*, Kelaniya 1999; *Spanish* version : *El Reino de Dios para los Pobres de Dios*, by Ediciones Mensajero, Bilbao (2005); "Lo Spirito Santo in Asia", (Eds. M.Amaladoss and R.Gibellini), *Theologia in Asia*, Editrice Queriniana, Brescia, 2006, 383-410.

possessed as private property but to be enjoyed by all.[3] Let me complete Fernando's picture by mentioning what he has missed out: the "pleasure park" that this cosmos was destined to be (Gn 2,10), with its vegetation providing bodily nourishment as well as aesthetic gratification (2,9). Hence all pain and suffering caused by injustice and inequalities result from violating and vitiating this cosmic order of plenitude, pluralism and pleasure!

But this view, with due respect to Fernando and Schwartz, is *not unique* to biblical revelation; it is the *common ideal* of most major religions and all primal religions. It is the universal and original revelation, conserved up to this day in tribal and clannic cultures that still survive in many pockets of Asia, Africa and the Americas; it is the first fruits of the evolutionary process in which the hominized beast was humanized by *homo religiosus*; and it is a *pre-biblical and extra-biblical vision* which the Hebrews Scriptures have absorbed, tracing it back to Yahweh, who had been *previously* recognized as God of justice and freedom, a faithful partner in an anti-slavery campaign (Ex 20,1-3). But in the biblical version of this primordial spirituality, God holds us "co-responsible" (Gen 1,26) for fostering this healthy cosmic order of a shared abundance, and treats us as 'co-creators', calling us to 'work' over Nature for human benefit (2,5-15). God, therefore, is our partner in the struggle against plutocracy, which manufactures scarcity and suffering in a world destined to be a paradise of plenitude and pleasure.

From an Asian biblical scholar, who had recognized the strong symbolism of ancient West Asian culture, I came to learn (*contra* Schwartz and Fernando) that the chain of violence initiated by Cain reflects a "crisis of brotherhood" resulting from an exploitation of nature in a 'civilization' based on innate compulsive tendencies ("serpent"; "dust"), which could end up building a megapolis (symbolized in Enoch); whereas Abel, by contrast, represents freedom from compulsions and a cosmic spirituality that ensures plenty and pleasure.[4]

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[3] Jude Lal Fernando, "God of Plenitude and Meditation on Conscience: Subverting Religious Narratives for Peaceful Co-existence," in: J. O'Grady and P.Scherie, *Ecumenics from the Rim: Explorations in Honour of John D'Arcy May*, LIT Verlag, Muenster, 2007, 369-377.

[4] Shirley Lal Wijeysingha, "Cain and Abel: Brotherhood in Crisis," *Vagdevi, Journal of Religious Reflection*, I/2 (July 2007), 45-52. Here the author has utilized the unpublished research work of J-L. Ska, *Genesis I-II*, (Rome, 1986), with the latter's permission.

Unfortunately, it is only in the Bible that some creation-theologians of the West meet this spirituality for the first time, probably because the *non-biblical* Christianity to which the West was converted centuries ago had eliminated the West's own version of this primal religiosity as mere nature-worship or superstition. The wheat had been removed with the weeds. The Christianity that they brought to Asia from there had adopted the same negative approach towards Asia's primal religions, as the Asian Bishops have highlighted and criticized.[5] Science and technology, too, developed in the West after the Cartesian vision of "Man exploiting Nature" had erased from history the memory of the 'human-cosmic alliance' of ancient times. The result is a *technocracy* allied to a *secular this-worldliness*, which is now swallowing up the *sacred this-worldliness* of Asia's cosmic religions. The signs of the times summon the advocates of both biblical and non-biblical versions of cosmic spirituality to join forces to resist such technocracy (and such Christianity) from continuing to produce scarcity where there is plenty.[6]

This cosmic religiosity, therefore, should be the *common foundation* on which all religions must meet and celebrate religious pluralism as a gift to humanity, appreciating and encouraging one another's irrepeatable identities. Those who do not practise this common spirituality are the anti-religious and anti-pluralist fundamentalists responsible for today's inter-religious conflicts! It is they who invoke various 'isms' (be it theism or atheism, or any other) to justify their monocratic intentions. In any history, including the history of Israel recorded in the Bible, idolatry invoking divine will to justify violence is internally critiqued by a cosmic religiosity. It is not the ideologies invoked by such fanatics, but "greed which is idolatry" (Col 3,5) that is the root of all violence.

In the beatitudinal spirituality of Jesus, an Asian hears the echoes of a cosmic spirituality common to all religions:- "the happy life" (beatitude) of sharing Nature's abundance like the birds in the air and the lilies in the field, *without hoarding, without anxiety* (Mt 6,19-34). Here, a spirituality common to all religions is couched within the framework of biblical theism: an exercise of "faith" (*'emuna*, meaning *anxiety-free reliance*) in a Father-Mother God who is "faithful", (*'emet*, or absolutely reliable). Hence trust in such a God excludes all reliance on other 'gods'

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5 *FABC Papers, No. 81*(Hong Kong), 25.

6 See A. Pieris, "Asian Reality and the Christian Option: A Plea for a Paradigm Shift in Christian Education in Asia", *Dialogue, NS* (Colombo), Vol. xxxii-xxxiii, 158-196 (2005-6) 171-77.

(Ex 20,2-3), gods symbolized by Mammon, which is 'unshared wealth' as well as 'absolutization of what is relative' (such as colour and caste, religion and race, language and land). Since such idolatry is 'greed' (Col 3,5), we acknowledge that those Asian religionists that are not God-believers in the biblical sense, are nevertheless anti-idolatrous Mammon-repudiators in that they advocate *greedless* living, which is the *sine qua non* for shared abundance. Thus the "God-Mammon conflict" is the typically Christian formulation of a common religious heritage. Hence our faith in the enfleshed Word, crucified and risen must culminate in a Christological confession: *Jesus is the irrevocable antinomy between God and Mammon*.

2. Christianity's Uniqueness: "Jesus as God's defense pact with the poor"

Wherever the Money-Demon's clients threaten to replace plenitude, pluralism and pleasure, respectively, with penury, plutocracy and pain through exploitation and hoarding, Yahweh cannot remain neutral as She is bound by a covenant to identify Herself with the victims of that sinful option: *the Covenant with the runaway-slaves of Egypt ratified on Sinai and renewed by Christ on Calvary*. It is not surprising that the justice which the poor cry for in at least 40 of the psalms, as Lyonnet explains, is an appeal to God's (covenantal) *love and fidelity towards the poor*, in stark contrast with God's attitude towards the oppressors, which is one of "anger" (*orge tou Theou*),[7] the anger of the victims appropriated by Yahweh, their defense-ally. Our *unique* contribution to the inter-faith dialogue is to confess that *Jesus is God's defense-pact with the poor* —not by mere words but by actively joining God's own defense of the poor.[8] Such action has never been a threat to other religions, because its intent is not conversion of other religionists to Christianity but conversion of the order of induced scarcity to one of shared abundance. All religionists can join this struggle without compromising their faiths.

I would have ceased being a Christian if Yahweh of the Bible was incapable of anger that threatens hell-fire on oppressors in the name of their voiceless victims—not in order to destroy them for ever (that would

[7] S. Lyonnet, *Il Nuovo Testamento alla luce dell'Antico* (Lectures given in 1968), 1971, reprint 1977.

[8] Developed at length in my "Christ Beyond Dogma: Doing Christology in the Context of the Religions and the Poor", *Louvain Studies*, 25, 2000, 187-231. Spanish version: *Revista Latinoamericana de Teologia*, 52, (XVIII), January 2001, 3-32 (Part One); 53, XVIII, May-August, 2001, 107-124 (Part Two).

be hatred), but to elicit their conversion and bring relief to the outcasts. For *prophetic anger is an expression of redemptive love*. The parable of the last Judgement (Mt 25) is good news to the poor, because the threat of eternal hell fire jolts the non-poor from their complacency before the plight of their brothers and sisters. God of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures does not address the powerful and the powerless in the same language; nor should we!

The Hitlers, Pinochets, and Bushes had their way because their pastors failed and even feared to announce Jesus Christ as God's Defense Pact with the oppressed! For, Christian fundamentalists dilute the notion of "God's Wrath" by spiritualizing it and removing it from the Covenantal justice of God so that the violence against the poor disappears from the concerns of *their* God and from *their* theology of "atonement" ('appeasement of God's wrath').

What these fundamentalists have done through a misguided evangelism, we *dialogists* could do through genuine irenism. Paul Knitter, in the process of trying sincerely to accommodate Thich Nhat Han's and Rita Gross's Buddhist critique of Liberation theology, expresses some uneasiness about the aggressive expressions such as Jon Sobrino's phrase "anti-Kingdom" or my own reference to the Covenant as a "defense pact" between God and the poor,[9] the implication being that an Asian theology of liberation based on God's Covenant with the poor errs by integrating the notion of divine anger against the victimizers, as it is offensive to non-Christian Asians.

This species of uneasiness can be traced back to three sources. The first is the confusion between *anger* and *hatred*. The forgiving love in Christianity encompasses prophetic anger but excludes rancour. The Apostle's advice to "become angry without sinning" (Eph 4,6) insinuates that there is a legitimate place for a non-hateful anger in the life of a Christian. Thich Nhat Han and other Buddhist critics should be reminded that even the Buddhist Scriptures allude to monk-saints "burning" with holy indignation against their errant colleagues (Vinaya III, 137, 138), insinuating that Buddhism too differentiates between anger and hate.

The second source of the objection is the inclusive method of cross-scripture reading, often resorted to in inter-religious dialogue, a methodological blunder which I have already illustrated with examples

[9] Paul Knitter, "Is God's Covenant with Victims a Covenant against Oppressors? Aloysius Pieris and the Uniqueness of Christ", R. Crusz, M. Fernando & A. Tillekratna, *Encounters with the Word: Essays to Honour Aloysius Pieris*, EISD, Colombo, 2004, 195-208.

from the writings of Thic Nhat Hahn himself.[10] To compromise the distinctive character of Christianity in the name of inter-religious dialogue is to eliminate one partner of dialogue altogether! For, here, we are dealing with a non-negotiable element in the Bible, just as non-theism is a non-negotiable factor in Thervada Buddhism. Irreconcilable differences are a constitutive dimension of pluralism. A theology of dialogue is a theology of pluralism.

The third source of misapprehension is the failure to understand the nature *of God's defense strategy* illustrated in the incarnate, crucified and risen Word in whom God and the victims of injustice constitute one sole covenanted, and therefore, salvific reality. Thus in Jesus we meet both partners of the covenant, God and the Poor, demonstrating two kinds of resistance to violence, on the one hand exercising God's anger against those who exploited *others*, but on the other, forgiving *his own* persecutors. In his life and work we see God's wrath being unleashed on the violators of the vulnerable, but in his passion and death we see God *identifying* Herself with the oppressed so indistinguishably as to become one of them, who dared to defy His oppressors by braving the atrocities of torture unto death, and who thus engraved in the annals of human history that it is *deicide* to rob the poor of their life!

This kind of God and this kind of divine involvement with the oppressed as revealed in Jesus is unique to Christianity, and absent in other faiths. Micael Amaladoss' claim that Hinduism advocates such a God has no foundation in Hindu scriptures.[11] No theologian, who is at the same time a qualified and recognized Indologist, has so far produced a single instance of such a belief from any Indic religion.[12]

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[10] A. Pieris, "Cross-Scripture Reading in Buddhist Christian Dialogue: A Search for the Right Method", in J. Wickeri (editor), *Scripture, Community and Mission. Essays in Honour of D. Preman Niles*, CCA, Hong Kong and CWM, London, 2002, 240-41.

[11] *God's Reign for God's poor*, 83-89. Spanish Version,103-109.

[12] When questioned by Ann Alden (*Religion and Dialogue in Late Modernity* Lund 2004, 123) Amaladoss, instead of adducing a counter argument, has merely dismissed my challenge saying that I am playing with the word 'poor' when in reality the term 'poor' is not my invention but a blanket term recurrently used in the Hebrew and Christian *Scriptures* (as the writings of the Scripture scholar George Soares-Prabhu have amply demonstrated), which I have taken pains to spell out in terms of *all the concrete categories of the poor* mentioned the Scriptures, with such insistence and clarity in so many of my writings that 'playing with the word' (which Alden too repeats without substantiating the statement) is, to say the least, a lame response to my challenge. I am still waiting patiently for an *honest* attempt at a counter-demonstration !

To sum up: my fidelity to my own Christian identity requires, first that I proclaim Christ as one who demands conversion from mammon-worship (Mt 6,19-24) rather than from other religions (Mt 23,15), thus *confirming the common spirituality* of all religions within my faith; secondly, in keeping with my *Christian uniqueness*, I confess from that common platform, both by word and deed, in liturgy and life that Christ is God's defense pact with the oppressed —thus laying the foundation of a "Liberation Christology of Religions".

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Religious Experience as Foundation for a Possible Interfaith Theology

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Religious experience is foundational

In order to construct a theology in which every religious tradition will see itself included and in which they can all can recognise themselves, a theology that could serve as a reference point for a dialogue regarding our "living together" in a world faced today with enormous challenges, it seems to me indispensable to discover a point of departure that can set the process into motion and that would serve as a foundation for the whole venture. I propose to examine religious experience in this sense.

Theology is always a second step. As a reflection on faith, theology finds its roots in that fundamental human experience which is faith lived in the everyday experiences of life. As a reflection, theology examines that experience, tries to understand and interpret it and lives in profound dependence upon it.[1] Without that reference to experience, theology, like religion, becomes arid. This leads me to affirm that religion is also a second step. It is the way in which we institutionalize our collective religious experience in order to be able to return to it again and renew it in the various stages of our human journey: birth, marriage, sickness, death, etc. Theology, and religion also in broader terms, attempt to offer an interpretation of religious experience that frames and integrates it into everyday life through rituals, prayers, meditation, days of celebration, etc. All this activity is nevertheless at the service of religious experience. Religious experience is then fundamental for the revelation of God and the divine inspiration that leads us to faith.

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[1] Bernard LONERGAN, *Method in Theology*, New York, Herder and Herder, 1972.

Obviously the sequence is not chronological. Religion, religious traditions and theology pre-exist my personal and collective experience today. They are the product of a collective, historical experience. The tradition was present long before my awakening to faith. Nevertheless, religion and theology are only validated by my entry into the religious experience they express.

Religious experience points to our relationship among ourselves and with God in the context of the natural environment that provides us with life and on which we depend in order to live. In that context the environment appears as sacred (full of transcendental mystery) so that it cannot be confined even by religion. In it we discover other voices that speak to us from beyond the narrow vision that we have constructed as individuals and societies. For that reason, we abandon our desire to control and begin to participate. In this way we break with our alienation; we awaken from a culture of passivity and become active participants. In that awakening we encounter a world of meaning, of serenity, and paradoxically, of struggle and pain. We pass over into a world full of risks. We abandon much of our security. It is a world that is more adult and, at the same time, one that is more compassionate.

It is quite another matter to understanding that experience. The problem is that religious experience is diffuse, without categories. It arises from the interiority of a group or individual. This leaves it open to all sorts of interpretation and history shows to what extent those interpretations can be strange. In addition, the experience in itself offers no guarantee of its authenticity. The prophet Jeremiah struggled intensely with the question of the authenticity of the divine revelation he received. (See *Jeremiah 20*.) For the prophet, only history itself can provide a stamp of authenticity. The only confirmation of the authenticity of an experience lies in the justice, solidarity and compassion it evokes, that is to say the strength of life that flows from the effort to live in coherence with our religious experience. The passage from religious experience to religious knowledge is long, tortuous and always circumscribed by the limitations of a specific historical context. To help us in this process, we turn to the wisdom of religious traditions. Belief is thus the expression of religious experience that allows a religious tradition to deal with it.

Religious experience as a search

William James (1842-1910)[2], among others, pointed out some of the characteristics of religious experience that appear to cut across many religious traditions. These include communion with the "numinous," with the totally Other, and with the Other as compassionate. Religious experience also implies a life conversion toward the good and toward sharing. It offers a meaning and an orientation in life. It opens onto another world that is different and without exclusions.

An analysis of religious experience shows that it is rooted in our being human and is inseparable from what is human given that it is intimately related to our capacity for wonder and for questioning. Questioning open us to an unending search for the transcendent.[3]

Our capacity for questioning, above all the questioning that is concerned with beauty, holistic well-being and communion, place us before the horizon of mystery, the ultimate foundation of life. While the very structure of human consciousness searches for responses to fundamental questions, the conscious mind does not always find conceptual responses. In this sense, the word "religious," in this context, refers to what is open to the "Other" that is the final objective of all our questioning. This openness sometimes happens in a context that society recognizes as religious. However, it can also happen in contexts that are very different as is the case of scientists who experience wonder at the magnitude and beauty of the universe. It is also the case for those who, for quite political reasons, search passionately for the liberation of the oppressed.

Believers today find themselves faced with a dialectic that repositions religious experience and religion in the contemporary world. As Beck and others point out, the transcendence that we search for is not "totally other," in the sense that it would be disconnected and without relation to the rest of life. It is rather a transcendence that is imminent to every dimension of the universe and yet never exhausted in it.[4] On the other hand, it is also "beyond" that current reality, which is so crushing

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[2] *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Gifford Lectures, Edinburgh, 1902. See also the analysis of Charles TAYLOR in La diversité de l'expérience religieuse, William James revisité, Montréal, Bellarmin, 2003.

