

**PONTIFICAL GREGORIAN UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF THEOLOGY**

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY:

**A Perspective Toward A Post-Conciliar Theology
In The Context Of Religious Plurality**

Thesis of Licentiate in Dogmatic Theology

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*“I consider religious pluralism a fate allowed by God,
a fate whose meaning we don’t yet understand.*

*It is not simply a deviation,
but a positive expression of the spiritual riches
given by God to the nations
(cf. Ad Gentes 11).”*

Claude Geffré

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Y.B. Prasetyantha M.S.F.

For the Church of Christ in Indonesia

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INTRODUCTION

The state of being religiously plural belongs to the structure of reality. The world contains a vast array of religions. Numerically the largest are Christianity (Catholic and Protestant), Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. For me, this religious plurality is not a new case. Since childhood I have been familiar with the other religious believers, especially Muslims, the majority of Indonesians. However, it must be noted that Indonesia is not an Islamic state. In fact, my neighbors, my classmates, and even some of my relatives are Muslims, Protestants, Buddhists and Hindus. When I was seminarian, moreover, I also studied Islamic philosophy and theology, Hinduism and Buddhism. It must properly be noted that, although have been modified by the Javanese indigenous cultures, the episodes from Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahābhārata*, are familiar to many people in Indonesia, especially in Java, on which most of the Indonesians live. My favorite figure is *Yudhisthira*, the older of the five sons of *Pāndu* (The *Pandavas*) of the *Mahābhārata* epic.

When I arrived in Rome, the center of catholicity, with my background of religious plurality, I was surprised, but also interested by the most noticed debates in current theology of the significance of the plurality of religions. Much attention

has been given to the questions of universal salvation in Christ and in religions. Of course, the questions of universal salvation are also the questions of the Indonesian Christians, a small minority amidst a large majority of Muslims. In the context of Indonesian religious society, however, the Church pays attention more to the attempts to cultivate relationships with other religions. The terms of “tolerance”, “dialogue” and “*persaudaraan sejati*” (“truly relationship”) are three of the important keywords of the Christians in Indonesia.

The Indonesian Bishops Conference and the Indonesian Churches Council, for example, in its “*Pesan Natal Bersama 2001*” (co-message of Christmas day 2001) invited the Indonesian Christians to greet the Muslims who celebrated the *Idul Fitri*, the feast celebrating the end of fasting period, on December 16, 2001. In the actual context of the social, political and economical problems, which have been occurring in Indonesia, moreover, the Indonesian Christians were being invited to cultivate cooperation, dialogue and inter-religious friendships with all other religious believers. Therefore, the Indonesian Bishops Conference and the Indonesian Churches Council entitled their pastoral co-message by citing from the first letter of Paul to the Church in Thessalonica (1 Th 5, 13b): “*Hiduplah selalu dalam damai seorang dengan yang lain*” (“Be at peace among yourselves”).

For Indonesian Christians, at least for me, the questions of universal salvation were not the big theological problems, until I “fell in love” with inclusivism, one of three candidates of the theology of religions, when I read Jacques Dupuis’ book *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (2000). The author reflects the Christian theological understanding of world religious pluralism in the big framework of the universality of the Reign of God. He concludes his book by writing “The eschatological fullness of the Reign of God is the common final achievement of Christianity and the other religions.”¹

¹ Jacques Dupuis, S.J., *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000, p. 390.

Generally, theology of religions is a theological study that offers an interpretation for Christians of the meaning of other religions and their role, if any, in salvation of the world, in order to make sense of two Christian truths: the uniqueness of Jesus and the universality of God's will to save. As we know, Christians, on the one side, have claimed that Jesus is the Incarnation of God within human history, the unique Savior of the world. But in addition to this traditional affirmation, Christians have also held that God wills to save all human beings. "God our Savior wants everyone to be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth. For there is only one God, and there is only one mediator between God and humanity, himself a human being, Christ Jesus, who offered himself as a ransom for all" (1 Tm 2, 4-5). The theology of religions attempts to find a theological answer to the problem of salvation that asks the meaning of non-Christian Religions and their role in the salvation of the world.

Recently, the academic debate has developed this theology in terms of three significant categories: exclusivism, pluralism, and inclusivism. Exclusivist theologies of religion, while maintaining that other religions are marked by humankind's fundamental sinfulness and are therefore erroneous, and that Christ offers the only valid path to salvation, claim that God's salvation is available to all, but only through Jesus Christ. In contrast to exclusivist, pluralistic theologies of religions claim that non-Christian religions are legitimate ways to salvation apart from the way of Christ. Therefore, they ask Christianity to abandon the traditional belief in Christ as the one and only savior. Between exclusivist and pluralist position, there is inclusivism. Inclusivist theologies claim that all salvation is in the name of Jesus Christ, the Savior of all. But these theologies also argue that God's saving grace is present universally and therefore no human being is untouched by the grace of the God revealed by Jesus Christ.