[3] Bernard LONERGAN, *Philosophy of God and Theolo*gy, London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973.

[4] Clive BECK, "Faith in a Broad Sense as a Goal in Promoting Human Development," *Philosophy of Education Annual Meeting*, 1990, 90-100; Gregory BAUM, "*Religion as Source of Alienation*, The Young Hegel," Religion and Alienation, Paulist Press, 1975, 1-19; Thomas BERRY, "The Dream of the Earth: Our Way into the Future," *The Dream of the Earth*, San Francisco, Sierra Club Books, 1988, 194-215.

for the majority of humanity. The believer always runs the risk of abandoning openness to transcendence by embracing a reduced expression of religion. In so doing, the essence of religious experience is lost.

Understanding religious experience in this way, that is to say as a search for ultimate transcendence that lies at the heart of our questioning since it is its objective, has enormous consequences. First of all, religious experience finds itself once again at the very center of our daily tasks. It frames our path through life. The object of religious experience will always escape our full knowledge, but the objective never varies. Thus the religious dimension of religious experience is the dynamic path toward an objective that we can never fully capture and that nevertheless remains the condition for our "being in the world."[5]

Religious experience as response

Religious experience becomes the horizon of our search for meaning, for liberation, for justice. It evokes an objective. On the other hand, it is also the irruption into our awareness of a response to our questioning. Religious experience in this second sense is the irruption of the Ground of Being, of the "Totally Other" into human consciousness as a response to our search for meaning, for justice and for peace. In theological terms, this is called grace or also revelation.

Thus, religious experience is found not only in the search for love, for beauty, for truth and communion. It is discovered also in the irruption of transcendent beauty, truth and communion into our lives as a response to our questioning. Many times this is revealed as an irruption of love and of compassion in an unexpected place or time. The beauty that we discover in the "other" raises us to a level of communion that transforms and vitalizes us.

That irruption – a response to our search – in turn invites our response, a behavior coherent with what we have received. (As we have been loved, love one another.) So it is that religious experience includes also, in its third sense, our response to the gift given. Here we can recall all those spiritual journeys of so many men and women in history who have given their lives to living in fidelity to the irruption into their con-

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[5] In this light, read the extraordinary reflection of John Paul II in Redemptoris Missio: (28) *The Spirit manifests himself in a special way in the Church and in her members. Nevertheless, his presence and activity are universal, limited neither by space nor time…. The Spirit, therefore, is at the very source of man's existential and religious questioning, a questioning which is occasioned not only by contingent situations but by the very structure of his being. The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only the individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions.*

sciousness of that transcendent reality that has managed to transform their entire being and that has motivated them to transform their world.

In Western culture we usually think that it is the individual who is the "subject" of religious experience. That concept is the result of the individualism of our culture and the legacy of the political philosophy of Spinoza. It is not, however, necessarily the same in other religious traditions and in our context here it is certainly not so. The primary "subject" of religious experience is the community of the impoverished and excluded. We always have to place the question of religious experience in the context of the people of God whose heart is touched by compassion and whose lives are oriented to the liberation of the poor and excluded. Attention to religious experience leads us recognize the communion, with God and among ourselves, lived by the whole people of God: past, present and future. It is a communion that promotes action with a single mind and heart.[6]

In addition, attention to religious experience places us before the problematic of the historicity of religious experience. Joan Chittister (a Benedictine Sister and author of many books on spirituality) suggests that we remain energized and vital only when we are fully committed to a constant "search and destroy."[7] Today we are called to profoundly question our assumptions about what it means to be followers of a religious tradition and even our being citizens or even human beings. Our presuppositions situate us culturally, socially, politically and economically. Only if we actively question our own structures, engagements, assumptions, ideals, options, exercise of power, alliances and relationships can we count on the fact that our religious traditions will speak in some way of the future of human society and of the future of life on our planet. Such questioning inevitably repositions us. Chittister tells us a story from the Sufi tradition in which a youth asks the master what must be done to achieve eternal life. The master responds that he must abandon the past. The youth is scandalized and replies that the past is his patrimony in which he finds wisdom. And the master answers by saying that he must abandon the past precisely because it is *past*. We can be faithful to the past (not to speak of the present and future) only by abandoning the past. Fidelity to religious experience and to the traditions constructed by it require that we commit ourselves to a difficult and painful exercise of deconstruction in order to bring to light the power of our past to control

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6 Elizabeth JOHNSON, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints*, New York, Continuum, 1999.

7 Joan CHITTISTER, "Destroying the Past to Create the Future," *Compass*, May/June, 1994, 6-8.

us and to control others. An extensive dialogue with other religious traditions can help us achieve the systematic humility required if we are going to remain open to self-questioning.

Dialogue

Openness to questioning the past, such as I have explained it, is a strategy for entering into dialogue about meaning and duty for today. Only in this way do we awaken hope since we cannot change the past. In any case, we do not construct a future by leaving aside the past since our understanding of the past orients our activity to create a future. We have to find alternatives. They are the spaces between the walls that allow us to move forward, experiences that easily escape our awareness but that invite us to new life in the search for that "other world that is possible" and that Christians call the Reign. As Christians we are called to cross borders, to discover what exists on the other side of the cultural and religious barriers.[8] Today, this repositioning includes solidarity with the Earth, with the oppressed and with the marginalized. Precisely at this moment we move out of our ghettos, that is to say out of a lifestyle that closes us in on ourselves. In this way we begin to construct a new narrative.

If we want to search together for the sacred and to create, or discover, the stories that reveal the sacred, we need to begin by paying a lot of attention to the story-tellers. For too long we, as believers, have been repeating the same old stories that have lost their meaning. There are other stories to tell. This doesn't mean that the old stories have no value. Some of them are rich in meaning but need a new reading from new perspectives so that their light might shine. Some of the new stories can help us do precisely that. Some of those stories come from feminist writings, from the ecological movements, from the world religions, from the traditions of indigenous peoples and minorities throughout the world. They are stories that are closely related to rituals practiced in those contexts. There are also entirely new rituals that invite us to connect with the Earth and its creatures, rituals that unite us in solidarity across borders and in common struggles. These stories and rituals invite us to sound the depth of our being in order to touch the sources of our energy.

In one way or another, we are all capable of helping heal the ruptured relationships in our society and to call attention to the absent

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8 See Gregory BAUM, *op. cit*; Wilfred Cantwell SMITH, *Toward a World Theology*, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1981.

voices. Among these latter we can mention the environment (air, water, earth, plants, animals), ethnic minorities, women, children, those who live with physical, emotional or intellectual limitations, those of advanced age, refugees, immigrants.

For too long we have lived the experience that our religions divide us. Religious experience, as a search, irruption and response offers us a very positive basis for a dialogue that heals wounds, mobilizes forces and serves to mediate between the individual and society, between the natural world and God. It is a dialogue oriented to sharing, to appreciating and to valuing the other.

Praxis

Religion should sustain and extend religious experience so that a coherent praxis and a sharing of that experience emerge. Unfortunately, religion sometimes appears rather as a collection of doctrines and rituals that pretend to deal with the mystery of God but that have come to be separated from their foundations in religious experience and from an engagement with the world to which the irruption of the Other, of the Transcendent One, invites. From this derives the importance of praxis. Praxis is absolutely necessary so that experience not be sterile but rather lead to the common good. Our religions (rituals, beliefs) are quite diverse. Nevertheless, they invite us to a union of forces in the practice of solidarity with the poor, oppressed and marginalized. Paying attention to the religious experience that is at the source of our diverse religious traditions allows us to recognise its beauty and to practice the compassion that is a critical factor for the construction of that power, which can build a world that is compassionate and just.

If we want a trans-religious theology or a super-religional theology, it should be grounded in and framed within a reflection on religious experience. More specifically we need to recognise the "subject" of religious experience that rises up out of our very being as human. Religious experience, as an action that is rooted in the very structure of what it is to be human, that is to say as a "subject who acts," transcends all religions and religious traditions. In the final account, the ground or foundation of all theology is not a collection of doctrines but rather the human "subject"[9] (the being who acts self-consciously) in a universal communion in which priority is given to those who are considered non-subjects (non-persons)

[9] See Bernard LONERGAN, *Method in Theology*, New York and London, Herder and Herder, 1974; ID., *The Subject,* Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1968. Jean-Marc FERRY, *Les puissance de l'expérience*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1991.

and who are excluded. Being "subject" transcends religious traditions and their structures. Whether we are Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists or follow an indigenous spirituality, we are always human subjects committed to a human search and a questioning of the reality that opens onto the irruption of the "Other" and of the "other" in our day-to-day life.

Religious experience, born in wonder and in the questioning that is at the center of being human is built on the foundation of elements that are shaped precisely by the structure of human consciousness itself and that serve as a common substratum underlying all the varieties of interpretations and understandings that have come into the different religious traditions. While every effort to formulate this common substratum will only end up being another theology or another religious path, it remains clear that we are subjects of religious experience before we recognize that reality as such.

Recognition, in dialogue, of the other as such with all his or her diversity is an indispensable reference for being able to carry forward a fruitful dialogue, that is to say a dialogue that is grounded in inter-subjectivity. Such dialogue can lead us to recognize the elements (values and truths) that each one brings and that strengthen our practical solidarity.

The effort to name certain elements of religious experience can afford "hooks" that enable us to construct a framework for a common praxis, that is to say for living together on this planet. Probably the traditions that are best able to express those common elements are those found in indigenous religions. Clearly I am not calling for everyone to adopt an indigenous religion or to abandon our different religious traditions. On the contrary, the richness of the diversity and the extraordinary depth developed by the millennial traditions of the great religions of the world merit our entire respect. Nevertheless, looking at these same traditions from the perspective of indigenous traditions and from the lived experience of the impoverished and excluded can help us find elements that will assist us in discovering the originality of the great world traditions in a new light. The elements thus identified can serve to orient us in the effort to discover what is authentic in religious experience. Besides this, a consideration of the values that flow from an understanding of the structure of religious experience as rooted in the "subject," that is to say in the dynamic structure of human consciousness as questioning and as wonder, can help us discover values and ethical principles that are important if we are going to respond to the challenges that humanity is confronting today.

In a further step, dialogue on religious experience in a context of commitment with the struggles of the poor for their recognition opens up the possibility of realizing a reflection on the discourse of the dialogue

itself. This moment of re-flection on what we have done allows us to articulate the underlying dynamic of religious experience. In this way we already begin to construct the interfaith theology we hoped for.

Conclusion

I have tried to indicate a path toward the construction of a foundation for interfaith theology. To achieve this we need to find a common reference that allows us to enter into relationship. In this sense, I propose religious experience in three senses, that is to say as a search for meaning and love, as an irruption of the Transcendent into our consciousness (through the poor), and as a human response to that irruption. In second place, I insist on the importance of praxis as framing dialogue and as constituting a process that leads to recognition of the other as subject. In third place, I suggest that dialogue is an activity of mutual recognition between subjects that offers the possibility of appreciating both differences and common elements. Finally, I propose that an interfaith theology arises out of reflection on dialogical praxis.

There is no theology without a theologian and every theologian is a human being with a human consciousness subject to the potential and limitations of what it is to be human. A theologian is a subject. An interfaith theology is possible in so far as it is coherent with the subject of religious experience and recognises that subject with its potential and limitations. If we accept this principle, evidently many theologies will need profound revision.[10] Thus, it appears to me that an interfaith dialogue in function of a "living together" is not only urgent but also possible.

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[10] The epistemological contributions of Bernard Lonergan, Juergen Habermas and Jean-Marc Ferry offer fruitful (though diverse) principles for our journey in dialogue.

Toward a Post-Confessional and Post-Religious Theology

Religious experience, symbol and post-religious theology

José Amando ROBLES

If symbols are the appropriate expression of religious experience (1), then this latter, expressed symbolically, is the object of theology (2). On the other hand, between symbol and religion there is a certain relationship of continuity as well as one that is proper to the symbol alone (3). These three relational conditions are very important since one of the keys appears here for why theology has to be post-religious and also, for that same reason, post-Christian (4). This is the thesis we are defending here in response to the thematic question posed for us: "Is a … trans-religious theology possible?" For editorial reasons we will present these four points very synthetically in what follows. Our focus will be fundamentally epistemological.[1] We take this approach, not because it is the only one absolutely possible, but rather because the thematic question has profoundly epistemological dimensions and orientations for theology.

1. Religious experience and symbolic expression

For several decades now, the object of theology has increasingly been referred to in terms of experience, of religious experience, and with reference to the nature of religious language as a symbolic language. Often the reference is quite general, even vague and the proof is that, contrary to what one might hope, this approach has in no way changed the foundations of theology. We are referring to the formality of its object

[1] An epistemological focus that we examine on just one point, namely religious experience symbolically expressed as the object of theology. A broader approach was taken up in *Repensar la religión. De la creencia al conocimiento*, EUNA, Heredia (Costa Rica) 2002, pp. 293-358, y en ¿Verdad o símbolo? Naturaleza del lenguaje religioso, Universidad Nacional, Heredia (Costa Rica) 2007.

of study, to its way of understanding itself as *episteme*, to its famous "theological sites," to its discourse. In general terms, the object of study continues to be the same. A sign of this is that terms like religious experience and symbol are not used rigorously but rather in a generic way. We need, then, to correct the usage.

When we speak rigorously of religious experience, we are referring, above all, to a *real and specific experience* of the absolute that we are, and that everything is. It is the experience of reality in its unity, fullness and totality. We refer to characteristics, or better, to dimensions that can only be known experientially and never rationally and conceptually. For this sort of knowledge, reasoning and concepts are profoundly inadequate resources since they are insufficient. Only experience is adequate. Moreover it is a very specific experience that does not presuppose subjectification or objectification. In this sense, one has to recognize that not even the term *religious experience* is entirely adequate since it is often misleading. We use it because, like the terms *spirituality*, interior *path*, or others, it is, in any case, the lesser of the evils we have at hand.

If we understand the phrase well, it would be sufficient, as Raimon Panikkar often points out, to speak of *experience of reality*, without adding "religious" experience.[2] By this he is indicating that it is not a matter of a special or specialized experience but rather of the experience of reality in itself—in its totality, however. The qualification "religious" that we tend to add either serves to connote the dimensions of unity, totality, gratuity, or it is superfluous. In fact it adds absolutely nothing.[3] Experience of reality in its fullness and in its totality is human experience by that very fact, and so then quintessentially fully human and therefore religious.

When we have recovered the truly experiential nature of religious experience, the two terms, "experience," and "religious," should remind theology that the nature of religion itself is experiential. Effectively, religious experience is not only correctly understood as what underlies religion, it is also that which constitutes it. Religion is the most profound, full and total experience that a human being can have, or else it is not religion. And if it is not religion, then it is a cosmovision, a world philosophy about being human and of history, ethics, theodicy—but not the experience of unity, fullness and totality—that is its foundation and that constitutes it.

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[2] *Iconos del misterio. La experiencia de Dios*, Ediciones Península, Barcelona 1998, p. 52; *De la mística. Experiencia plena de la Vida*, Herder, Barcelona 2005, p. 34.

[3] See Raimon PANIKKAR, *Entre Dieu et le cosmos. Entretiens avec Gwendoline Jarczyk*, Albin Michel, París 1998, p. 11.

Since religious experience is essentially experiential, its expression is *essentially symbolic*. This is the only way possible. So, for good reason it has been said that symbols that express religious experience are the primordial religious language above any other. They are the origin of all the other religious languages and nourish them. It may even be the only religious language because experientially speaking the rest—the myths, rituals, doctrines—are derivatives; they are thematic by preference and so do not rise to the same level nor do they accomplish the same function. The relationship among these various religious expressions and experience is not the same as in the case of symbols, where the relationship with experience is more direct, even though we recognize that there is a difference of nature that is sensed, not without pain, by those who have the experience and express it. Only symbols have experience itself as their target. They point to it and they are oriented to it to the point of disappearing like a good precursor. This is quite contrary to what happens in art where symbols remain as entities in themselves and symbolize it. In other words, in religious experience the reality lies in the experience itself, not in the symbol. The symbol has to point toward experience.

2. Religious experience expressed symbolically is the object of theology

The importance of understanding well the experiential nature of religious experience as well as of understanding that its expression is symbolic and that it is symbolic in a very specific way, stumbles over the fact that religious experience, expressed symbolically, is the formal object of theology. It is what theology studies and is the light under which theology studies it. This is the object that theology searches to understand and no other.

The point just made is extremely important. The object of theology is not the vision of reality or the sum of the values that a myth or a ritual, or even a whole series as an articulated whole, can provide us. These myths and rituals are already derived from symbols, in one case representational (myths) and in another case dynamic (rituals). Even less is the object of theology the sum of truths that can be drawn from articulated sets of symbols in order to conserve, transmit, legitimize, and provide identity or any other purpose. In this way—well known for having been what theology has largely undertaken for centuries—theology loses its function and its proper object for study to the precise extent that it draws further away from symbols and their function. The object of theology is religious experience, genuinely such and symbolically expressed. Nothing else. The other objects—myths, rituals, truths, doctrines—can only be turned to and only merit attention in a search for the symbolic

richness they still contain and by tracking their primary function, recovering those objects and recovering the symbolic richness. Nothing else.