Up until now, the debate has been centered on the problem of an adequate theology of religions. Summarizing this contemporary debate and giving the critics of every category, James L. Fredericks In his book *Faith among Faiths, Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (1999) has come to recognize that the debate between exclusivists, inclusivists, and pluralists has reached an impasse. Therefore, having the conviction that the Christian spiritual transformation is “generated by the encounter between the truths of Christianity and the truths of non-Christian religions”², he suggests comparative theology as an alternative to the theology of religions and a way to get beyond the current impasse over the pluralistic model.

Reading James Fredericks’ book, which I found in Saint Louis, Missouri, the United States summer 2001, I am challenged to re-think my orientation toward other religions. I am mesmerized to approach the religious plurality by a new point of view, namely doing theology comparatively. Comparative theology is a new theological study that attempts to deepen understandings of Christian faith by exploring it in the light of the teaching of other religious traditions. I think that cultivating inter-religious friendships and learning other religious traditions seriously, comparative theology is a best way to deal the religious diversity as an alternative to the theology of religions. In addition, it may be a good perspective for developing a post-conciliar theology in the context of religious plurality.

The purpose of this work, then, is to suggest comparative theology as a new way for living responsibly and creatively with non-Christian believers. There are three fundamental objects of this work. The first object is the analysis of the questions of universal salvation in Christ in the context of religious plurality. The second one is the horizon of the recent theology of religions in the framework of responding the problem of salvation. The last one is the description of the definition

² James L. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths, Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions*, New York: Paulist Press, 1999, p. 179.

and method of comparative theology and the suggestion of comparative theology as an alternative to the Theology of Religions.

The thesis will be divided into three chapters. The first chapter of this work is given to setting the questions of universal salvation in Christ in the context of the religious plurality. Related to the method, in this chapter the descriptive-critical method will be used. The tools used will be the biblical texts and the dogmatic documents of the Church. Before analyzing the problem of salvation, this chapter will examine some support in the Bible for the basic elements of traditional Christian faith: the uniqueness of Jesus and the universality of God's will to save, confronting with the context of the religious pluralism.

The second chapter is intended to describe the contemporary panorama of the theology of religions. In this chapter the analytical-critical method will be used. The used method is also intended to give the critics of the entire theology of religions. After looking at the questions of salvation, the second chapter will give an actual horizon of the theology of religions. Every category of the theology of religions will be examined and analyzed using two preconditions: responsibility to the tradition and creativity to the fact of religious diversity. Criticizing the theology of religions, it will be shown how the debate between exclusivists, inclusivists, and pluralists has reached an impasse.

In the third chapter, using the descriptive-critical and analytical-critical methods, I hope to describe and outline the method of comparative theology. The descriptive-critical method is used to describe the comparative theology as a new approach to the religious diversity. The analytical-critical method is used to suggest in how far this comparative theology is useful to Christian to develop skills for living responsibly and creatively with non-Christian believers and, at the same time, to arrive at the deep truth concerning the way in which the two doctrines that all are saved in Christ and that God wills all be saved are compatible each other. Suggesting comparative theology as an alternative to the theology of religions, this

last chapter will also give a perspective toward a post-conciliar theology in the context of religious plurality: commitment to the tradition and openness to other religious truths.

In the end of this work, I will give a conclusion that attempts to pull the "gold yarn" of our reflections. Taking the renewal spirit of Vatican II as a starting point, I believe that comparative theology is a best approach to the religious plurality. As an alternative of the theology of religions, comparative theology constitutes an important dimension of the post-conciliar theology in the context of the religious plurality.

CHAPTER I

THE QUESTIONS OF UNIVERSAL SALVATION IN CHRIST IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RELIGIOUS PLURALITY

1.1. The Context of the Religious Plurality

The phenomenon of religion has pervaded the history of humanity from its earliest known beginnings to the present day. The influence of religion has been very varied in world history. This has been both constructive and destructive. On the one hand, some of the greatest civilizations of the world have been founded on the basis of a religious faith. On the other hand, some of the most prolonged and bloody conflicts in human history have stemmed from religious differences.¹

Even though “one of the features that is most striking when surveying the world of religion is the profusion of its differing and conflicting forms”², today we live in an ecumenical age. The progress in communication and transportation has brought all the peoples of the world into one global village. It is also brought the religions of the world into close contact. A movement for a “wider ecumenism” has

¹ Cf. Moojan Momen, *The Phenomenon of Religion, A Thematic Approach*, Oxford: Oneworld, 1999, p. 1.
² Moojan Momen, 1999, p. 1.

begun, bringing together for dialogue leaders and scholars from all the world's religions.³

Between theologians of all faiths, there is a new consciousness of the worth of other religions and they are seeking to overcome the prejudice of an earlier time. Interfaith dialogue in our time is going beyond the first step of appreciating other religions – to understand each on its own terms – to a growing recognition that the religions of the world have much in common.⁴ “It is a very striking fact that almost all of the major religions have remarkably similar accounts of a future promised Golden Age and the advent of a savior.”⁵ In addition, now an inter-religious cooperation is being developed to support the peace and welfare of the world. It is obvious that we are moving toward a world civilization, in which so many religious traditions will impinge on one another.

1.1.1. The Horizon of the World's Religions

The world contains a vast array of religions. Beside the great “World Religions” like Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and so on, there are the “Traditional Religions” of Africa, the Americas, Asia and Oceania, as well as many new religious movements. There are also a number of other well-established independent religions: Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, Jainism and the Baha'i Faith.⁶

It is also important to keep in mind the traditional distinction between the monotheistic or prophetic religions and those usually referred to as oriental or

³ Cf. Andrew Wilson, ed., *World Scripture, A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts*, St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1991, p. 1.

⁴ Cf. Andrew Wilson, ed., 1991, pp. 1-2.

⁵ Moojan Momen, 1999, p. 242.

⁶ Cf. Moojan Momen, 1999, p. 7.

mystical.⁷ That the three “Religions of the Book” – Judaism, Christianity, Islam – are called “monotheistic” must not be intended to imply that all the other religions are “polytheistic” (or non-theistic); conversely, the Eastern religions – Hinduism and Buddhism in particular – are called “mystical” without prejudice to the “mystical” dimension of Christianity and the other prophetic religions. The merit of the distinction consists in stressing the common foundation of the three religions of the Book in the faith of Abraham and recognizing the “wisdom” or “gnosis” characteristic of the Eastern traditions. This distinction, according to Jacques Dupuis, goes to show that:

While the relationship between Judaism and Christianity has a unique character, Islam too has a special affinity to Christianity insofar as Islam also goes back to the faith of Abraham as to its last foundation. The three “monotheistic” faiths thus constitute between themselves one family of religions, while the Eastern religions share special ties of which account must also be taken.⁸

a) *Judaism*: is a monotheistic and ethical religion, which believes that there is one God, mighty and good, the Creator, who reveals his Word to man, and answers prayers. This religion makes a positive affirmation of the world as the arena of God’s activity, as the place where people have an obligation to act ethically, and which should be redeemed from injustice. Judaism looks to a final consummation of history and the realization of God’s complete sovereignty on earth, through the coming of a Messiah or, in the case of modern forms of Judaism, a Messianic Age. Jews believe that the Messiah has not yet come, and they still anticipate the coming of the Messiah or Messianic Age. Their future hope is an earthly vision of a world of peace and justice.⁹

⁷ Jacques Dupuis, S.J., *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Book, 2000, pp. 8-9.

⁸ Jacques Dupuis, S.J., 2000, p. 9.

⁹ Cf. Andrew Wilson, ed., 1991, p. 6.

“The most basic of Jewish scriptures is called by the Jewish people the *Tanakh* – and in English, the Hebrew Bible.”¹⁰ The *Tanakh* is made up of the Law (*Torah*), the Prophets (*Nebi'im*), and the Writings (*Ketuvim*)¹¹. The center of this scripture is the Torah, the five books of Moses. In addition to the *Tanakh*, a tradition of *Oral Torah*, passed down to the rabbis of the first several centuries of the Common Era and codified in the *Talmud*, which is constituted by the *Mishnah* and the *Gemara*, is authoritative for the observant Jew. One may regard the role of Talmud as providing the interpretative perspective for a proper understanding of the Bible. While much of the Talmud is devoted to discussions and codifications of law, it also contains passages of universal spiritual and ethical wisdom. The books of Midrash, rabbinic interpretation of scripture, are replete with moral and spiritual lessons and stories. Judaism regards its sacred books as the complete source for all the teachings, which God requires of his people for their welfare.¹²

Christianity is bound to pay special attention to Judaism because Jesus (c. 4-30 A.D.) and his disciples were Jews. They lived as Jews but criticized Jewish beliefs and practices. They were reformers from within. Jesus' life and teaching are largely incomprehensible without an understanding of the Judaism of his time. Christianity, moreover, has taken the sacred books of Judaism, called the *Old Testament*, as a preparation for the final revelation that God would make through Christ – a revelation that is written in the books of the *New Testament*.

In its new document on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, *Il Popolo Ebraico e le sue Sacre Scritture nella Bibbia Cristiana* (2001), the Pontifical Biblical Commission writes that the Jewish people and its sacred books that are in the Christian Bible has its importance. “The sacred books of the Jewish

¹⁰ Ian J. Kagedan, “Judaism II: Jewish Life”, in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000, p. 538.

¹¹ “Its books were written over a period of more than thirteen hundred years of Jewish history, from the time of Moses until several centuries before the common era.” (Andrew Wilson, ed., 1991, p. 7.)