This object for study, as we know well, is nothing that can be conceptualized. It is uniquely what it can be said to be: the ultimate, fullest and most total experience of reality in so far as this experience is expressed symbolically. Expressed *symbolically* means that it cannot be conceptualized. So, those addicted to reason and concepts in all cases ask themselves how this object of study can be captured? Marià Corbí will say that they can only be understood and read symbolically in the same way art understands and reads a poem, that is to say they can only be captured and read symbolically, in the same way that art is understood and read in all its manifestations.[4] In this sense religion constitutes an experience that we are engaged in every day when we see a landscape, a tree, a flower or when we look at any object not as a work of art but as having a certain level of design and artistic quality. In all these experiences we perceive much more than what is physical or what we see objectively. We perceive a subtle reality of unity and totality that transcends the material dimension of the things that we see even though it is in them.

Theology, like art, should teach us to perceive that dimension, to understand its meaning and value, to discover its richness, its presence in everything, its capacity to transform reality. It should show us its relationship with everything that we call reality and teach us to live out of that experience and with it. But, in order to do that, it has to keep firmly to its proper object of study, to know how to be courageous, not to give in to the temptation—understandable in itself—to set out on a hunt for truths and concepts as the object of its study in order to be more efficient. Theology needs to know that to the extent that it draws away from a form of expressing religious experience that cannot be put into concepts, that is symbolic, to that extent it draws away from the experience that symbol points to and so becomes increasingly incapable of giving an account of them even though they are its source. Symbols, when they are conceptualized in religious terms and made to serve that conceptualization—for this is what religions are—end up "closing off" to what precisely defines theology: its universality and its density of meaning. Theology ends up with a meaning that is perhaps strongly doctrinal—as happened in the case of the symbols of creation, incarnation and resurrection in Christianity, to give three examples—but that progressively become impoverished symbolically.

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[4] *Religión sin religión*, PPC, Madrid 1996, p. 131. Also in the digital Library of Koinonia Services, on the net: servicioskoinonia.org/biblioteca

3. Between symbol and religion: an irreducible relationship.

Contrary to what we are accustomed to think, there is no evolutionary or harmonic continuity between symbol and religion as a system of beliefs, meanings and ritual practices. Certainly symbols and symbolic gestures have been able to produce developed sets such as myths and rituals, mythologies, ideologies or religions, although it would be better to say that myths, rituals and religions have figured out how to take symbols up into the new thematic reality they have articulated and even systemized. However, this has not happened without a level of violence and, so also a loss of meaning and function for the symbol.

J. Severino Croatto[5] has well underlined how, in this operation, symbols lose both universality of meaning and density, that is to say in what they have that is properly theirs and that is genuine. On the other hand, they acquire power and value, concreteness and configuration, interpretation and even an explanation of the reality, orientation and determination. But all of that happens within a determinate cosmovision of the world and in function of it. For that reason it has a proportionately reduced potential for symbolizing. To the extent that a symbol is found within a cosmovision and a religious body, and the more it achieves a concrete meaning, to that same extent it loses its character as infinite and its inexhaustible profundity of meaning.

The fact is that, by its nature and functions, there is between symbol and religion as a body and system of truths and values, a certain incompatibility and uniqueness that has to be recognized and redeemed. They do not present the same ontology nor are they in the same category. Symbol itself is not the same before and after becoming part of an articulated whole that is religion. Once taken up and subsumed within a religion, a symbol is no longer the same. It has suffered losses. It has lost what is most genuine in its being and function: its capacity, apparently vague and imprecise but fundamentally full of richness and appropriated, to point to what is ineffable without replacing it or ever categorizing it, because it points to the experience itself.

It is here, on this point, that the great difference between religion and symbol lies, namely that religion, by having turned symbols into concepts and truths—and truths that are frequently divine—remains with them under the form of faith and belief, while the symbol points to reality and to experience of it as the only way of knowing it.

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[5] *Los lenguajes de la experiencia religiosa. Estudio de fenomenología de la religión*, Fundación Universidad a Distancia “Hernandarias”, Buenos Aires 1994, pp. 163-165.

4. Post-religious and post-Christian theology

In the light of what has been said here, the symbol that expresses religious experience, the object of theology, becomes the discriminating criteria for theology's pertinence, we could even say of its religious quality. And this is true independently of the religious references that might accompany it or that embrace it. In the polarity of symbol—as originating expression—and religion—as the articulated set of truths and doctrines—is the symbol as object of knowledge and its dynamism. These are what define theology. There follows the need to disengage theology from religion and from religious confession. Or, to put it another way and in our current cultural context, theology must be post-confessional and post-religious. This is the only way of guaranteeing that it is authentic, that it gives an account of religious experience and its contributions. The contrary, namely to continue doing confessional and religious theology, is to create a theology in view of beliefs, of doctrinal, moral and institutional interests but not in view of religious experience that is authentically itself.

We need to become clearly aware of this challenge, which seems to go against all logic and against all evidence. The logical and evident thing to do would seem to be to continue doing theology as it has always been done, taking the starting point from truths that are revealed, from concepts and credos. In the end we start from a vision of the world, of being human, of history, of a philosophy. Otherwise we have a feeling of impotence, of not knowing how theology might be done. This is a sentiment that can well be understood if the ideal of theology is that of an objective metavision of the world, of human beings and of history, that is to say, if theology is to be a spokesperson for other views. But the object of theology is quite different—religious experience expressed symbolically—and its knowledge is knowledge about that experience and based on it.

Besides, the best of confessional and religious theology will be recovered only though a post-confessional and post-religious theology. The deep dialogue among all theologies will not only be possible but will be the common substratum and experience because religious experience and symbolic expression never shut down or are exhausted. In this sort of theology, there is a place for all genuinely religious experiences and for all the theologies that are genuinely constructed in function of those experiences. None of them is superfluous.

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Interfaith Theology: A Hindu Perspective

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Introduction

Hinduism is an ancient, multi-faceted, multi-directional, dynamic and living religious tradition; it recognizes the inevitable differences in human life and experience as well as the varied needs of the individuals in different stages of spiritual evolution. Almost every form of worship is preserved in the tradition. Any form of worship, if useful to someone at some stage of spiritual growth, is appreciated by the Hindus. They recognize and respect the individuality of each tradition and sect; each of them represents a significant perspective on Truth. Hindu approach to Truth is experiential; it is living and moving in Brahman (universal Truth). Search for Truth is broad based on progressive discoveries of the ever-expanding vision and experience of the Divine. The quest for Truth and value is never-ending. Underneath all the different sects and movements, Hindus see certain common themes that account for the larger unity. They emphasize that the ultimate Reality is the Supreme Spirit; that it is one without a second (advitiya); that it is supreme value; that there is a sense of unity running through all things, and that there is justice in the heart of the universe. The spirit of Hinduism is "unity in diversity."

Hindu perspective

In Hindu perspective, great religious traditions are different from one another, but they are necessary and valid as they emphasize various dimensions of Truth. They help the spiritual development of humanity in different times and climes. Every religion, culture and language has its place in the world. Anything that is in harmony with truth and eternal moral law is acceptable to Hinduism. It enables its followers to respect other religions and admire and assimilate whatever may be good in other faiths.

Every religious tradition is strong in some values, and deficient in some others. There are blemishes and bright spots in every tradition. No religion is perfect. Each religion must purify itself by correcting distortions and deficiencies in its heritage. Every tradition is a part of the religious heritage of humanity. Each of them has made and continues to make significant contributions to human fulfillment. They are complementary. Diversity of culture brings richness and beauty to human life. Hinduism holds that religious pluralism provides a suitable context, within which each tradition can preserve its unique features, and can act, react, grow and develop. Hinduism does not insist on religious conformity, but insists on the application of the principles of morality or righteousness (dharma) in life.

Hinduism values other traditions; it does not claim that it is the sole repository of Truth in the world. Nowhere in the Hindu scriptures is it written that only Hindus are eligible for salvation. Hinduism invokes the blessings of life on all, not on Hindus only. "Let all be happy, healthy and blessed" is part of their daily prayer. As an open religion, it has assimilated insights from other faiths. Hindu vision contains one world, one humanity, but many households of faith. In this regard, the institution of marriage may be used to illustrate the Hindu view beautifully. The purpose of the marriage ceremony, whether it is Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, or Sikh, is to bring the bride and the groom together under the sanction of holy matrimony. The marriage ceremonies are certainly different in different traditions; but they all are meant to accomplish the same goal.

Similarly, the purpose of spiritual traditions of humankind is to bring the individual soul in touch with the Supreme Being, or as Mahatma Gandhi put it, to bring the seeker "face to face with God or Truth." Religious traditions are to help the respective followers to reach this goal. Sri Ramakrishna of the nineteenth century and Mahatma Gandhi of the twentieth century also support this view through other imageries.

One substance: many names

Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) practiced spiritual disciplines of different Hindu sects one after the other. Having successfully practiced Hindu sadhanas, he turned to the practices of Christianity and Islam. He followed the modes of disciplines as advocated in those respective traditions. He realized and enjoyed the glory of God in each of those ways. He saw that all faiths are different roads to the same destination. Paths are many, God is one. Rama, Krishna, Siva, Allah, Jesus Christ and a thousand names signify Him only. No matter with what name and form the Divine is worshipped; the Supreme Lord accepts the devotional worship.

The difference is in perspectives and languages, not in substance. Water is called jal by Hindus, pani by Muslims, and water by Christians and so on. Substance is the same, but names are different in different languages. And God is beyond words, but can be experienced.

Imagery of motherhood

Mahatma Gandhi used a different imagery. A mother nourishes and cherishes the life of her child; and the mother is loved and respected by the child. Each mother is unique to her children. Just as I respect my mother, I am also expected to respect the mothers of my neighbors. All mothers are to be respected. A religion, like a mother, nourishes and cherishes the spiritual life of its followers; it deserves their respect. This does not mean that other religions should be deplored. In order to establish the relevance of one's faith, it is not necessary to decry other faiths. Actually, reverence for the faith of others exalts one's own faith; it is an acknowledgement of the fact that truth and spiritual values are embedded in different traditions according to the needs and genius of the respective peoples.

Essentially, Hindu way of life is geared to the search for Truth. Truth includes what is true in knowledge, what is right in conduct and what is just and fair in human relations. Hindu tradition (Vedas) gives guidance in the art of living, based on the knowledge of the underlying eternal truths of the Universe. It deals with life and death, good and evil, love and hatred, here and here-after as well as the meaning and purpose of life. To know how to live is the real knowledge. The tradition focuses on the conditions of life and common human goals of righteousness (dharma), economic security (artha), aesthetic enjoyment (kama) and spiritual freedom (moksa.) There are many paths and spiritual disciplines, any one of which can lead one to the highest goal.

Every historical religion contains local, regional and universal elements. Local, cultural and geographical factors are useful in their own time and place. Indeed, particular religious traditions and sects have their own concerns and problems. Differences exist between and among religions on doctrinal and dogmatic matters. Divergences in rituals and in conceptions of God result in different forms of religion. Sugar is described differently by a boy, a chemist and a diabetic. These conceptions do not affect sugar, the substance (Reality). It is misleading to overemphasize the differences and ignore the universal elements. The insensitivity to the value structures of other faiths leads to cultural blindness. Religions, which are supposed to unite humanity, become divisive forces. Some of the serious breaches in human community have religious basis.

The universal values embedded in these traditions transcend the limitations of history, geography, culture, etc. The spiritual elements in all traditions not only teach against such divisive attitudes, but give extensive resources that can give guidance to human progress and harmony. All religions encourage humans to realize Truth, the ultimate spiritual value. They all aim at helping humans in their strivings for the knowledge of God. Saints of all religions preach eternal Truth; they all express God's love to His children. Whatever religion we may belong to, we can enrich our spiritual life by keeping ourselves open to the profound wisdom flowing from one Divine source through many revelations. Diversity enriches culture. Spirituality, which is the heart of religions, unites humanity. If universal elements are released from their narrow settings, religions would become unifying forces in the world.

Human birth

To be born as a Human being is a precious privilege and a great gift. No matter what race, religion, culture, nationality, gender or generation a person may belong to, a human being is, first and foremost, a human being. The potentiality of moral and spiritual development distinguishes humans from other animals. Food and drink, sex and sleep are common to humans and animals. But humans are graced with reason and the freedom of will. Only they have the unique opportunity to seek salvation, which is the spiritual birthright of every person. Religions are meant to help humans in this direction. Their primary responsibility is to work for the health, happiness, harmony, and fulfillment of human beings; this has precedence over narrow and sectarian goals.

Ultimate goal

Salvation, the ultimate goal of human life, is called by different names in different religions (Moksha, Nirvana, Kingdom of God, Redemption, Deliverance, Heaven, Paradise, etc.) A variety of approaches to salvation is presented in different religious traditions. In each case, it is directed to achieve freedom from suffering and evil, extrication from confinement and attainment of eternal happiness. There is an eternal longing of the soul for the Infinite; it is concerned with wholeness and wholesomeness. The goal of spiritual lie is eternal life. Whatever one's religious background, every individual has the privilege to strive for salvation, which is the highest spiritual aim. But no religion or religious leader can give salvation to any person; it is entirely dependant on the grace of God.

Globalization

In our contemporary world of fast travel and rapid communications, diverse religions and cultures are brought into closer contact, and often in confrontation with one another. The meeting of religions is not confined to this or that country; it is now a world-wide phenomenon. Every part of the world is becoming multi-cultural and multi-religious. The world has become a global village. Traditional boundaries are being questioned by new generations.

Spiritual truths are eternal in character, but social and cultural customs and practices change as per the requirements of the times and circumstances. Many religions in history have changed their stances on many issues; for example, religions have altered their positions on slavery, racial discrimination, status of women, centrality of rituals, and attitude to scientific knowledge. Now the time has come to overcome religious exclusivism and discrimination. The rivers must flow and the religious people must grow, otherwise they become stagnant. We are to be creators of history, not victims of history. We are not born to live within narrow boundaries. We have to think through our problems in the context of people of other faiths. Each religion has to take an active interest in human welfare around the world. It should not stay stuck in the immediate, narrow and sectarian interests. And cultural and religious contacts should be mutually beneficial and serve the world at large. In the emerging global culture, the world needs to take into account the diverse currents of religions and their contributions to the welfare of humankind as a whole.

Turning point

We are at a crucial turning point in history. The time has come for world religions to reach a new horizon. Past modes of thought, which considered people as closed groups are no more valid. Categorization of people of other faiths as pagans, heathens, kaffirs and barbarians is to be totally rejected. Behind us, there is history of centuries of religious confrontations; before us, the chance of peace, cooperation and dialogue. Religious traditions are useful in many ways, but religious exclusivism is close-minded. We have to live in a world which has Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, Confucians, Taoists, Shintoists, etc., great communities owning great faiths. Loyalty to our respective traditions should not undermine our loyalty to humanity. Presently, world religions have the opportunity and responsibility, to cooperate with one another in the promotion of human unity and world peace.

The adherents of different faiths, as inhabitants on this earth share the same planet. To guarantee the continuation of the human race, to preserve the earth's resources to posterity, and to enrich the quality of life for all humans are the common responsibility of all religions. World religions have given their profound insights on these and other matters. It is great to be able to derive benefit from whatever is true and beautiful and good, wherever it may be found. To build a better world, knowledge and cooperation among people of different religions is necessary.

Human religious heritage

Saints, sages and prophets of different religious traditions work for the general good and happiness of all. Compassion is the queen of saintly virtues; it is intended to all humans, even to all living beings. Saints are the messengers of God. They come to the world in every age. They are servants of humanity. They proclaim that ultimate Reality is One. They speak from the direct experience of Truth. Every religion has a long succession of saints; they are the sources of wisdom and guidance for all. They speak the language of love. They are sweet by nature; and their hearts are simple and straight. They preach and practice love and harmony among the peoples of the world; they have no enemies. Further, such great holy personages as Mahavira, the Buddha, Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, Lao-tze, Confucius, Moses, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, and Guru Nanak are not the exclusive possession of any country or group; they belong to the whole of humanity.

Scriptural heritage

Similarly, the scriptures of all religions, Vedas, Tripitaka, Avesta, Tao-te-ching, Torah, Bible, Qur'an, Guru Granth Sahib are the precious treasures of human heritage. They communicate to us the knowledge of Truth/God. The spiritual truths that they disclose are intended for the entire humanity. Rigveda (1.89.1) says: "Let noble thoughts come to us from all directions." The noble insights of different scriptures should make human life and culture richer and more fulfilling. One should be able to derive benefit from every scripture. We should be grateful to each and all of them. World Scriptures – each of them- is like a prosperous tree, full of leaves, flowers and fruits. According to the ability and the interest of the seekers, some get leaves, others flowers and some others fruits. To realize their imports at deeper levels, one needs to have profound love, sincerity and openness. They should not be exploited for selfish and partisan purposes. No scripture should be used to undermine other scriptures.

Vision of peace

Potential for peace is there in every religion; those potentialities are important sources for a just society. The essential aspiration of faith traditions is for freedom, reconciliation and peace. Gita says, "There is no happiness for those who have no peace." The Vedic command runs: "Don't injure any human beings." Cruelty to human beings is a denial of God. The Buddha taught "Let a man overcome anger by love, let him overcome evil by good, let him overcome the greedy by liberality and the liar by truth;" Jesus Christ declared: Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you and pray for them that despitefully use you. In the Qur'an, it is stated that if you are good and kind to your fellow men on earth, Allah will be gracious to you on the Day of Judgment, and the Prophet of Islam has declared "he who digs a pit for his brother man falls into it himself." Mahatma Gandhi once remarked: "It is easy enough to be friendly to one's friends. But to befriend one who regards himself as your enemy is the quintessence of religion. The other is mere business." The religions of the world can and must take humanity to a creative, dynamic and non-violent society. Joint moral efforts on a global scale are required to solve the problems of hunger and disease, violence and war.