¹² Andrew Wilson, ed., 1991, p. 7.

people constitute an essential part of the Christian Bible and they are present, in many ways, in the other part. Without the Old Testament, the New Testament would be an illegible book, a plant deprived of its roots and destined to dry up itself."¹³ Furthermore, the Pontifical Biblical Commission argues that the Christian hermeneutic of the Old Testament is deeply different from that of the Judaism. Nevertheless, it corresponds to the potentiality of the present sense of the texts. The Commission, then, concludes that there is a "triplex-relationship of the New Testament to the Old Testament: of continuity, of discontinuity and of progression."¹⁴

In other words, the Church's relation to the Jewish people can be understood as follows:

Christ and the *Torah* thus are not seen as canceling each other out. Jesus is not the Law's historical end, as Paul's words seem to suggest (Rm 10, 4). Jesus himself had reinterpreted but not abrogated the Law (Mt 5, 17-20. 21. 48), and now his disciples and followers should go on joyfully being guided by it in their master's spirit (Rm 12, 1). God's holy, just, and good will continues to guide and direct the Lord's disciples into worship and service (Rm 13, 8ff.). The coming of Jesus is not the end of the Jews (and the *Torah*) in God's plan. It is, rather, the opening of doors to let the multitude of Gentiles in. The drama goes on and the players are the same, only their numbers increase."¹⁵

b) *Islam*: is the third great monotheistic religion, which traces its roots back to Abraham. Islam proclaims Allah, the one God, and the Creator, who is sovereign and good, who answers prayers, and who works with mankind in history by calling prophets to proclaim God's word. There is a positive affirmation of the world as God's creation and the arena where people are obligated to act ethically. Islam

¹³ Pontificia Commissio Biblica, *Il Popolo Ebraico e le sue Sacre Scritture nella Bibbia cristiana*, Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2001, p. 199, par. 84.

¹⁴ Pontificia Commissio Biblica, 2001, p. 148, par. 64.

¹⁵ Ian J. Kagedan, 2000, p. 544.

offers only two choices for mankind: belief or unbelief, God or Satan, with the result that they will attain either Paradise or the fire of hell.¹⁶

For Islam, the prophets are God's intermediaries to humanity. The prophets: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Moses and many others named and unnamed, delivered God's word to diverse peoples. They each had specific missions, but their messages are ultimately one: submit the self to the will of God. Jesus is one of the prophets. Though titled Messiah, he has no distinctive messianic role in the sense that Christians ascribe to him, nor is he in any sense divine. His message and purpose were consistent with those of the prophets before and after him. The revelation to Muhammad (c. 570-632 A.D.) - the Seal of the Prophets - is the perfect and accurate record of God's message by the prophets of every age.¹⁷

As a religion to be practiced, Islam has five obligations that are required of every Muslim, called the Five Pillars: (1) confession of faith in God and in Muhammad as God's messenger, (2) daily prayer at the five appointed times, (3) fasting during the month Ramadan, (4) paying an alms-tax and giving charity to the poor, and (5) the *hajj*, namely pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca and its sacred shrine, the *Kaaba*.¹⁸ "All Muslims have a duty to make *hajj* at least once in a lifetime if their circumstances permit."¹⁹

The *hajj* offers each individual Muslim the experience of a personal integration in the context of the *ummah*, with God at its center. As in most religions, peace and harmony are important pilgrimage themes, and once the pilgrims have entered the sanctuary violence of any kind is forbidden. Pilgrims may not even kill an insect or speak a harsh word.²⁰

Islam's basic scripture is the *Qur'an*, which was revealed by the angel Gabriel specifically in Arabic. Gabriel recited its verses to prophet Muhammad,

¹⁶ Andrew Wilson, ed., 1991, p. 8.

¹⁷ Andrew Wilson, ed., 1991, p. 8.

¹⁸ Andrew Wilson, ed., 1991, pp. 8-9.

¹⁹ Karen Armstrong, *A History of God, The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994, p.156.

²⁰ Karen Armstrong, 1994, p. 157.

who in turn taught them to his followers who memorized them and wrote them down on leaves and scraps of paper. With regard to the authority of texts beyond the Qur'an, Islam is split into two large sects, *Sunni* and *Shi'i* or *Shi'a*. *Sunni* Muslims revere the *Sunnah*, the teaching of Muhammad based upon *Hadith*, the traditions and sayings of the prophet Muhammad as recollected and transmitted by his Companions. Most of the *Hadith* concern the specifics of Islamic law, but some concern matters of faith, morality and eschatology. The *Shi'i* tradition in Islam has its own collections of *Hadith*, which differ only in minor details from the *Sunni* collections. What most distinguishes *Shi'i* Islam is its reverence for 'Ali (d. 661 A.D.), the son-in-law of Muhammad. 'Ali who became the fourth Caliph and ruled the Muslim peoples for seven years until his death as a martyr is regarded as the perfect exemplar of Islam. For *Shi'i* Muslims the *Nahjul Balagha*, the collection of Ali's sermons and sayings, is a sacred scripture second only to the Qur'an.²¹

c) *Hinduism*: is one of the oldest extant, textually based religions in the world. The Hindu religious tradition defies description by any simple list of doctrines and practices. Some branches are monistic and see divinity as pervading all reality, some are largely dualistic and posit reality as the interrelation of the divine Spirit (*Purusha*) and primordial material nature (*prakriti*), some are monotheistic and revere a personal God, and still others worship the Nameless and Formless God with many names and forms. A Hindu may worship God in the form of Krishna or Shiva, or seek unity with the impersonal Brahman, yet he will regard all these as symbols for one Ultimate Reality.²²

For Hinduism, Brahman or Ultimate Reality is both personal and impersonal and appears in many forms. It is accessible through a variety of paths (*margas*): knowledge (*jnana yoga*), devotion (*bhakti yoga*) and action (*karma yoga*); it is

²¹ Andrew Wilson, ed., 1991, p. 9.

²² Andrew Wilson, ed., 1991, p. 10.

realized by those sages who have attained union or communion with that Reality. On the other hand, creation and the phenomena of worldly life are temporal and partial. Hindus further hold the doctrine of *karma*, which says that each thought, word, and action brings appropriate recompense, thereby upholding the moral government and ultimate justice of the cosmos and the doctrine of reincarnation, understood as a dreary round of continued suffering or a continuous series of fresh opportunities to improve one's lot. Inequality of endowment and fortune is explained as the working out of karma and not as the result of some discrimination by God. Hindus also uphold the traditions of family and social life with its four stages of student, householder, spiritual seeker and ascetic who renounces all for the sake of spiritual progress and the welfare of all. In Hinduism, there are four goals of life: righteousness (*dharmā*), worldly success (*artha*), pleasure (*kama*) and spiritual freedom (*moksha*).²³

“The Hindus divide their sacred writings into two distinct categories that they call *Śhruti* (what is heard) and *Smṛiti* (what is remembered).”²⁴ The *Śhruti* are the most ancient and authoritative revealed literature: these are the *Vedas* that include the *Samhitas*, *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas*, and *Upanishads*. The four *Vedas*: the *Rig Veda*, *Sama Veda*, *Yajur Veda* and *Atharva Veda* have been transmitted orally from generation to generation for more than three thousand years. They are written in verse and contain hymns, ritual formulae, chants and prayers. Many of the Vedic hymns are addressed to deified powers of nature that are understood as manifestations of cosmic truth. There are 108 Upanishads, composed at various times (900 to 200 B.C.). Etymologically, Upanishad means “sitting near” and Upanishads record the philosophical and mystical teachings given by the ancient sages as they sat surrounded by their disciples. The general trend of the Upanishads

²³ Andrew Wilson, ed., 1991, p. 10.

²⁴ Mariasusai Dhavamony; “Hinduism”, in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000, p. 427.

is to identify Reality as supra-personal Brahman, who is “not this, not that” – beyond any particular description – and who is one with the *Atman* or universal “Self residing” in the heart of each person. They teach that liberation is to realize the *Atman* within while transcending the ego-self that is identified with the “psycho-physical organism”, its actions and desires.²⁵

“The second category (*smriti*) which does not have the rank of being the eternal truths, comprises the *Sutras* (philosophical aphorisms), *Dharma Sastras* (the Law books), the *Puranas* (stories about the great gods), and the two national epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*.”²⁶ The most widely known Hindu scripture is the *Bhagavad Gita*. Even though it is composed several centuries before the beginning of our era, *Bhagavad Gita* is usually raised to the status of an Upanishad. Sharing many affinities with the older Upanishads, it sanctions several paths for realizing the highest goal of life. But it is also distinctively monotheistic, teaching that devotion (*bhakti*) is the supreme way to approach God and receive His grace.²⁷

d) *Buddhism*: originates with the life and teaching of Siddhartha Gautama (c. 581-501 B.C.). His title, the *Buddha* (Enlightened One), refers to the fact that after a prolonged period of searching the Indian religious traditions, he achieved a state of enlightenment while sitting under the tree. The Buddha avoided dogma and metaphysical speculation in his teaching and concentrated on the essentials for spiritual development. He thus set out the Middle Way, a pathway to enlightenment and *Nirvana* (extinction) avoiding the extremes of asceticism and self-indulgence. Buddhism evolved into many schools, of which two major branches survive: *Theravada* Buddhism which spread to Sri Lanka and throughout Southeast Asia,

²⁵ Andrew Wilson, ed., 1991, p. 11.

²⁶ Mariasusai Dhavamony, 2000, p.428.

²⁷ Cf. Andrew Wilson, ed., 1991, p. 11.

and *Mahayana* Buddhism which spread northward to Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea and Japan.²⁸

Theravada Buddhism, the Teaching of the elders, claims to preserve the original teaching of the Buddha. It teaches the ideal of the *arahant* (Skt. *Arhat*), one who has achieved liberation from all fetters of selfhood and craving. The goal of liberation, *Nibbana* (Skt. *Nirvana*), can be reached through self-purification and proper understanding of the *Dhamma* (Skt. *Dharma*), which is specifically the Four Noble Truths: (1) all existence is suffering (*dukkha*): we must inevitably live with things we dislike and separate from things we like; (2) suffering is due to grasping for existence and craving (*tanha*) for the pleasures of sense and mind; (3) the cessation of suffering comes with giving up all craving and grasping; and (4) the practice that leads to the cessation of suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path. This path to salvation requires constant practice and training; there is no appeal to divine grace. More important than ascetic practices is the realization that the self has no reality; it is a mirage born of conditioning and is impermanent. As there is no self, also there is no God in the sense of a Being with whom one could identify his Self.²⁹

The Theravada scriptures are written in *Pali*, a language formerly of northwestern India. The canon of Theravada scriptures is called the *Tipitaka* (Skt. *Tripitaka*) or Three Baskets. They are divided as follows: the *Vinaya Pitaka*, collections of rules and precepts for the order monks; the *Sutta Pitaka*, discourses and dialogues of the Buddha; and the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, scholastic and philosophical treatises.³⁰

Mahayana Buddhism, the Great Vehicle, (which emerged between about the first century B.C. and the first century A.D.) is divided into many schools or sects,

²⁸ Andrew Wilson, ed., 1991, p. 15.