Spiritual truth

Spiritual truth and values are not restricted to the East or West or to this or that tradition. All spiritual literature glorifies Truth and enlightens the mind. Realization of Truth is the *summum bonum* of life. All have to pay homage to Truth. Sciences study the natural world. No particular branch of science claims monopoly of wisdom for itself nor does it quarrel about its superiority over others. Religions explore the spiritual world; they too are to be seen as complementary and supplementary to one another.

Truth may be observed from many perspectives. Indeed, the fullness of Truth is wider and deeper than the apprehensions of it by historical religions. Spiritual values are genuine human concerns. We have to lift our mind and consciousness above the conceptual to the spiritual level to find our common human unity. Each religion and culture has its own excellences. For example, nonviolence of Jainism, compassion of Buddhism, spirituality of Hinduism, ecumenism of Sikhism, brotherhood of Islam, charity and love of Christianity, and humanity of Confucianism are great values. They do not contradict one another. They express beautiful dimensions of Truth. They teach adherence to certain moral, spiritual and human values. Spirituality does not divide people; it takes us into

deeper and wider realms of Truth. The way to Truth is through love. All traditions value simple virtues like purity, honesty, charity, courage, contentment and service.

Religious traditions have been major forces in molding human society. They have shaped our moral ideals and values, influenced our social institutions and customs, and also affected our art, architecture, music, dance, etc. At different times in history, they have provided continuity and stability to the existing social order, and at other times, as revolutionary forces, they have effected radical change in societies. Although they have developed distinctively in different cultures, some of their thoughts and practices have acquired global appreciation and acceptance. For example, the practice of meditation and yoga is no more limited to Hindus and Buddhists nor is the service of the poor and the sick confined to Christians. Similarly, the practice of fasting and prayer is not restricted to Muslims. All beings are inter-connected, and whatever is uplifting to one is beneficial to all.

Spiritual life of humankind is nourished by divine revelations. Guru Nanak says that they are like numerous seasons emanating from the Sun. Great religions of the world, each in its own sphere, have sustained the hearts and the minds of the peoples down the ages. They manifest the richness of human religious heritage. There is a taste of the Divine in every tradition. Each of them has a message and individuality; each presents, in its own way, solutions to life's problems. They relate to the diverse ways of humankind and alternative ways of living, none of which is superior or subordinate to the other. God belongs to all and all belong to God. All of them are to be respected. Each religion is a civilizing force in the history of humanity. All of them assert that empirical life is not complete in itself; they look beyond this phenomenal life. Vedic thinking has been to appreciate and understand faith in its various forms and allow them to grow and flourish side by side for the benefit of humanity.

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Syncretism and Interconfessional Theology

Some preliminary notes

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This text intends to support very concisely the theological value of religious syncretism inserting it in the dynamics of revelation. Syncretism is an undeniable portion of the history of agreements and disagreements between divine and human, which was captured in its "as long as" and which precisely for this fact eludes definition and/or full inference. Be God evident, mysterious or simply problematic, there is no other way to accede to him but fragmentarily.

I propose a discussion in the form of short theses trying to suggest to the readers that syncretism is the revelation of a God in act, namely what is happening when we gradually dive into mystery amidst advances and retreats, lights and shade. To imagine it otherwise is just to deny that our meeting with God can be human and historical. The theology of syncretism in tune with black theology and the several theologies that start from the autochthonous experience seems therefore to converge towards a pluralist proposal that however must be examined with due care because not everything is suitable for a society where everybody fits.

There are those who already start to suggest names such as multi-religious theology, interfaith theology, inter or even trans-confessional theology.

Syncretism as pluralism in act

Syncretism is part of the historical relations between religions. Even those who reject it generally does so based on a religion that is also to a certain extent syncretical.

In the beginning of this essay we have talked about the plurality of terms that demand attention from pluralistic theology. But the reality

of syncretism as such and the twofold religious experience continue to be one of the most difficult and controversial points of inter and intra-religious dialogue. Both the Catholic theologians more tuned with the Roman paradigm and those more moved by the CEBs do acknowledge the doctrinal difficulty represented by several Latin-American communities that are immersed in a popular Christianity that does not put aside millenary spiritual traditions.

However it must be pointed out that the syncretic experience of Christianity is not an invention of Latin-American Autochtonous Peoples and Afro-descendants. In the history of peoples an authentic dialectic game happens in which the victorious people first tries to impose itself by eliminating the religion of the defeated (antithesis); then the dominator accepts the most valid or strongest elements from the oppressed (tolerance, peaceful coexistence); in the end a synthesis happens. Christianity, being a universal religion, cannot escape from syncretism once it shouldered the responsibility of containing in principle all the plurality found in humankind.

The present Catholic hierarchy, although with more reserve, is still reluctant concerning the best way to deal with syncretic spirituality, basically for a question of power. However, indifferent to controversies, large segments of the population of our countries continue to worship their gods and to observe some Christian rites fully convinced that such ways of understanding and practicing religion are certainly Catholic. "I am a Spiritualist Roman Apostolic Catholic, thanks be to God", an *Ialorixá* [priestess of a *terreiro*] once told me.

Of course one must distinguish between approaching such interactions from the point of view of the sciences of religion and the place of theology. However the cultural studies attribute a high measure of realism to the theological gauging when they show the lack of consensus toestablish criteria that define a cultural translation or an incorrect hybridism.

The advice of these scholars is to be sensitive when taking into consideration persistent syncretic practices without overlooking the claimant's points of view, namely those who witnessed a certain feature of their system of beliefs to be appropriated by someone else and did not like the adaptation.

There is always a somewhat idealistic solution of proposing to ban for ever from the theological universe the concept of syncretism "for a correct and orthodox syncretism today is called inculturation and it is not burdened by past negative readings like the term syncretism". The issue is to know how far one can go and feel safe with being in a real and orthodox syncretism. Are all the elements of a certain culture or religion fully translatable into another linguistic-dogmatic code?

Not on the face of it. The syncretical variables are precisely the vestige that remains along the way to God's self-communication in history.

Individuals and communities, because they feel this revealing pressure of the divine in their lives and have no time and conditions to silence their answer before they are able to elaborate it fully, carry on taking risks, from one test and trial to another, in order to translate their discoveries and experiences into a language at their disposal.

A separate challenge for fundamental theology would be to verify what, in a certain time, culture or religion, resists more to being translated or inreligionized and also those elements that inexorably are lost in the process of translation or recreation of the Tradition.

Syncretism resembles more an anthropologic constant and should be studied with the best resources of sciences, regardless of our axiological assumptions.

Despite the ecclesial-theological interdictions the issue of bricolage and cultural hybridism went on its way in scientific literature. Some approach it from the evolutionist theory; others proclaim the culturalism and view it as a stage that includes conflicts, compromise and assimilation towards the desired acculturation; others inaugurate a stage of more sociological explanations analyzing the native's capacity of "digesting" in his or her own way the alien novelty and so forth. For sure former myths are being dismissed one by one: the thesis of syncretism as a colonial mask to trick domination; the hypothesis of syncretism as strategy of resistance; the synonymy with juxtaposition, patchwork, bricolage (Levi-Strauss) or incomprehensible agglomerate (Gramsci) because they could not explainthe cases in which religion remains as an integrated entirety. One is more aware about the price paid by some concepts for being chained to certain theories. Or further the reductionism of viewing syncretism in a range of bipolarities such as purity versus mixture, separation versus fusion etc. We can be helped in this intricate matter of terminologies and ideological uses by the synthesis proposed by Sergio Ferretti which includes under the umbrella of syncretism a scale from zero to three in which zero would be the hypothetic separation between two religions that were never in touch; the level one would be the first mixtures, junctions or inter-religious fusions; the level two would include the building of parallelisms or juxtapositions between symbols and religious signs, finally getting to level three of convergence or adaptation.

Therefore the question is not whether we are syncretic or non syncretic – a careful review of good studies available shows unequivocally that everybody is more or less syncretic – but how far on the path we want or can go in this interchange without harming the original Christian inspiration. Regardless of calling this translation an inculturation or

"orthodox syncretism" it is important to learn to detect this process of borrowing when it is being commanded by delimitations outside which one cannot perceive anymore a continuum with the Christian tradition.

Syncretism is above all a practice that precedes our theoretical options and ideological colors.

This book intended just to bring into light some experiences that perhaps are still buried in the religious catacombs. We are not launching any campaign in favor of an extended, general and unlimited syncretization of all religions. First of all, it is about acknowledging a *de facto* syncretism; only later the question about what we could learn *theologically* from this real data will have any meaning. Therefore no one should be forced to take part in such experiences or hide them for being afraid of retaliation. However as mentioned earlier both extremes sometimes are detected in the Christian *membresia* which is torn between practical tolerance in the name of compassion and official rejection.

Actually it is not always simple to explain what drives a process of donation and reception of values and cultural objects, which criteria govern such choices and which subjects lead, if they do lead them, these reconfigurations and rearrangements. The cultural studies appeal to several concepts in order not to reduce the complexity of this trading of symbolic goods. They talk of appropriation or cultural translation to highlight the human agent's role but they prefer hybridism or "*creolization*" to show that often the resulting changes in that culture or religion happened while the involved agents were not aware of it.

On the other hand, it would be naïve to disregard that many of the syncretic practices experienced by our people resulted from the violent way by which Christianity imposed itself in and outside Europe being left to the individuals some biased, camouflaged and fragmented habits of their traditions. Therefore today's movements to retake these ancestral traditions that avoid "paying toll" to Christian/Catholic rituals are auspicious.

In a way they restore the autochthonous and transplanted traditions on the same level of the Christian heritage with the same right of existence and expression. But just the same, the rejection of syncretism implies a repudiation of Catholicism. For the leadership of the Afro-Brazilian religions for instance it is enough that the initiates know that Orixas and Catholic saints are different energies.

Concerning the agents of the Black Ministry (APNs), most of them Catholic, who intend to rescue black traditions and reaffirm their cultural identity, the issue takes a new color. Many of them arrived at the threshold of twofold religious experience, or an experience irradiated in distinct expressions as result of previous ethic-ideological option. And

they have to face the serious question about the safe boundaries of this Christian trip in search of rescuing the authentic African roots. The issue is the same anywhere: can I be Aymara and a Christian, Indian and a follower of the Gospel, Chinese and take part in the Sunday Mass, Bantu and believe in resurrection?

Once it is peacefully accepted that such connections have already been made in practice, we can go forward to the next issue: these factual circumstances, not artificially created, have also something to teach us not only from the standpoint of pastoral theology but also religious theologies as such.

The twofold religious experience is one possible natural development of the inter-religious dialogue having the syncretism on the threshold.

If the term is not unanimous at least there are marked advancements as to acceptance or tolerance of the reality represented by the expression.

At the bottom of this new disposition are for instance the Second Vatican Council decisions about ecumenism and dialogue with other religions. An exemplary case was that of Dom Boaventura Kloppenburg. Until the eve of the Council, his writings contained an unconcealable apologetic flavor against Spiritualists and Umbandists. "It was a syncretism" he later will admit "that seemed to me inacceptable from the point of view of an authentic Christian life". Years later, inspired by the Council and referring to the Message *Africae Terrarum* by Paul VI, he affirms:

> When an African becomes Christian, he does not disown himself but retakes his ancient values of tradition in spirit and truth. But we, for being European, Westerners, from the Latin Church (...) incapable of imagining a sacred dance at drumbeat, we wanted the African to give up being African just because he lived next to us (...) It was the total and proud ethnocentrism of the Europeans and the Church that came from Europe. But when the Black became free (...) he went back to his "*terreiro*." the drum, 'the rhythm of his origin and myths of his language. From deeply within his being (...) arose the old religious tradition of Black Africa..."

Apart from eventual inaccuracies in the terms related to the Afro universe, Kloppenburg's testimonial influenced the next decades as we saw when explaining the "twofold experience" of priest François de L' Espinay who was Xango's priest at the *Ile Axe Opo Aganju* in Salvador, Bahia. Or even in more disturbing experiences like that of José Carlos de Lima who is a priest and janitor-of-the-saint of the temple of the *Spiritualist Apostolic Catholic Community of Our Lord of Bonfim* in São Paulo.

Lima's project is extremely enlightening. He represents an important movement of some significant sections of Latin-American population which is common also in Africa: anchored in his religion and culture of origin – or on its remaining deeper traces – they go to meet Christianity in order to extract from it everything that can enrich their own cradle experience. They give no importance at all to our injured western pride.

They imagine that, if there is something good and true in Christian tradition, they have the right to enjoy it too in their own way.

Even the neo-esoteric course of some communities that search for UFOs is a kind of twofold experience in the boundary between scientific logics and magical thinking. These spiritualized ufologists, who are refractory to the traditional religious discourse and probably contributed to increase the percentage of "no religion" in the last official census in Brazil, find support in a series of science education works; they trust the testimonial of a leader who was supposedly abducted by extraterrestrial beings who were considerably more advanced philosophically and technologically and they regurgitate these data in the form of a *cryptic-religion* with utopian-socialist features.

A hybrid experience can very well point to the divine design of self-communication. Theology should consider it within the revelation process.

Years ago, although ignoring the syncretic exploits by Father Lima, His Holiness Pope Paul II, during a visit *ad limina* by some Brazilian prelates, highlighted in his discourse popular religiosity as an important issue and religious syncretism as one of the main threats. In the Holy Father's opinion:

> The Catholic Church is concerned with these worships but considers pernicious the actual relativism of a common practice of both or a mixture between them as if they both had the same importance and thus jeopardizing the identity of the Catholic faith. The Church feels under the obligation of stating that the syncretism is pernicious when it hampers the truth of the Christian rite and the expression of faith in detriment of an authentic evangelization.

First of all it must be said that from the practice of rituals belonging to different traditions by the same individual one cannot automatically infer that those have identical value or importance for the cultist. Secondly, and if I am interpreting correctly the pontific message, perhaps there is here an opportunity for dialogue in order to infer that if syncretism does not hamper the truth of the rite etc then it will be welcome. After all, as it was very well known by the predecessor of Benedict XVI, the truth of the rite and the expression of faith do not appear all of a sudden and an authentic evangelization implies a very long term process of

incarnation of the evangelical spirit in the life of people and communities. Moreover the Pope seemed to recognize that the only collection of criteria that people have to judge whether the Gospel is in fact "good news" is its own autochthonous culture and therefore cannot automatically put it aside to become "evangelical".

The Brazilian prelates could have informed the bishop of Rome on that occasion or in any other that the people of *Candomble* can only say "yes" to Jesus when compared to *Oxala* and the other *Orixas* – and one only compares if one recognizes the pertinence of the two terms of comparison. The bishops could also have replied that instead of putting aside Christianity to remain with just their protecting entities, the preferred people-of-saint – who knows, in a proof of gratuitous love – to continue with the "*Orixa*" Jesus respecting the Catholic prayers. Come what may, the Afro-popular tolerance is certainly one of those pleasant surprises of how God reveals himself always blowing unexpectedly where he wishes to.

On several occasions and already many years ago the developments involved in the practice and example of important individuals such as L' Espinay and Simba have challenged faith, spirituality and the way of doing theology for many people. The conclusions to which gradually one reaches are not comfortable for the Church-institution and perhaps do not even please most Catholics – including those who keep a twofold experience or still follow the "religious flow" but do not want to admit it reflectively.

It is even easy to recover syncretism as a sociological condition for every religion; after all none of them exists as cultural fact independently of several traditions from which it derived. But what shall we infer theologically from the option of a Catholic priest who has never understood that it was necessary to apostatize his original faith in order to embrace the spirituality derived from the *Orixas*? Or what can we deduce from the testimonial of a janitor-of-saint who decides to study philosophy and Christian theology in order to enrich his mediumistic experience of Afro-Kardecist basis?

And how can we evaluate the appropriation of the character Jesus of Nazareth by spiritualized ufologists who guarantee they have decoded empirically (through close encounters of the third kind) and scientifically the soteriological meaning of the universe?

In the first case, the Catholic priest who goes to *Candomble* (or comes back if he is in a process of reassuming his ethnic-cultural roots) is fully reasonable to admit a move of sincere Christian tolerance concerning other spiritual traditions without this implying any readjustment to Christian dogmatics. An ethical-affective imperative can support similar

experiences or a sincere desire of knowing better the daily life of the mission's addressees. The theology of liberation, among others, gave occasion to this kind of sympathetic engagement. However, individuals involved in the process can in fact experience some kind of interior change once they are exposed to a personal experience situated on the junction of spiritual slopes that are not coinciding and even contradictory in more than one aspect. At this point I follow Torres Queiruga's considerations when he detects the real difficulties to experience more than one "faith" if this faith "is experienced as a radical and integral way to relate to the Divine and to organize one's entire life based on it." Taking into account the short term of one's life compared with the extremely long processes of cultural interpenetration. what one can glimpse in these personal experiences is not that they are two faiths deeply and coherently experienced, with no confusion, mixture or separation, but sincere and legitimate inreligionations of certain elements found in someone else's treasure. Even in the case of censorship or condemnation of some aspect left out in another's well, one should admit that we might not understand deeply the newly adopted religion. The second case, the son or father-of-saint who decides to be a seminarist and a Catholic priest, should not give rise to troubles for a sensible pastoral theology. In these times of decadence of the Catholic hegemony, it is even flattering that adepts of other religions are interested in knowing Christianity better, eventually borrowing some of its notions and rites. It is not necessary to appeal to a pluralistic theological view to see the positive signs, provided that one has common sense and takes into account not only from the point of view of cultural interactions in the present world but also the biblical features of the divine revelation, we are talking about long term processes.