²⁹ Andrew Wilson, ed., 1991, p. 15.

³⁰ Andrew Wilson, ed., 1991, p. 15.

each with their own scriptures, some attributed to Gautama Buddha and some to other figures, such as the heavenly buddhas. Many Mahayana schools identify an eternal, transcendent reality, Suchness (Tathata), the Truth or Law, which governs this Universe. For the enlightened, everything is considered as a manifestation of this Truth; within human beings it is present as the Buddha Nature, the pure Mind, which is realized as one develops on the path to Buddhahood. Suchness is by no means a Creator God in the sense of Western religions; from the Buddhist point of view the word "God" is too often loaded with connotations from other traditions to be helpful for understanding Buddhism. Nevertheless, we find that Mahayana Buddhism contains doctrines of Ultimate Reality and grace that are absent from the doctrines of the Theravada school.³¹

Furthermore, Mahayana Buddhism teaches the ideal of the *bodhisattva*, the man of great compassion who gives himself for the liberation of all beings. In the other word; if the Theravada ideal figure is the *arhat*, who achieves Nirvana, in Mahayana the ideal figure is the *bodhisattva*, who puts off reaching Nirvana in order to help others on the spiritual path. The absence of the reality of self-means that all things are interrelated and indivisible, hence the salvation of the individual is inseparable from compassion for others. A distinctive feature of Mahayana Buddhism is that certain great *bodhisattvas*, whom we may regard as the symbolic manifestations of the Buddha's perfections of wisdom, morality, charity and compassion, are worshipped on the popular level as spiritual benefactors.³²

The vast Mahayana collections of scriptures are written in Sanskrit. Each of the several Mahayana school venerates certain particular canonical scriptures, supplemented by texts from the founders of the school. Most Mahayanists also accept the authority of the texts in Pali canon. Among the most beloved of Mahayana scriptures is the *Lotus Sutra (Saddharma-pundarika)*. It teaches the

³¹ Andrew Wilson, ed., p. 16.

³² Andrew Wilson, ed., p. 16.

doctrine of the One Vehicle, which promises that regardless of their particular sect and way of Buddhist practice, all beings will surely attain Buddhahood. It contains the doctrine of the eternal cosmic Buddha, whose abundant and universal grace is the source of this salvation.³³ About this grace, *Lotus Sutra 5* says

I am the Tathagata
 The Most Honored among men;
 I appear in the world
 Like unto this great cloud,
 To pour enrichment on all
 Parched living beings,
 To free them from their misery
 To attain the joy of peace,
 Joy of the present world,
 And joy of Nirvana.³⁴

1.1.2. Vatican II and the Post-Conciliar Magisterium on Religions

“In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different people are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions”³⁵. With this sentence, Vatican II has marked a true break with the past and a new beginning where the Church’s relations with the other religions³⁶. “It was the first ecumenical council to speak of other religions in a positive tone”³⁷. It also means that *the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)* promulgated on October 28, in 1965, “marked a decisive step in Roman Catholic theology of religions”³⁸.

³³ Cf. Andrew Wilson, ed., pp. 16-17.

³⁴ Andrew Wilson, ed., p. 361.

³⁵ *Nostra Aetate* 1.

³⁶ Cf. Jacques Dupuis, S.J., 2000, p. 11.

³⁷ Jacques Dupuis, S.J., *Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991, p. 136.

³⁸ Gavin D’Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000, p. 101.

In fact the Council, at its inception in 1962, had no intention of speaking about Islam or the other non-biblical religions. Before the Council, between 1959 and 1961, bishops, religious superiors and universities throughout the world were consulted regarding the agenda. A few, but very few indeed, in their reply proposed that Islam should be discussed. However, the preparatory commission for the Schema on the Missions suppressed all reference to Islam and to other non-Christian religions. Islam made its appearance in the debates during the second session of the Council, in connection with the text on the Jews. In 1962 Pope John XXIII had personally requested Cardinal Bea, the President of the Secretariat for Christian Unity, to oversee the drafting of a statement on the Jews. This was to have been chapter 4 of the Schema of the *Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio)*. When this text was presented to the Council on November 1963, it met with fierce opposition from the bishops of the Arab-Muslim world, especially the Middle East, where the question of Israel was a burning issue and its political and religious aspects were not easy to separate. Thus the Appendix on the Jews and Islam – after many Fathers of the Council, particularly Asian and African, were unhappy about the Appendix being limited to the exclusion of Hinduism, Buddhism and the traditional African religions – was detached from the Schema on Ecumenism and came to form an independent declaration on non-Christian religions.³⁹

The Declaration *Nostra Aetate* places the meeting of the Church with the world religions⁴⁰ in the broad context of the common origin and destiny of all people in God: “One is the community of all peoples, one their origin.... One also is their final goal, God”⁴¹ and in the context of the search to answer the ultimate

³⁹ Cf. Michael L. Fitzgerald and Robert Casper, *Signs of Dialogue. Christian Encounter with Muslims*, Zamboanga: Silsilah Publications, 1992, pp. 234-235.