Moreover, apart from the discomfort that initiatives like that of Father Simba can generate (besides the present legal impossibility in democratic societies of prohibiting such translations), we must admit that Christianity has been throughout centuries a recognized expert in acting in this way when clashing with other religions. We have already seen, this Christian ability has lately been called inculturation or, more recently, inreligionation. When members of another religion do the same to us, of course we can attribute a different name to this practice, but we would neither change its consistency nor interfere in its outcome.

The third example of inreligionation mentioned by us (UFO seekers) seems to be of a different kind, once their neo-esoteric adepts do not view themselves as a religion. Perhaps, at the most, they accept for the group some tenor of spirituality. Were they European they could find themselves mirrored in Marià Corbí's proposal of a "lay spirituality:" no beliefs, no religion, and no gods. However, their anthropologic faith

brings in an inchoative way some absolute values that the West got used to seeing embodied in the symbol-person of Jesus Christ. Thus although the movement flirts with Buddhist compassion, admitting the postulate of reincarnation, yearning for an ideal alternative world with a socialist bias, declares itself open to dialogue with any and all religions and supports scientific research as the only method of knowledge, it is true that the fascination exerted by the Jewish-Christian tradition is evident not only in Carlos Wells (the founder of the ufologist group Projeto Amar, *Love Project*) but also in most of its participants. Its literal reading of long excerpts of the Bible as "proof" or "clue" of ancient and regular visits of aliens to our ancestors is very significant in these hypermodern times in which it sounds absurd to believe in the Trinity but seems reasonable to believe in elves or the newspaper horoscope. Perhaps we have here an example of a crossroads at which everybody in this beginning of the century is between the end of ideologies and the emergence of sensologies, as M. Perniola says. On one hand, we have faith as subjective belief and an element of social cohesion; on the other hand an odd solidarity between credulity and nihilism, Thus, it is not important whether one believes in any nonsense or does not believe at all. The new beginning of hybrid movements like the *Projeto Amar* may point to a future and original reconfiguration of what we normally view as religion, requiring Christianity to dig out in its own well the experiential dimension a long time ago subdued by dogmatic too rigid contents and structures of power that recall the Ancient Regime.

The three cases presented are each in its own way promoters of rearrangements in the Christian self-comprehension. To know who holds the right or authority to lead these inevitable processes of donation and reception of signs (significant conductors of meanings) depends clearly on the perspective or institution from which we regard them. Father Simba's inreligionized *Candomble* will be somewhat different from the Christianity that inspired him and it should not be forcedly Christianized. Its spirituality becomes modified and enriched by the Christian components that it will adopt. On the other hand one can expect that something similar happens to the inreligionized Christianity in India, Africa and Latin-American countries. Without losing its axis-faith the Christian message is hybridized in the metaphors that it learns from other religions although it does not give up its metonymic power.

Something less risky is impossible because on one hand the missionary character of taking the Good News is something that cannot be waived by a Christian and on the other "all cultures are today borderline cultures" (Nestor Canclini), being the history of all "the history of a cultural borrowing" (Edward Said). Therefore we do not have any other available area to pitch our tents.

The hybrid nature of religious experiences from interfaith theology

The multiple experiences and the religious transit cannot be ignored in this planet increasingly globalized and "entangled" (web). The interfaith thought seems to be the most adequate kind of research and reflection to face the question raised by such experiences. Because the theology of syncretism is exactly about this: Is it possible that an individual or a social group experience simultaneously more than one faith? Or further: Does the same faith support distinct realizations (*syncretical faith*)?

The traditional twofold answer is well known. In the name of the principle of non-contradiction we have always known how to answer that there is intellectual deficiency when one chooses simultaneously systems of faith (noetic) that are clearly distinct. But, it is also possible to admit with no great commotion for the Western great traditions that when one reaches a certain level of spiritual deepness, one is able to relativize conceptual disputes in favor of ethical or just purely mystical divinations. The examples herein reported about the priest, François L' Espinay, among the Nagos in Bahia and the twofold experiences of Christian pastoral agents fit in this ethical and/or mystical boundary. In favor of Father Simba's church-*terreiro* perhaps mitigating circumstances can be pleaded in an attempt to read positively the Catholic orthodoxy, an inverted movement of the first answer, namely to seek to overcome some aporias of the mediunic traditions by virtue of the closeness of the dogmatic-conceptual language of Christianity.

But what we are asking here is nothing of the sort. We talked about a conscious spiritual option which intends to support itself with conceptual notions that are irreducible to each other or to follow liturgical rituals that lead to ethical options that are not equivalent. Father Espinay and Father Simba could individually have this awareness although neither, as far as I know, has defended this "third way." Come what may, in order to describe any less radical phenomenon we have already relied on words much more well-behaved like ecumenism, inter-religious dialogue, the already orthodox inculturation and the newcomer inreligionation.

Is or could the theology of religious syncretism lead to a inter- (trans-) confessional theology (interfaith theology)?

When one talks about theology of syncretism it is possible to understand this genitive as a nominal complement or an adnominal adjunct. In the first case it is a formally theological discourse whose purpose is to build value judgments about the syncretic phenomena in the light of certain hermeneutic mediation. Monotheistic religions founded on the belief

that the absolute mystery communicates with human relativity located in time and space will end up by having to consider theologically eventual benefits and limits of an hybrid spirituality. But the genitive supports another meaning – chronologically prior, by the way, to that explained in the paragraph above. It consists of recognizing an actual syncretism and to study its internal logics. One expects that the sciences of religion can identify the theology or theologies underlying the phenomena of cultural and religious hybridism. This preliminary concern will exempt the theologian from the naïve apology of long ago syncretic practices that very often resulted from the violence with which Christianity and/or Islamism were imposed on the autochthonous peoples. Under such circumstances people remained with just the biased and fragmentary practices of their original traditions.

Up to now however we would not be within the scope of an interfaith reflection as such. A certain theology of syncretism may even judge more or less inclusively the results achieved by the sciences of religion and not be aroused or modified by them. It can even reject them as incompatible with the Christian faith. But what will make the difference is the practice. And this has been starting a new way with difficulty: Christian leaders of the Black movement choose to recover their ancestral identity and ask themselves to what extent it is convenient to advance in search of their authentic African roots. The same thing is happening at the crossroads of the most different religions when we meet Zen-Catholics, Christian Aymaras, Indians that follow the Gospel, Chinese initiated in Candomble, Bantus who believe in resurrection, Jews who recite the Koran.

In order to build a coherent theology of syncretism it is necessary to take seriously the data provided by the sciences of religion namely that such intercultural connections are daily experiences and not fanciful inventions of a theologian. The new fact will be the eventual conclusion that the traditional Christian categories are not anymore up to what will be found out in the whirling made by the meeting of different seas of spirituality.

Interfaith theology learns from syncretism that there are no stages towards this or that total religion because there is no faith or spirituality that exhausts the Meaning of Life.

A hybrid experience may be an indication of the divine design to self-communicate. Between "talk to us" and be misunderstood or "to keep silent", feeling one's way, several religions unanimously state that the Deity chose to tell us something despite the risk. Thus syncretism could become a welcome therapy for certain dogmatist scleroses of the monotheist religions. It renders immediately evident where the basic theologi-

cal problem of these religions is: God's revelation contains ambiguities, mistakes and contradictions that are inevitable thanks to our human way of acceding the truth. But, at the same time, as taught to us by the *Dei Verbum*, the whole path is permeated by the safe and truthful divine pedagogy.

Well then, how can we read theologically the syncretic experiences? Theology can make an effort to imagine a situation *between-the-faiths* or a common boundary still free of institutional religious limits. But what kind of faith is available on this borderland? I wrote this book assuming at all times an operative category that perhaps helps to understand what is happening to us and around us. I call it *syncretic faith*, inspired by the dyad *faith-ideology* proposed by J. L. Segundo and translated by Hermilo Pretto as political faith. The scope of the dyad in its three versions is to articulate two distinct forces within the same experience of faith/option of life which may also be complementary: on one hand something of absoluteness of the fundamental values that guides choices apparently contradictory of religious significants (faith dimension); on the other hand the relativity of the results effectively achieved (ideological-syncretic dimension).

Basically and regardless of the term chosen by the reader, it is necessary to identify how a faith materializes or is translated once there is no faith in a pure state; it displays itself only through praxis. Here I view as practically synonyms the terms syncretic, historical, materialized and translated. What I try to avoid mostly is to merely call this process inculturation because there is a difference in the course, that is, the standpoint from which one observes people's religious creativity in action. When I say *syncretic faith* I intend to stress the divine self-communication already active in several cultural traditions before, against or even despite a contact with Christian communities supporting in its discreet compassion the free choices and selections (some still in the juxtaposition stage) that each individual or social group has been doing. To think that people first have to parenthesize their life story, culture and religion and only then, in some kind of "state of emergency" (whatever is that!) get into authentic communication with the true God is, on one hand, to discredit the free and loving divine decision of coming to us at all costs, and on the other hand it means to yield to what long ago was already identified as Pelagianism: the "extravagance" of intending to achieve full salvation in the solitude of one's own powers without any support from divine grace.

As said almost poetically by my dear friend Torres Queiruga, "the history of revelation consists of precisely this: God gradually achieving that this opaque and impotent human spirit, by means of the infinite,

starts to grasp his presence and be moved by his manifestation, thus starting a dialogue with his word of love and accepting the saving power of his grace." The result of this progressive discovery of divine love in us cannot be contained in just one religious or philosophical jurisdiction. The Christian tradition as such does intuit this in several moments like when it remembers the Lord's words: "In my Father's home many can live".

No va para ningún lado quien no sabe donde está

[Who does not know where he is, is going nowhere]

In his recent book *The future of Christology* Roger Haight risks to anticipate the course that the development of this discipline may take by appealing to three metaphors. The first is spatial: "the scientific conception of the origin of the universe" allows us "to interpret the continuous creation by God (...) as a divine presence and creative power within the process as such," leading us "to think of a theocentric referential picture distinct from the Christocentric framework." The second image is temporal: history and the hard sciences are forcing us to a procedural comprehension of reality that increasingly makes evident that the aliens of long ago are today "members of my human community in a new, real and practical way;" therefore to plead Christianity as the only true religion would be in E. Schillebeeckx's words "a virtual declaration of war to all other religions." Thus one can expect that *a priori* ideas of superiority gradually give place to an *a priori* "admission" of what God is doing in other religions as being more or less equivalent in their contexts to what God did in and through Jesus." The third dynamic proposed by Haight considers that new information and experiences are constantly being incorporated by us and they expand our horizons and make us constantly revise our stances concerning any matter. The gradual admission of pluralism is one of these cases and it is making people read other religions in a positive way insofar they recognize "God as Spirit acting in his adepts" and conclude that "plurality of religions provides 'more' revelation of God than just one particular religion could do."

Haight's intention is to show, by means of these three suggestions, the possibility of a future Christology stating the formal divinity of Jesus Christ without undermining the integrity of his humanity. This will be (it is already being) done thanks to a context increasingly more inter-religious in which we will have to live and are already living, and that will force us (it already does) to explain who is Jesus starting almost automatically the explanation with a narrative about the "historical person" of Jesus of Nazareth. On the other hand we should be sincerely open to what other religious experiences can teach us (although they do not always insist on it like in the case of the African matrix traditions) so that perhaps

it will lead us one day to conclude that "we, Christian persons, through Jesus—and we will not need to renounce this Jesus—came to know what God in doing in the whole world through many religions." This may take us to a not exclusive realistic ratification of Jesus' divinity. In other words although the Divine "acts in Jesus in a distinctive and historically unique way" "he can also be present and acting in other historical symbols of God that are equally singular."

What R. Haight is suggesting is exactly the following: that perhaps in the future a really orthodox Christology will be able to affirm that Jesus is divine in such way that it does not exclude the divinity of mediators that came from other spiritual traditions. Moreover: a future pluralistic consciousness will be able to judge "that to restrict divinity to Jesus means to be unfaithful to God's revelation mediated by him."

Torres Queiruga halts well before Haight and admits "the self-comprehension of Christianity as *definitive climax* of God's revelation in history." But previously he paved the way for at least three new categories flexible enough to enable the thought to move on the orthodox limits towards the pluralistic direction. He proposes the pertinence of an "asymmetrical pluralism" that is prepared for the different without degrading it because even though revelation is a historical process, it is not true that when one sees something everybody is seeing everything in the same way and clearness. Then invoking realism due to the new times of intense biblical research and growing inter-religious contact, Queiruga introduces the "Jesuanic theocentrism" as guarantee of the delicate balance between God's centrality and the unique and non-renounceable role of the Nazarene's historical character – which basically is concentrated in his proposal of God as unlimited Love and unconditional forgiveness. The third category that I have adopted throughout this book is the "inreligionation" which is undoubtedly an evident advance in respect to its cousin "inculturation."

Thus Queiruga is able to see with favor an "ecumenism *in fieri*" that already makes "the Christian institutions [be] really and truly present [like in the case of Father Simba's hybrid community] in other religions in the same way that these [ancestral practices by the ancient "barbarian", rituals encysted in the popular Catholicism] are present in Christian religion." On the other hand, I think that the direction glimpsed by Haight for the next Christological developments already represent the emergence of a new platform for theological discourse – precisely *interfaith theology*.

It derives from the results of the contemporaneous Christian theology which rediscovered the divine revelation as an historical process with stages that have their own meaning (*Dei Verbum* 15: the divine pedagogy), but are not definitive. In this process the biblical people (authors and readers' communities) tried always to modulate in human language

the blow and the resonances of the divine mystery. Hence results the strength and the weakness of the Christian threshold: This depends intrinsically on an undeceived experience that only has meaning if the individual does it on his or her own. And there is no guarantee that the result should necessarily be configured as a clearly Christian community (at least according to the standards to describe it nowadays). Even if it were, this would not eliminate the inevitable mishaps of a real translation of this meeting, that is, of our daily spirituality.

Such ambivalence is not in itself a defect; we were made as such. Therefore the syncretical experiences are also variations of an experience of love. And if the ways by which people, groping like the blind, were arriving and continue to come to their insights is part of the revelation, syncretism can only be the history of revelation in act because it consists in the real path of divine pedagogy amidst popular religious inventions.

Which theology would be able to translate conceptually and adequately an experience as such? No need to answer quickly for we might end up by confusing the eclectic steamroller of "everything is suitable" with the universal and pluralist intuition that "everybody fits in." At this stage it can be a trump card to recognize that an inter- or trans-confessional theology would have been unthinkable if Western thought had not given those prior steps. The question and the difficulties of an interfaith theology derive from the Trinitarian monotheistic torrent that generated them.

I think that this last remark seals off the limit beyond which we could not go without vulgarizing the search as such. The theological interfaith project marks a crossroads. It does not seem epistemologically difficult to go forward on the proposal of a global ethics (H. Küng) or *ethos* (L. Boff) and it will always be nice to go toward a mystic path that overcomes the theo-*logical* boundaries (R. Panikkar). It is also easy to discard the pastiches of religious pluralism like the blockbusters of the Matrix movie trilogy. But the old notion of truth still holds us back on this side.

A self-confessed interfaith author like J. M. Sahajanada proposes that "truth cannot be defined because every definition of truth is like a tomb and only the dead are put into tombs." To understand this is to go forward on the wisdom paths because "wisdom is born from a virginal mind in which the power of knowledge is silenced." It is evident that to accept such assertions we have to assume with H. C. Askani that the claim of truth has a different meaning in philosophy from that in religion. In the first "the claim implies and demands confrontation and dialogue between philosophies. In religion however there is a way of feeling obliged and to be committed that is so strong, extreme and unique that every comparison would be therefore a deep *indiscretion*."

Nevertheless we are here doing theology, that is, elaborating a reflection or speculation about ultimate Reality that starts from the data provided by a certain spiritual tradition – generally authorized by a coherent collection of writings – that might or not come to the adoration of the stated Reality. On the other hand the efficient scientific language is an adequate language to penetrate blockages that are merely ideological or axiological. Unable to tell us the whole truth, it can expose alleged truths and overcome deadlocks that the religious and dogmatic visors cannot unravel without anathemas or a blood bath.

What will happen in the next decades can mean a new alliance between religion and sciences, theology and sciences of religion. Facts such as the syncretic spiritual experiences are literally breaking the floodgates and rendering the boundaries porous where a new opportunity to reeducate ourselves as human beings is arising.

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Marks of an Inter-Religious Mysticism

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Going back to its etymology, the word mysticism comes from *myein*: which means to close the eyes or the lips. A "mystic" is a person who lives the experience of a mystery; mystic is the person who is the subject of an experience which has Mystery as its object. From the beginning the word *mystikós* has been used as an adjective and it is only since the 17th century that it has become accepted as a substantive.[1] It's from then on that we begin to speak of mystical language as a unique new language. In Christian usage, mysticism was used to designate a different way of coming to know God, a way different from common knowing, a way marked by the force of a Presence beyond our capacity of expressing. Down through history different definitions have been given to this experience: Thomas Aquinas called it *cognitio Dei experimentalis* "experiential knowledge of God;" Angelus Silesius spoke about it as the "interior union of God with the soul;" for John of the Cross it was "a loving listening to God" and for Jacques Maritain "a joyful experience of the Absolute."

It's worthwhile pointing out the force involved in two essential terms implied in this extraordinary direct or immediate access to Mystery and Reality: these words are "experience" and "presence." In his sermons based on the biblical Song of Songs, Bernard of Clairvaux points out that it is by means of the book of "experience" that we can reach the mystery of God. From his point of view it is through "experience" that human intelligence is able to delve into the deepest fields of understanding.[2]

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[1] Michel de CERTEAU, *"Mystique" au XVII siècle. Le problème du langage "mystique"*. In: Vários. L´homme devant Dieu. Mélanges offerts au Père Henri de Lubac, Paris: Aubier, 1964, v. II, pp. 267-291.

[2] Bernardo di CHIARAVALLE. *Sermoni sul Cantico dei Cantici*. v. 1. Roma: Edizioni Vivere in, 1996, pp. 53 e 230 (sermões III,I,1 e XX,I,2).

Mystics of different religious traditions give us important testimony about the force of this experience. The French intellectual Simone Weil, in an autobiographical letter, describes the sharp experience of God that she experienced in Solemes in the year 1938: "Christ himself came down and possessed me."[3] Likewise the Nicaraguan mystic Ernesto Cardenal wrote: "You also swiftly entered into me while my defenseless soul was seeking to hide its shame."[4] We can also mention the "experience of God" found in the beautiful history of Theresa of Avila:

"Sometimes it happened to me, as I have said, although it was over briefly, the beginning of what I will speak now: it happened to me in this fantasy that I placed myself next to Christ, as I have said, and even at times reading, unexpectedly there came upon me the feeling that I was in no way able to doubt that the presence of God was within me and I completely wrapped up in Him. This was not as it were in a vision; I believe they call it theological mysticism. The soul is, as it were, suspended so that everything seems to be outside of oneself: the will loves, the memory seems to be almost lost, the understanding seems not to function but is not lost; rather as I say, it does not function but instead seems as though it becomes frightened by the amount it does understand since God wants it understood that nothing should be understood about the way His Majesty is represented."[5]

Mystics of all traditions very clearly recognize that the abysmally inaccessible mystery in its totality pierces through and goes beyond the experience. Despite efforts to express the experience, the tongue is poor and deficient in translating the richness that has been experienced. What often happens is that mystics have to "mangle words" and "murder the language" in order to describe even in a limited manner, the force of an illuminating presence.

Without denying the singularity and specific weight which distinguish the different religious traditions, we must recognize the presence of "great similarities and analogies in religious experience."[6] They are resemblances that do not annul differences but rather reserve space for an experience which is always unique. Likewise, in the realm of spiritual depth it is always necessary to share with the other. This is the reason

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3 Simone WEIL. *Attente de Dieu*. Paris: Fayard, 1966, p. 45.

4 Ernesto CARDENAL. *Telescopio en la noche oscura*. Madrid: Trotta, 1993, p. 67.

5 Teresa de JESUS. *Livro da vida* 10,1. In: Obras completas. São Paulo: Loyola, 1995, p. 70.

6 Thomas MERTON. *O diário da Ásia*. Belo Horizonte: Vega, 1978, p. 245.

for the great difficulty in judging the spiritual experiences of others, so as not to relativize or degrade them as inferior. It's extremely complicated attempting to interpret a certain religious or mystical experience without being in syntonic perfection with it. One must use tremendous spiritual delicacy to be able to approach a distinct religious experience. This holds good also for judging different rituals. These always make reference to a "pristine experience" and its re-actualization. They are rituals that do not transmit simply knowledge but rather and above all an experience. As Amaladoss correctly noted, "anyone who has not had the experience and is now capturing the tradition from outside, very possibly will not be able to reach an authentic interpretation of it."[7]

Simone Weil was strongly questioned by certain Catholic theologians for having affirmed that "mystics of almost all traditions are almost in identical accord."[8] Opposing the author and also the defenders of a "philosophy for all times," who are trying to give support to "the transcendental unity of religions" the theologian Henri de Lubac tried to give strength to the idea of "the qualitative difference that separates other religious traditions from the Christian tradition."[9] In his classical work on Catholicism, De Lubac admits that, even outside Christianity, humanity has - "as exceptions" - been able to reach spiritual heights. Nevertheless, by the force of his "theology of consummation," he brings into question the love of the Buddhists and the mysticism of the Hindus. In his vision, the most beautiful and powerful human efforts have to be "fertilized by Christianity in order to produce fruits for eternity."[10]

It's impossible to deny the differences among religious traditions, as likewise the peculiarities that distinguish the experience and the interpretation of the Mystery developed by mystics of the different religions. Therefore it's necessary to recover the "hidden equivalences" and underline the "profound similarities" that join in brotherhood the mystics on their path searching for Reality. To recognize differences does not mean

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7 Michael AMALADOSS. *Pela estrada da vida. Prática do diálogo inter-religioso*. São Paulo: Paulinas, 1996, p. 30 (e também pp. 87-88).

8 Simone WEIL. *Lettre à un religieux*. Paris: Gallimard, 1951, p. 53.

9 Henri de LUBAC. *Prefazione*. In: André RAVIER (Ed). *La mistica e le mistiche*. Milano: San Paolo, 1996, p. 22.

10 Henri de LUBAC, *Catholicisme. Les aspects sociaux du dogme*, Cerf, Paris 1947, p. 186. In the same line of reflection, the Benedictine theologian Anselm Stolz (1900-1942), without having a means to compare Christian mysticism with the others, affirms that an authentic mystic could come to fruit only in the Roman Catholic Church.: A. STOLTZ, *Teologia della mistica*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1940.

to belittle the "intense confraternity" underlying these deep personal experiences. This is the great challenge that animates those who believe that mysticism is alike and that there is the possibility of an inter-religious mysticism or even a mysticism that goes beyond religions.

1. Mysticism as an experience of Reality

"Mysticism as an experience of Reality" comes up as highly helpful in the search for a positive path to reach an understanding of an inter-religious mysticism or concept of Reality. The author who appears here as a light for reflection is Raimon Panikkar, the Catalonian theologian and mystic who has contributed a lot to the development of an enriching debate in the inter-religious field. In a work of his published in 2005, Panikkar notes that mysticism is not a specialization but rather an "anthropological dimension" that accompanies a person during all his existential trajectory.[11] The human being is potentially empowered to discover the Mystery that inhabits reality and then to irradiate this experience to others just as waves wash up on the shore of a lake. Mysticism describes this as "the experience of the ultimate reality", as "the complete experience of reality."[12] The category "reality" (or "Reality") is chosen because of its greater neutrality and for its macro-ecumenical potential. Reality is the symbol chosen to translate the All, *(to holon)*. In this way mystical experience is an integral experience which makes possible access to integral reality which can be designated in different forms: God, All, Nothing, Being, etc. We're not talking about something superficial or merely passing but rather an in-depth insertion into the very interiority of the object experimented. And all this does not mean accepting pantheism since mystical experience barely touches reality on the edge and then only contingently. The Mystery keeps on burning. Divinity envelopes all reality but passes through it infinitely.

Because of the influence of the Christian Orthodox tradition, and also of the Indian *advaita* spirituality, Panikkar has recourse to the "cosmo-theo-andric intuition" in order to express the three dimensions of reality: divine, human and cosmic. These are three dimensions that interpenetrate each other and reveal the fundamental enigma of the relation.[13] This *advaita* (aduality) vision favors a perception of reality which supersedes both monism and dualism and gives birth to a harmony of relation

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[11] Raimon PANIKKAR. *L´esperienza della vita. La mistica*. Milano: Jaca Book, 2005, p. 16.

[12] Ibidem, pp. 58 e 175.

[13] Raimon PANIKKAR. *Entre Dieu et le cosmos*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1998, pp. 131-136.

and integration of the transcendent with the immanent. For Panikkar, "the *advaita* intuition does not consist in affirming the unity nor negating the duality, but rather precisely by means of vision that transcends intellection and recognizes the absence of duality in the base of a reality which in itself lacks duality."[14] The very structure of reality is dialogic and harmonic. The human being participates in an "adventure of reality", which involves the transcendent and the immanent, which is at the same time divine, human and material.

The great challenge consists in awakening this reality, catching the diaphanous state of the other world that permeates this world, picking up the little signals and lights which shine forth from the very interior of things. It's necessary to tune the ear to present time, undertake a "poetical listening" to the entire cosmos. The essence of the gift of contemplation, as Thomas Merton points out, is to awaken the "infinite Reality that exists within everything that is real."[15] It's an experience that involves permanent tranquility and attention. It's not something that is limited to a few virtuous people, but rather it's open to everyone who is disposed to pay attention to the occasion with sensibility and transparency. From his rich experience with spiritual direction of the Trappist novices at Gethsemane (USA) Thomas Merton points out the intimate relation between contemplative and active life. For him, the exercise of the contemplative life was nothing complicated, but rather a gift for living simply, for feeling life flowing, for advancing into the depths of the great mystery that lives in time. In his reflections for the novices, he said that contemplative life "was simply to live like a fish in water."[16]

In his attentive observation of the dawn, Merton managed to distinguish "a virginal point" between darkness and light which expresses the ineffable secret of the encompassing presence of the mystery. In the contemplation of night, a bit before light peopled the dawn, while the birds were still initiating their first songs and "creation in its innocence solicited permission to "exist" again," the Trappist mystic discovered the presence of that "soft, blind point" which lives in the very center of being and which he identified as the presence of God's pure glory."[17] What is meant

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[14] Raimon PANIKKAR. *Il dharma dell´induismo. Una spiritualità che parla ao cuore dell´Occidente*. Milano: BUR, 2006, p. 171.

[15] Thomas MERTON. *Novas sementes de contemplação*. 2 ed. Rio de Janeiro: Fissus, 2001, p. 10.

[16] Ernesto CARDENAL. *Vida perdida. Memórias* 1. Madrid: Trotta, 2005, pp. 144 e 204.

[17] Thomas MERTON. *Reflexões de um espectador culpado*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1970, pp. 151-152 e 183.

is the irreducible secret center of the heart. For Merton, that point of simplicity, of inexpressible innocence reveals the sacredness of the self-conscience , liberty and peace. It's a point of unveiling the "immense open secret which lies there for everybody, which is completely gratuitous and to which nobody pays any attention."[18] The inspiration of this image of the "virgin point" *(point-vierge)* comes from the influence of the French oriental expert Louis Massignon, deeply learned in sufi mysticism. In the mystic psychology of Islam, and especially in the thought of al-Hallaj, the "primordial luminous point" suggests the profound mysticism of the knowledge of "Reality" (al-Haqq). This point represents the "neurological center of the sphere of *tawhid* (unity)."[19] In the point of view of Hallaj, the organic principle of everything, which expresses the nucleus of the original light, is that luminous point *(nuqta)*. It is interesting to know that some Muslim teachers learned in the Koran, place their concentration on the importance of the diacritical point that marks the letter *ba* in Arabic. The book of the Koran begins with the letter b: *Basmala* ("In the name of Allah"). The sufi teachers hold as the base for esoteric symbolism that the contents of the entire Koran are concentrated in that diacritical point of the b found at the beginning of *Basmala*.

2. All names of The Reality

In one of his beautiful homilies on the Song of Song, Gregory of Nissa, one of the three great Capadotians of the IV century, speaks about water which hides beneath the spring. If someone approaches a spring he is astounded at the abundance of water that constantly gushes up. But there is no access to "all the water", which mysteriously remains hidden in the bosom of the earth. And this water that never ceases to flow, permanently stirs the desire of the thirsty person.[20] Reality is like the "spring of the source" in its ceaseless movement of generosity and gratuity.

Just as "all the water" of the spring cannot be seen, likewise Reality always remains hidden. The reason for choosing the word Reality to express the Ultimate Mystery, is due to his use of language of certain religious traditions. In the Jewish-Christian tradition God is spoken of "He Who is" (Ex 3,14). The Sanskrit language of the Hindu tradition uses

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[18] Patrick HART & Jonathan MONTALDO (Eds). *Merton na intimidade*. Rio de Janeiro: Fissus, 2001, p. 179.

[19] Sthéphane RUSPOLI. *Le message de Hallâj l´expatrié*. Paris: Cerf, 2005, p. 264.

[20] Gregório de NISSA. *Omelie sul Cantico dei Cantici*. Roma: Città Nuova, 1996, pp. 225-226 (Omelia XI).

the expression sat; in Arabic *al Haqq*. These are corresponding expressions that despite imprecise and frail human language try to translate the greatest mystery that has no name. The Buddhist tradition opts for "God's Silence," which absolutely does not mean atheism. The negation serves as a "sign of the transcendence." Velasco has pointed out that "God's Silence" practiced by Buddha "is the most radical form of preserving the mysterious condition of the ultimate, the supreme which is the focus of all religion.[21]

The different names that are attributed to God or the Major Mystery do not apply to his essence which remain untouchable. The names always imply a state of determination and boundary. The "Spiritual Presence" which breaks through into all history becomes fragmentary when showing itself in time and space. The names or attributes of God are "miserable leftovers" that still give off "perfume of the divine nature;"[22] they are an isthmus *barzakh* that serves as a bridge between the essence of the mystery and the cosmos. Mystics of different traditions indicate that Reality is beyond names: Master Eckhardt makes a distinction between God in her/his own self and the God of creatures. Gregory of Nissa makes a distinction between God in her/his essence and God in her/his attributes who carries out operations in history; Ibn 'Arabi of the sufi tradition, distinguishes the Divine Absolute and the Divinity of dogmatic convictions "that is prisoner of limitations;" in the *advaita* of the Hindu tradition a distinction is made between God in Self and God of names and forms *(nâmarûpa)*. In the classical German sermon 2, Master Eckhardt speaks of the incandescent and burning force of God, which flows without ceasing into the "intimate room" of the soul. But it's a God who is "free of all names and stripped of all forms, totally unencumbered and in liberty."[23]

The flow of self-revelation of the Mystery is always continual and never repeated. From here mystics like Ibn 'Arabi pointed out as very important that searchers broaden out their beliefs in order to participate in and enjoy the numberless benefits that animate Reality. There is no way of placing limits on Reality. Beliefs in their turn are always frag-

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[21] Juan Martín VELASCO, *El fenómeno místico*, Trotta, Madrid 1999, p. 161. The author continues: "The fact of remaining silent about God, of neither affirming nor denying his existence, and even more radically, avoiding the answer to the question about him – not because he lacked a reply, but because he realized that the question was incorrect and not well put, offensive to the transcendence of the reality to which it referred – this fact, in a paradoxical manner, was perhaps the only possible way to reflect a presence that can only manifest itself in an allusive way...": ibidem, pp. 161-162.

[22] Gregorio de NISA, *Omelie sul Cantico dei Cantici*, p. 52 (Omelia XI). As Gregory of Nisa suggests in reference to the Canticle of Canticles, God is a "Difuse Perfume."

[23] Maestro ECKHART, *Sermões alemães*, Vozes, Petrópolis 2006, pp. 49-50 (Sermón 2).

mentary, they are chains or bonds that put limits on Reality. They are like the "numberless colors that persons impose on colorless light by means of their own limited existence."[24] Religions and beliefs are really systems and symbols that refer to Reality, which is at one and the same time transcendent and immanent. But Reality is beyond that which we are able to grasp by means of symbols. Religions play an important role in anamnesis, that is the living, actualizing memory of the dynamic transforming power of Reality that instigates in persons a longing to practice ego-de-centralization and re-centering on the Mystery of the Other. As the theologian John Hick well indicated, Reality constitutes the essential starting point for human transformation: "It's that reality in virtue of which, by means of our response to one or the other of its manifestations as figures of God or of the non-personal Absolutes, we are able to reach the blessed state of ego decentralization which is our supreme good." [25]

3. Reality and its fragrance

Being infinite and intangible, Reality is manifest in the depth of the human being, in the very heart of the heart. In one of his sermons, Eckhardt emphasizes that access to the "depth of God" is gained through the depth of the person who purifies the heart of all attachments and lives in humility pure receptivity for the gift of the Mystery. Eckhardt points out: "Those who know say that the stars pour out their powers into the depth of the earth, into nature and the earthly elements producing there the purest of gold. The more that the soul reaches the depth of the most intimate of its being, so much more the divine power is poured bountifully into her and acts in a hidden manner which reveals great works... [26] In the depth of the heart is where is revealed the "great door of the mercy of God." But there is necessary a permanent work of purification of the heart, of breaking the knots which impede the exercise of loving reception of the other and of spiritual delicacy. This idea of the heart as the mirror which reflects God was also given much emphasis by Gregory of Nissa. He has some beautiful reflections on "the pure of heart" commentating on Mat 5,8. Actually the pure of heart will see God, but for this to occur it is necessary that the mirror be well polished so that it might be able to reflect with tenderness and strength the unceasing rays of the Mystery of light.

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[24] William C. CHITTICK, *Mundos imaginales. Ibn al-Arabi y la diversidad de las creencias*, Alquitara, Sevilla 2003, p. 283.