⁴⁰ It must be noted that the religions are seen to be differently related to the Church in theological and historical terms: Judaism first, then Islam, and finally Hinduism, Buddhism and “other religions to be found everywhere”. (See. Gavin D’Costa, 2000, p. 102).

⁴¹ *Nostra Aetate* I.

questions that beset the human spirit: "Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of human condition, which...deeply stir the hearts of man.... What, finally is the ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our experience: whence do we come and where are we going?"⁴². Furthermore, Vatican II develops the theme of authentic values found in non-Christians and in their religious traditions. That is expressed as follows:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ, "the way the truth, and the life" (John 14, 6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself (cf. 2 Co 5:18f).

The Church therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.⁴³

This assertion of the existence of authentic values in the non-Christian religious traditions is in accordance with the other principal texts of the conciliar documents, especially *the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)* (16-17) and *the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church (Ad Gentes)* (3, 9, 11)⁴⁴. *Lumen Gentium* 16 affirms that God's assistance for salvation is available not only to people in different religious situations but also to those who, "without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life". Everything they have that is good and true "is considered by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel (cf. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Praeparatio evangelica* I, 1), a gift from him who enlightens all human

⁴² *Nostra Aetate* 1.

⁴³ *Nostra Aetate* 2.

⁴⁴ Cf. Jacques Dupuis, S.J., 2000, pp. 162-165; 1991, pp. 136-140.

beings that they may finally have life" (LG 16). The same combination of subjective dispositions and objective values is found in *Ad Gentes*.

In addition to developing the themes: (1) the salvation of people outside the Church; (2) the authentic values found in non-Christians and their religious traditions; and (3) the Church's appreciation of these values and the consequent attitude which it takes toward the religious traditions and their members⁴⁵, Vatican II directs the Church towards the practice of dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions (NA 2-3; AG 11-12, 16, 34; GS 92; AA 27). This theme will be more developed by the Pontificates of Paul VI and John Paul II.

The encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, published by Paul VI between the second and third sessions of Vatican II (6 August 1964), marks the appearance of "dialogue" on the program of the Church renewal intended by the Council. He stressed the need for friendly dialogue with all people. It is based on God's free initiative in revealing himself to humanity from which he expects a free response. In this encyclical the Pope distinguishes by way of concentric circles four classes of people with whom the Church must be in dialogue: with the entire world, with the members of other religions, with the other Christian Churches, and, finally at the inner circle, within the Catholic Church itself.⁴⁶ Furthermore, in an *Address to Representatives of Various Religions* (1964), the Pope stressed the need for mutual respect and acceptance: "... we must come together with our heart, in mutual understanding, esteem and love.... we must also begin to work together to build the common future of the human race.... It must be built on a common love that embraces all and has its roots in God who is Love."⁴⁷

Following upon the 1974 synod of bishops on the evangelization of the modern world, Paul VI published *the Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi* (8

⁴⁵ Cf. Jacques Dupuis, S.J., 2000, p. 162.

⁴⁶ See J. Neuner, S.J., and J. Dupuis, S.J., *The Christian Faith, in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, New York: Alba House, 1995, p. 398; Jacques Dupuis, S.J., 2000, p. 171.

⁴⁷ J. Neuner, S.J., and J. Dupuis, S.J., 1995, pp. 399-400.

December 1975). He speaks of the religions of the world in the context of the Church's evangelizing mission. The Pope notes that the religions' relationship to Christianity raises many questions, which need to be further studied, and stresses the exclusiveness of the religion of Jesus through with alone an "authentic and living relationship with God is truly established"⁴⁸.

While Pope Paul VI only mentions the Spirit in his document as the "principal agent of evangelization" (EN 75), Pope John Paul II affirms the operative presence of the Spirit of God in the religious life of non-Christians and the religious traditions to which they belong.⁴⁹ Already in his first encyclical letter, *Redemptor Hominis* (4 March 1979), John Paul II stressed "the aspect of his thought about the non-Christians that would become the key element of his teaching in their regard. This is: respect for the presence and activity of the Spirit in non-Christians and in their religions – a presence and activity which is seen above all in their practice of virtue, their spirituality and their prayer"⁵⁰.

Does it not sometimes happen that the firm belief of the followers of the non-Christians religions – a belief that is also an effect of the Spirit of truth operating outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body – can make Christians ashamed at often being themselves so disposed to doubt concerning the truths revealed by God and proclaimed by the Church?⁵¹

The most explicit text on the economy of the Spirit is to be found in the Encyclical on the Holy Spirit, *Dominum et Vivificantem* (18 May 1986), in which John Paul II developed the theme of the universal action of the Holy Spirit.