[25] John HICK, *Teologia cristã e pluralismo religioso. O arco-íris das religiões*, PPCIR/Attar, São Paulo 2005, p. 91 (y también 90 y 41).

[26] Mestre ECKHART, *Sermões alemães*, p. 296 (Sermão 54a).

When one gets down to the bottom line, the "defuse perfume" of the Mystery is poured out and embraces all "names and forms." In the depths it manages to grasp the dynamism proper to the heart which is permanent motion, oscillation and pulsation. At every moment the heart catches the different unforeseen forms of the mystery of Reality. The same thing happens when the faithful of different religious traditions make efforts to move deeply into religious experience by going down deeper into their own proper religion. In so far as they extend their efforts they begin to realize that the mystery that inhabits the experience can not be limited to just their own religion. The theologian Paul Tillich realized this very clearly: "In the depths of every living religion there is a point where religion as such loses its importance and the horizon towards which it sets its course permits it to supersede its particularity and raise itself to a spiritual liberty that makes possible a new overview of the presence of the divine in all expressions of the ultimate meaning of human life.[27]

The value and richness of a religion is revealed in its potential for humanizing fragrance, or if you wish, visible fruits. For Gandhi, what proves the truth of a religion is its "fragrance" of love, spirituality and peace.[28] In his letter to the Galatians, Paul speaks of the importance of the visible fruits inscribed by the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, amiability, goodness, faithfulness, modesty, and self control" (Gal 5, 22-23). The essential path is to follow these fruits of the Spirit. The great sufi mystic, Rúmi, expressed abundantly the centrality of these visible fruits in the very dynamic of salvation: "On the day of resurrection, men and women will appear pallid and trembling with fear at the final judgment. I will present this your love in my hands and I will say to You: interrogate this, this will respond."[29] The fragrance of spirituality does not appear only in religions. Human beings are capable of developing to a high degree special qualities of the spirit such as love, compassion, delicacy, courtesy, patience, hospitality, caring for others, etc. These virtues are not the exclusive property of religions.[30]

Conclusion

An authentic inter-religious mysticism needs to recognize the irradiation of the Spiritual Presence, of the power of Reality which envelopes

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27 Paul TILLICH, *Le christianisme et les religions*, Aubier, Paris 1968, p. 173.

28 Mohandas Karamchand GANDHI, *Gandhi e o cristianismo*, Paulus, São Paulo 1996, pp. 131-132.

29 Djalâl-od-Dîn RÛMÎ, *Rubâi´yât*, Albin Michel, Paris 1993, p. 21.

30 DALAI LAMA, *Uma ética para o novo milênio*, Sextante, Rio de Janeiro 2000, pp. 32-33; André COMTE-SPONVILLE. *L´esprit de l´atheisme*, Albin Michel, Paris 2006; Leonardo BOFF, *Espiritualidade. Um caminho de transformação*, 2ª ed., Sextante, Rio de Janeiro

all the universe and soaks into all of history. We are talking about a presence that manifests itself in beliefs but radically transcends them. Nothing is more essential than the capacity to amplify one's vision so as to be able to recognize the presence of Reality in all of its transcendent and immanent manifestations. It's possible to take part in a profound vision of Reality only through the application of beliefs and strengthening the potential sensibility to be able to perceive the divine in every place. As the mystic Teilhard de Chardin used to say: "nothing is profane for the person who knows how to see." And from this the fundamental importance for an "education of sight." As Henri le Saux, another great searcher used to say, "it's enough just to open up one's eyes" in order to perceive the presence of the Grail. One of the most daring mystics of all times, Ibn 'Arabi, recognizes, as very few do, that the heart is the place most fitting for the mystical perception of Reality: a heart capable of grasping all the forms. He says in one of his poems: "People have the most varied beliefs regarding God; but I profess all of them; I believe in all beliefs."[31] In the mystery of the depths, one finds the key of really true spiritual delicacy, of a singular courtesy that makes it possible to perceive the dynamics of the manifestation of the divine in all particular forms. To fix oneself exclusively on the transcendent mission *(tanzíh)* in order to grasp the divine, is in itself a limitation, just as is to fix exclusively on the dimension of immanence *(tasbíh)*. One must combine the two dimensions: transcendence and proximity in order to approach the Mystery which is and hides, a Mystery which is not only transcendence but also self-revelation for the world.

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[31] Ibn 'ARABI, *La taberna de las luces*, Editora Regional de Murcia, Murcia 2004, p. 24 (selection, presentation and translation by Pablo Beneito).

The Seductive Future of Theology

José María VIGIL

What is the future of theology? Where is it headed?

For some, the question is of no use because theology is—and supposedly always has been—the same, a perennial theology. And it should be that way in the future, for all ages. It should simply try to be faithful to its permanent mission and "faithfully guard the deposit of faith."

But this static vision doesn't match up with history, because, in fact, theology has never done anything except constantly change and evolve from the very beginning. Let's take a look, using my religious tradition, the Christian.

According to the definition of Anselm, theology is *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding. Here, faith is not faith as an abstract entity without a subject. Those who want to understand are believing subjects; they want to understand what they believe. So then, as believing subjects change across generations in historical contexts that are different in each period, their search for understanding—*quaerens intellectum*—inevitably evolves.

Patristic theology, that of the Fathers of the Church—remember that I am speaking from within Christianity—came into being in the monastery and the questions that theology wanted to understand at that point corresponded to the monastic context. They were questions that monks had at that time. The responses were also given by monks. For that reason it was a monastic theology.

After that, in the Middle Ages, the new world of the university arose, and theology emigrated over there. Their questions, which had now become *questiones disputatae*—disputed questions—reflected the specific

cultural context of the medieval university. It was scholastic theology. Later on seminaries emerged. They were houses of formation to prepare the clergy. Theology ended up finding refuge there. Their questions centered at that time around the preoccupations of the clergy and so it was a clerical, institutional and hierarchical theology.

Then modernity came along. The clerical, hierarchical theology was encircled by constant apologetic harassment and that meant closing the ranks within the institution. Theology got hooked on itself as an anti-modern, neo-scholastic theology. It was a theology without creativity, confined to serfdom, to repeat and comment on the pronouncements of the hierarchical magisterium. And it was reduced to this function for several centuries.

Toward the middle of the last century, not only in Catholicism, but in all of Christianity, there was a reconciliation with modernity and its values: the person, human rights, freedom, science, the autonomy of earthy realities, the positive value of the world, the recognition of other religions, interreligious dialogue... Believers saw themselves carried over very quickly into a whole new world with absolutely unprecedented questions. The old pre-modern theology, which had remained unchanged for several centuries, simply collapsed by implosion.[1] There are splendid testimonies from theologians in this respect: I am not interpreting here but merely presenting something that forms part of our lives.[2] Theology ceased being a subservient commentary on the declarations of the magisterium and became rather a creative reflection from the perspective of the new modernity: a modern theology, reconciled with the modern world.

From that point on—less than 50 years ago—the new stages in the evolution of theology have known an accelerating pace of successive forms.

So it is that at the pace of those times of renewal, Christianity in the Third World, which had been until then Euro-centric, creatively took up its faith in a militant engagement against domination and oppression. The questions that impoverished Latin American Christians raised began to revolve around the relationship of their faith to the struggle for liberation. A relatively new theology came into being and was known as "a critical reflection on the praxis of the faith." This was something totally different

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[1] J.B. LIBÂNIO, *Concílio Vaticano II. Os anos que seguiram*, em LORSCHEIDER-LIBÂNIO-COMBLIN-VIGIL-BEOZZO, *Vaticano II, 40 anos depois*, Paulus, São Paulo 2005, 73.

[2] Joseph MOINGT dramatically tells how, with the celebration of the Second Vatican Council, he had to abandon his whole project for a Christological synthesis and attempt to rebuild a truly new Christology: MOINGT, J., *El hombre que venía de Dios*, Desclée, Bilbao 1995, p. 7ss.

from what had existed before and from what theology was in other parts of the world. It was liberation theology, the true liberation of theology, a qualitative leap in the world history of theology. From Latin America it extended to the whole planet.

Much earlier, when, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the ecumenical movement had been extended in a significant way throughout Christianity, the ecumenical awareness of many believers no longer set out their questions in the narrow framework of their own Church. They began to look beyond the conflicts and the divisions and return to the beginnings of Christianity before the divisions. Based on this new awareness, many theologians began to develop their responses from a perspective that was also ecumenical. That theology was no longer simply Catholic, nor did it represent any Protestant denomination. Rather it was ecumenical, simply Christian. That pointed to a major novelty in the history of Christian theology. There had never been an ecumenical theology, one that was not framed explicitly within a Church.

During that final part of the last century, communications, emigration, tourism and globalization itself, shaped societies that were diversified. Most of the globe became pluri-cultural and pluri-religious. Homogenous, mono-cultural and mono-religious societies almost completely disappeared. They had been societies in which it was possible to do theology within a single religion without paying attention to the questions that arose from the demands for truth in other religions. The question of the plurality of religion and a review of the pretentions of the uniqueness of one's one religion became commonplace. The possibility of a confessional religion wanting to monopolize or speak with self-sufficiency in a plural society ended. Sooner or later, and with more or less awareness, believers finally want to understand the relationship of their own faith to that of other beliefs. They want to interpret the old responses they have inherited in light of that pluralism. It is a theology of religions, which later was called the theology of pluralism, and which included the question of whether this was a pluralism of fact or by right. It finally became called pluralist theology[3]. In the history of theology, this had never before been imagined.

If many religions now co-exist inescapably in society, no one wants to be limited to knowing what one religion says. Believers not only ask about their own religion, they also want to know what the others say. Theology replies not with the unique response of one religion but with the spread of answers that can be found in different religions so that the

[3] See the special issue of Concilium (1/2007), directed by A.TORRES QUEIRUGA,L. C. SUSIN y J.M. VIGIL

individual can be enriched with that whole spectrum. Nothing like this had ever occurred in the history of theology. We are seeing a comparative theology.

In this interreligious context, there are many believers—even though they are still the exception—who have a plural religious experience, who live their religious experience in more than one religion. They have a double belonging or sometimes even a multiple belonging. Obviously there are many more who believe this isn't possible, or that it isn't right and who try their best to avoid the experience. However, the overwhelming fact of those who indeed do experience a multiple belonging, raises another question for theology: Why could there not be an inter-religious, multi-faith theology? The possibility of an inter-religious theology already exists, even though it is in an experimental phase.

It is accepted by some and scorned by others. Some say the factor most influencing the change in human awareness right now is the new image of the world and of the cosmos that comes from the new natural sciences. The traditional image of the world that we inherited, and that had been devised precisely by religions, has crumbled before the emergence today of a new, scientific image, also for the first time in history. This image is being taken up by all humanity. Very rapidly, we have found ourselves transposed into a new world, a cosmos that has little to do with the static and dualist image of the world that we had known before. It is a new image of the world that has provoked in its turn a whole world of new questions. The old questions have totally lost their meaning. The old answers are obsolete. The very framework, the mind sets used, needs- to be resituated on new foundations. In this new world revealed by science, believers need to come to a new understanding of themselves. Theology is thus reconciled not only with nature and with the cosmic world from which it was always distanced and to which it was blind, but is restated in ecological terms and in depth (with deep ecology and not just the care of the environment). It is eco-theology.[4]

In this same line and already for some time now, a new phenomenon has been growing in strength in contemporary culture. It is the emergence of "gender" awareness. This is a new category that shows how many social and cultural characteristics are influenced by the desire for domination and carried along on roles linked to sexuality. This cultural revolution shakes up customs that are taken for granted and held to be so old that they get lost in the dawn of history. It is a new vision, a new paradigm that poses new questions for believers from a new perspective

[4] Félix WILFRED has just proposed that this ecological theology be, at the same time, the interreligious theology. Cfr Concilium 3/51 (2009)379-392

and that exposes the latent patriarchy in an infinity of details and serious questions about foundations. Believers—not just women but also men who are sensitive in this respect—want to understand all this from a faith perspective. They ask theology what answer it has to help them understand and renew their understanding of the whole symbolic religious patrimony in a way that is not patriarchal. Now is the time for a radical conversion in theology toward a theology with a gender perspective, it is a new stage in theology that has come to stay.

The crisis of traditional religion, lived out paradoxically with a revitalization of new forms of religion, has in practice already imposed a clear distinction between religion and spirituality. This latter is the profound dimension, while religion would seem to pertain more to the area of forms, the interfaces that human beings have created to express spirituality. This conviction, already strong in a good part of contemporary society, poses new questions for believers. They want to understand what meaning religion has. They want to know whether religion is, as had always been thought, the primary mediation for spirituality, the unique and principle source of communication with the divine, or whether religion is instead an interface: good when it serves that purpose, but one that can be substituted for or dispensed with when we find better mediations. In this case, as we said, the questions posed by many believers are now, in this sense, post-religious. They go beyond religions, and beyond religion, even though they are more interested than ever in spirituality. The reply to the questions inherent in this perspective contributes to the elaboration of a post-religious theology, one that is secular, human, preoccupied by the humanizing role of spirituality and beyond religions.

Looking back, we can say that, in the last hundred years, we have seen more evolutionary change in theology than was experienced in the whole of prior history. As we have been saying, its evolution has accelerated. It surprises us with its effervescent vitality. Has it arrived at its final phase? Obviously not! We don't know where it will be going on its surprising journey, but we wager a vote of confidence in its brilliant future.

Since it is obvious, there is no need to insist that not all theology has to pass through these stages. The appearance of a new theology does not mean the disqualification of former models of theology. Human knowledge, cultures and the religious world also, will continue evolving through successive waves, through new paradigms that appear unexpectedly and in a surprising, chaotic way not foreseeable by a linear projection. The lines meet, cross, collide, give rise to other paradigms or make them possible. And all this contributes to encouraging the progression of

the whole toward higher stages. The new paradigms do not always take the place of the older ones. More often they simply integrate them and mutually enrich each other.

In this sense many theologies can co-exist. There will always be confessional theology as long as there are confessions in the religious world. That sort of theology doesn't have to worry. It will always be necessary in its own sphere. The super-confessional kinds of theology have no desire to displace them. They don't come to expel and substitute for them. They deal with other spaces in which the older theologies are not accepted because they are not even understood: for example, in the multi-religious society, in the secular media of communication and in the secular university.

So we can say that most kinds of theology in these latter times can continue, each in the niches where they are lodged. In my opinion however, this doesn't prevent us from saying that we can discover in the evolution of theology an arrow, a meaning that points predictably to a specific profile of the theology of the future. In our modest opinion, that theology is going to have the following characteristics:

- It will no longer be a theology that puts the accent so much on "theo," because it will be growing in awareness, across the globe, that theism is a model of understanding and expressing our concept of the divine, that it is not an exact description of the "Ultimate Reality," and that it is certainly not indispensible.

- Nor will it be very enthusiastically a "logos," because at this stage we have already discovered, on a world scale, the weaknesses of a unilateral, rational discourse that lifts up "logos" to the disadvantage of other more subtle dimensions of human knowing.

- It will be confessional when that is needed, for the theological service within the ministries or fields of a specific religion obviously. But, it will also know how to be non-confessional, ecumenical and above confessions, when that is required and in terms of the public to which it is directed and the field in which it finds itself situated .

- It will be, in any case, pluralist. By this I mean that it will have overcome the religious superiority complex that practically all religions in the world have had. It is a complex that has made them think that they were immediately divine and that they were the only valid religion in the world. This new theology will discover, on the evidence of the matter, that all religions are glimmers of the inexhaustible Ultimate Reality. They will perceive that religious pluralism is "beloved of God," rather than being an evil to be countered.

- Even when it is confessional, theology will certainly have to be, more and more, a comparative theology in a plural society. It will have to take responsibility for the word of other religions, rather than remaining within narrow and self-referenced limits, with the responses of only one's own religion.

- But more than simply being comparative, theology will often be interreligious, inter-faith, inter-believer, multi-religious and multi-faith. (A definitive vocabulary would be premature.) Although this interreligious theology is still, at this point in time, a possibility that many see as impossible; for others it is a possibility that already exists. There is absolutely nothing exceptional in the experience of double or multiple religious belonging, even though that is still unimaginable for many of those who do not have the experience. However, those who do experience that kind of belonging are able to develop the kind of theology we are talking about. There are provisional yet promising experiences already underway. If it is going to be non confessional, it will obviously have to be "secular," not official or clerical or pertaining to any religious institution. It will rather be a theology outside the institution: secular, civil, spiritual, human, and unable to be referenced to any religious institution. Those who open their eyes and know how to see will probably discover that this theology is already out there and that it is opening up a way that often has no name. It is not a conventional theology that works confessionally but rather a theology that simply pretends to "humanize humanity."

- Since the heyday of liberation theology, I believe that the qualification of "liberating" is not elective but essential. There is no theology if it is not a liberating theology. However, the old form of theology of liberation has to be given new life—and that is what is happening—with new paradigms that have come to be with time. It cannot continue being inclusivist as it was originally, even though that was not by explicit decision, but rather unconsciously. Involuntarily as that may have been, neither will it be able to be as anthropocentric as it was. The new theology will now have to be cosmo-biocentric in order to humanize both humanity and the planet from a perspective of eco-justice.

What is the future of theology? Where is it headed?

Enlivened by so many new paradigms and with so many experiences underway, the future of theology is promising, seductive for anyone who is fascinated by that radical restlessness that is being human, being human in a religious way that searches always to understand one's religion. Without a doubt, we are in times of radical change, of new forms of

theology that were never even dreamed of before. The future is for those who risk and who take on this task of refounding theology.

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OPEN CONCLUSION

We could end the book here. The co-authors have presented their views: plural, different, contrasting, in some cases even negative. Such diverse brushstrokes give rise to a broad, rich painting with many nuances. It will be the job of the reader to digest this whole reflection and form an opinion. We want to share with you some final commentaries that this splendid panorama laid out in the preceding pages suggests to us.

The first conclusion is that we are not led to think that a single path is foreseeable for the evolution of theology. At this point in time, theologians—women and men— still hold, quite varied positions. In some cases and on some points they are even opposed. This was not only foreseeable; it is also good: an indication that dialogue—practical more than theoretical—about the future of theology is underway and is probably far from over. Theology still has a long way to go. This theology also lends itself to a very broad debate that will include quite different and varied positions. In the future—and we see it happening already—we will find it increasingly difficult to speak of "a theology." It will be more a question of "theologies" and quite varied ones at that.

Hardly a century ago, most theology took place under supervision and with official recognition within each religious confession, so that theology ended up being one of the instruments of religious institutions. It was a time of generalized exclusivism that led one to think that those theologies and only those theologies or those like them could really be called theology. The others were not really even theology. Among our co-authors we don't even find a reference to that exclusivist position.

We still do find people who defend the classical position that all theology has to be set within in a specific confession and that without explicit confessionality there is no real theology. Theology has always been confessional and it is obvious that a confessional theology will always be necessary within religions. There is no doubt that confessional theology has a secure future. Nonetheless, we are still sure that a theology that is not within the confessional framework is finding its way, step by step, based on the older ecumenical and macroecumenical theologies. It is moving toward in very diverse forms that are currently being experimented with.

There is a contrast of opinion between those who still are clearly diffident in face of the pluralist position and those who consider it an indispensible minimum in order to be able to do theology in a way that will be received in today's world. Several of our co-authors provide clear testimony to the possibility of living and reinterpreting their own religion in a pluralist way even though that possibility is still not recognized and is not official in those religions. These authors are evidently convinced that the fears of their colleagues will end up being surmounted and that the pluralist position, which is growing uncontrollably and irreversibly in today's society, will end up being the majority position. Today much of theology is "inclusivist" although it does not see itself that way and tends to reject that classification without proposing any alternative. The theoretical and practical debate finds its place right at that point. It is one of the principal axes around which the future model of theology is being generated.

There are those who are afraid of an inter-faith, inter-believer or interreligious theology and who reject it for fear of the ambiguity, the lack of definition, the mixing of religions or syncretism. The negative reaction is logical for those who harbor these fears but it is increasingly clear that many of them are inexistent phantoms, that is to say theological projects that no one defends or practices. Anyone who goes beyond those fears and prejudices will see that proposals are emerging that are increasingly serious about the possibility of an interreligious, inter-believer or inter-faith theology and that excludes any ambiguity, lack of definition or syncretism. Even more, while recognizing that confessional theology will obviously always continue being possible and desirable, the consensus is growing that, outside each religion, theology is going to have to be less and less mono-confessional in the context of a society that is increasingly pluri-religious. If it wants to have a voice in a society that is irreversibly plural, it has to allow space for ways of doing theology that we only intuit vaguely today and that we give hesitant names to like inter-faith, inter-believer, interreligious, multifaith.

We don't need to spend a lot of time talking about names like these. They just need to help us have a nomenclature that is more or less common, though always open. What we do need to pay more attention to are the concrete proposals that are recurrently appearing about these new ways of doing theology. Several of our authors refer to the emblematic proposal in this sense made several decades ago by Wilfred Cantwell Smith. As Paul Knitter states, (page xx: Foundations for a Pluralistic Multifaith Theology), that proposal, which is "resurrected in this book, is not only valid but urgent." Here is a task to work on both from the theoretical front (deepening the foundations for a possible multi-faith theology) and on the practical level by doing it, developing it, sharing it. It is a task that some of our authors consider "almost impossible" and at the same time "appropriate, necessary and urgent." There are also those who go further. They call for a Christology that is "inter-believer" (Phan) or a "Christology of liberation, of religions" (Pieris). Their radicalism shows, factually, that theology is moving and that it is open to forms that had never before been imagined. We move along this path.

We find also the opinions of those who remind us that the foundation of all theology is to be found in deep religious experience, and that theology always has to return there to its source, knowing now that the concrete forms that such experience takes on are simply forms and that theology itself also has to look beyond the forms, beyond the concrete specifics of each religion. In this sense also it is post-religious.

We believe that this entire set of authoritative opinions by our co-authors has considerable value and is clearly representative of the legitimacy of the questions that this volume wanted to put on the table. It is also representative of the vitality with which reflection is moving in this field and of the great variety of opinions and theological models that exist in our "daily theology." The conclusion of this volume remains, then, open to the future. We will continue creating together a theology that is increasingly diversified, more open and freer.

We are happy to conclude the series "Along the Many Paths of God," having offered this volume as an occasion for gathering authoritative voices around the public debate regarding the interreligious field. They speak about the future of a pluralist theology beyond confessions, the theology of the future.

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From 1986-2004, Knitter was on the Board of Directors for CRISPAZ (Christians for Peace in El Salvador). He is also on the Board of Trustees for the International, Interreligious Peace Council, promoting interreligious peace-making projects. Since publishing his acclaimed book, No Other Name? (1985), Knitter has been widely known for his religious pluralism. Along with John Hick, Knitter has come under harsh criticism from Cardinal Ratzinger (presently the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church).

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Laurenti MAGESA

The Rev. Laurenti Magesa is a priest of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Musoma, Tanzania. He was the pastor of two parishes with 10 out-stations in the Musoma Diocese. He has a Ph.D. in Moral Theology from St. Paul University in Ottawa, Canada, and taught from 1986-92 at the Catholic University of East Africa, Nairobi, Kenya, where he also served as a lecturer at the Maryknoll Institute of African Studies. He was a visiting lecturer at the Maryknoll School of Theology, Maryknoll, New York, in 1994 and at Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1995. He is the author of several books, including *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Orbis, 1997), and many articles on African theology, moral theology, and social ethics.

Jacob NEUSNER

American academic scholar of Judaism who lives in Rhinebeck, New York, Neusner is often celebrated as one of the most published authors in history. (He has written or edited more than 950 books.)

He is the author of *"Israel:" Judaism and its Social Metaphors* and *The Incarnation of God: The Character of Divinity in Formative Judaism*.

Neusner has written a number of works exploring the relationship of Judaism to other religions. His *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (Philadelphia, 1993; translated into German, Italian, and Swedish), attempts to establish a religiously sound framework for Judaic-Christian interchange. It has earned the praise of Pope Benedict XVI and the nickname "The Pope's Favorite Rabbi." In his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, Benedict refers to it as "by far the most important book for the Jewish-Christian dialogue in the last decade."

Teresa OKURE

Professor of New Testament and Gender Hermeneutics, is a Nigerian and a Sister of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. She lectures in Old and New Testaments at the Catholic Institute of West Africa, in Port Harcourt, where she has also served for year in various administrative capacities such as Academic Dean, Dean of Students Affairs and Head of the Department of Biblical Studies. She has also served in many capacities in her Roman Catholic Church, including that of an Adiutrix at the recent Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, Rome 2009, and in various national and international theological and biblical associations. A well-known biblical scholar, through her many publications, and a former Executive Secretary of EATWOT and member of its Theological and Women's Commissions for years, Teresa is committed to promoting the cause of Christian

Unity for which Christ prayed, as well as interreligious cooperation through a theology that transforms life according to the mind of Christ. Currently, she is the founding President of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN).

Irfan A. OMAR

Irfan A. Omar is Assistant Professor in the Department of Theology at Marquette University in Milwaukee. He teaches courses on Islam, World Religions, and Interfaith Dialogue. His research interests include Islamic thought with a special focus on inter-religious connections between Islam and other religions. He is the editor/co-editor of several books including *A Christian View of Islam: Essays on Dialogue by Father Thomas Michel, SJ* (Orbis, 2010), and *Islam and Other Religions: Pathways to Dialogue* (Routledge, 2006). In 2006, he received the US Fulbright Senior Scholar Award for lecturing in Indonesia. He is an Associate Editor of the Journal of Ecumenical Studies. www.marquette.edu/theology/omar.shtml

Raimon PANIKKAR

Born in Barcelona in 1918, he has lived and studied in Spain, Germany, Italy and India. Doctor in Philosophy at the University of Madrid (1946), Doctor in Chemistry at the same university (1958) and Doctor in Theology at the Lateran University in Rome (1981). He is a priest since 1946 and has ministered in Barcelona, Salamanca, Madrid, Rome, Mysore and Varanasi. He has done research at the Universities of Madrid, Mysore and Varanasi and been professor at Universities of Madrid, Rome, Varanasi, Harvard, Montreal and Buenos Aires, among others. He has been a member of the Higher Council for Scientific Investigations and co-founder of various reviews of philosophy and culture (Arbor, Weltforum, Kairos, etc.). He was the first secretary of the Spanish Society of Philosophy. He left the West in 1954 to go to India.

Returning to Europe he was named "Free Teacher" at the University of Rome and devoted himself to the teaching of philosophy of religion. Beginning in 1966 he divided his time between the Universities of Varanasi, Rome and Harvard. From 1971 he occupied the Chair of Comparative Philosophy of Religion and History of Religions at the University of California at Santa Barbara where he is currently professor emeritus.

Peter C. PHAN

Peter C. Phan, a native of Vietnam, emigrated as a refugee to the U.S.A. in 1975. He obtained three doctorates, Doctor of Sacred Theology from the Universitas Pontificia Salesiana, Rome, and Doctor Philosophy and Doctor of Divinity from the University of London. He was also awarded an honorary Doctor of Theology from Chicago Theological Union.

He began his teaching career in philosophy at the age of eighteen at Don Bosco College, Hong Kong. In the United States, he has taught at the University of Dallas, Texas; at the Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, where he held the Warren-Blanding Chair of Religion and Culture; at Union Theological Seminary, N.Y.; at Elms College, Chicopee, MA; at St. Norbert College, De Pere, WI, and at Georgetown University, Washington, DC, where he is currently holding the Ignacio Ellacuría Chair of Catholic Social Thought. He is also on the faculty of the East Asian Pastoral Institute, Manila and Liverpool Hope University, England.

He is the first non-Anglo to be elected President of Catholic Theological Society of America.

Aloysius PIERIS

Aloysius Pieris, SJ, is Director of the Tulana Research Center, in Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. He earned his first PhD in Buddhist Studies, the first ever awarded to a non-Buddhist by the University of Sri Lanka. He has held Chairs in Theology in many universities, and has taught in both Catholic and Protestant theological faculties. A prolific writer, he has written many works, including *An Asian Theology of Liberation: God's Reign for God's Poor* (Orbis, Nueva York 1988).

Richard RENSHAW

Born in 1940 and Religious of Holy Cross, he has taught philosophy at Saint Thomas University (Canada). During eleven years in Peru he exercised pastoral ministry in poor areas and a prison, taught theology at ISSET Juan XXIII and edited LADOC. He then returned to Canada as Assistant Secretary General of the Canadian Religious Conference. He has been co-president of the Aboriginal Rights Committee, president of the housing cooperative, Abiwin (Ottawa), member of the Board of Kairos (Canada) and participated in the World Social Forum (India) and the Quebec Social Forums. He is a member of Antennes de paix (Pax Christi Canada), Religions for Peace, and the Coalition on the Socio-Environmental Impact of Transnationals in Latin America. He has a License in Theology (Gregorian), Masters in Philosophy and in Education (University of Toronto). He has published *La Tortura en Chimbote* (IPEP), *Dealing with Diversity* and *The Day it Rained* (Dunamis Publishers), edited various compilations as well as translating and collaborating in various publications and reviews.

José Amando ROBLES

Sociologist of religion and currently coordinator of the Mester Eckhart Program of Spirituality at the Dominican Research Centre (CEDI) in Heredia, Costa Rica. Since its foundation in 2004, he participated in the annual international encounters organized by the Centre for the Study of Religious Traditions (CETR) in Barcelona and among his works can be noted: *Repensar la religión: de la creencia al conocimiento*, EUNA, Heredia (Costa Rica) 2002; *Hombre y mujer de conocimiento. La propuesta de Juan Matus y Carlos Castaneda*, EUNA, Heredia (Costa Rica), 2006; *¿Verdad o símbolo? Naturaleza del lenguaje religioso*, Editorial Sebila, San José (Costa Rica), 2007.

K.L. SESHAGIRI RAO

Professor Emeritus in the Department of Religious Studies, University of Virginia, and Chief Editor of the *Encyclopedia of Hindusim*, Dr. Rao is one of the founding editors of "Interreligious Insight", published by the World Congress of Faiths, London, and the Rector of Thanksgiving Foundation, Dallas. TX. He is also on the editorial boards of both "Dialogue and Alliance" and of "Gandhi Marg" journals for many years.

He has written several books, numerous articles, and edited a number of books, including four volumes on *Religious Traditions of the World*. Working

as Professor of Comparative Religion and Chairman of the Guru Gobind Singh Department of Religious Studies, Punjabi University, Patiala (1967-71), he helped shape the first department of its kind in Indian Universities. His areas of specialization are Indic Religions, Gandhian Studies and Inter-religious Dialogue.

He has been a participant in consultations of UNESCO as well as the World Economic Forum in Davos. He has been a participant in consultations of UNESCO as well as the World Economic Forum in Davos.

Dr. Rao received the Hall of Fame "Anim Award" from the International Parapsychology Association; Ecumenical Studies Award from the Integral Yoga Association in Buckingham, Virginia; and the Consciousness Studies Award from the College of Natural Law in Washington, D.C. He also received the prestigious Vishwa Hindu Award 2006 from Avadhoota Dattapeetham, Mysore. The World Association of Vedic Studies gave him the Honorary Award of Prachya Vidya Parangat at their 2006 conference in Houston, Texas. He also received Certificate of Honor awarded by Indological Research Association, Bangalore, in 2005.

Afonso M. L. SOARES

Doctor in Religious Sciences at the Methodist University of São Paulo (Umesp) and Professor of Theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University (Rome). He is the current President to SOTER, and an Associate of ABI-HR (Brazilian Association of the History of Religions), of the Association of Social Scientists of Mercosur and member of the Atabal Centre for Black Theology and Culture. He teaches at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP). His most recent books are : *Interfaces da revelación; premisas para uma teologia do sincretismo religioso*, Paulinas, São Paulo 2003; *El mal: ¿cómo explicarlo?*, Paulus, São Paulo 2003; and *Dialogando com Juan Luis Segundo*, Paulinas, São Paulo 2005.

Faustino TEIXEIRA

Born in Juiz de Fora-MG, Brazil, 1954, he has a Masters in Theology from the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro and a Doctorate as well as postdoctoral studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. He is devoted to the study of interreligious dialogue. He is Professor of Theology in the Department of Religious Sciences at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora and coordinator of the post-graduate program in religious sciences. He has published various books and many articles in reviews like Vozes, REB, Convergencia and Concilium. He is a member of ISER-Assessoria and offers courses and conferences in innumerable pastoral gatherings.

His personal website is www.empaz.org/dudu/du_cur.htm#Pessoais

José María VIGIL

Theologian and Psychologist, doctor in Education (La Salle University, Costa Rica). Currently, is the coordinator of the International Theological Commission (internationaltheologicalcommission.org) of EATWOT (eatwot.org). Chief editor of the Latin American Agenda (latinoamericana.org/English), published since 1992 in 17 countries and 6 languages. Coordinator of Koinonia Services (servicioskoinonia.org), website on Liberation Theology and Pluralistic Theology. With A. Torres Queiruga and L.C. Susin, coordinated the issue of "Concilium" dedicated to the

Theology of pluralism (first of 2007). Author of many articles and more than 30 books, among them, *Political Holiness* (with Pedro Casaldáliga), Orbis, New York 1992, *Spirituality of Liberation,* Burns & Oates, London 1992 - Claretian Publications 1996; and *Theology of Religious Pluralism,* Lit-Verlag, Münster-Wien 2008.

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Wilfred Cantwell Smith's project of a «world theology», resurrected in this book, is not only valid but urgent. Without in any way diminishing the distinctive profile of each religion, I believe we can find "family characteristics" within all the religions that provide the foundation for a multifaith, world theology that sets aside claims of superiority of one religion over all the others and calls all religions to engage each other for the well-being of all sentient beings, and of the planet itself.

Paul KNITTER

I'm in full accord with the laudable effort and the counter-current of EATWOT of this book. The fish in the river swim upstream.

Raimon PANIKKAR

Many religions in history have changed their stances on many issues, for example, on slavery, racial discrimination, status of women, attitude to scientific knowledge... Now the time has come to overcome religious exclusivism and discrimination. We are to be creators, not victims, of history. We are not born to live within narrow boundaries. We have to think through our problems in the context of people of other faiths. Each religion has to take an active interest in human welfare around the world. It should not remain stuck in the immediate, narrow, and sectarian interests. In the emerging global culture, the world needs to take into account the diverse currents of religions and their contributions to the welfare of humankind as a whole.

K. L. SESHAGIRI RAO

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