We cannot limit ourselves to the two thousand years, which have passed since the birth of Christ. We need to go further back, to embrace the whole of action of the Holy Spirit even before Christ – from the beginning, throughout the world, and especially in the economy of the Old Covenant. For this action has been exercised, in every place and at every time, indeed in every individual, according to the

⁴⁸ *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 53.

⁴⁹ Cf. Jacques Dupuis, S.J., 2000, p. 173.

⁵⁰ Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *Salvation Outside the Church?, Tracing the History of the Catholic Response*, New York: Paulist Press, 1992, p. 190; Cf. Jacques Dupuis, S.J., 2000, p. 175.

⁵¹ *Redemptor Hominis* 6.

eternal plan of salvation, whereby this action was to be closely linked with the mystery of the incarnation and redemption, which in its turn exercised its influence on those who believed in the future coming of Christ....

But we need to look further and go further afield, knowing that "the wind blows where it will" (Jn 3, 8) according to the image used by Jesus in his conversation with Nicodemus. The Second Vatican Council, centered primary on the theme of the Church, reminds us of the Holy Spirit's activity also "outside the visible body of the Church." The council speaks precisely of "all people of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly (cf. LG 16). For, since Christ died for all (cf. Rom 8, 32), and since all human beings are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being associated, in a way known to God, with the Paschal Mystery (GS 22)."⁵²

During the same year 1986, at the invitation of Pope John Paul II, there took place at Assisi an event that was surely unique in the history of the world, a Day of Prayer for Peace, in which representatives of the major Christian confessions and the major non-Christian religions of the world took part. The Pope explained the meaning of this event in his Christmas address to the members of the Roman Curia on December 22, 1986. He saw it as a "wonderful manifestation of that unity which binds us together, beyond the differences and divisions which are known to all". At Assisi, John Paul II "gave dramatic proof of his conviction that every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in every human heart"⁵³.

Once more the theme of the universal presence and activity of the Spirit recurs in the encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio* (7 December 1990). The text states that the presence of the Spirit affects not only individual persons but also the religious traditions themselves. On the one hand, it affirms that salvation in Christ is accessible to people outside the Church (RM 10). On the other hand, it affirms that although the unique mediation of Christ does not exclude participated forms of mediation, but they cannot be understood as parallel or complementary to Christ

⁵² *Dominum et Vivificantem* 53; see also J. Neuner, S.J., and J. Dupuis, S.J., 1995, p. 410-411, par. 1048.

⁵³ Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., 1992, p. 197.

(RM 5). John Paul insists that while salvation is offered to all, it is always salvation in Christ as the one mediator between God and mankind.

Based on the conviction that the recognition of spiritual gifts in other religions in no way diminishes the unique role of Christ as the one mediator between God and mankind; John Paul II, who personally engages in dialogue with members of other religions during his many pilgrimages, stressed inter-religious dialogue as part of the Church's evangelizing mission. "Understood as a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment, dialogue is not in opposition to the mission *ad gentes*: indeed it has special links with that mission and is one of its expression"(RM 55). "Through dialogue, the Church seeks to uncover the "seeds of the Word", a "ray of that truth which enlightens all men"; these are found in individuals and in the religious traditions of mankind"(RM 56).

1.2. Some Basic Elements of Traditional Christian Faith

The present review of Vatican II and of the post-conciliar Magisterium has shown that on the one hand, there is openness towards other religious traditions. Moreover, John Paul II is even more positive and shows a greater disposition toward a broader perspective with his emphasis on the universal active presence of the Spirit of God and of Christ in the religious traditions themselves. On the other hand, this recognition does not bring him to a conclusion that the non-Christian religions are *per se* ways of salvation. In other words, it does not mean the dialogue and collaboration with other religions replace the "*missio ad gentes*"⁵⁴ or, moreover, would displace Christ from the center of the divine plan of salvation. For Vatican II,

⁵⁴ The necessity of "the missions to all nations" is understood by the Church as flowing from Christ's explicit command (Mk 16, 16) as well as from the Church's intimate nature. The Church must become present to all nations in order to make Christ known to them and to gather them into one people of God according to the divine plan of salvation and for God's glory (Cf. *Ad Gentes* 1; 5; 7).

Paul VI and John Paul II, it is obvious that the Church's constant mission is to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus, who is at the same time the mediator and the fullness of all revelation⁵⁵.

Living in the context of the religious plurality, however, it means there must be an opening to the truths of non-Christian religions, but at the same time, there must always a commitment to the basic elements of traditional Christian Faith. The commitment to the Christian tradition is the aspect that is strongly stressed by document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith *On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church (Dominus Iesus)* (6 August 2000). "The document takes up what has been taught in previous magisterium documents, in order to reiterate certain truths that are part of the Church's Faith."⁵⁶

In the context of religious pluralism, there are two traditional Christian axioms that become into focus. The first states that salvation is through Jesus Christ alone. The other one states that God desires the salvation of all humankind. But it must be noted that these axioms cannot be separated one another. *Dominus Iesus* 13 explains as follow:

In the New Testament, the universal salvific will of God is closely connected to the sole mediation of Christ: "(God) desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a ransom for all" (1 Tim 2,4-6).

1.2.1. Jesus Christ, the Unique Savior of the World

"That salvation is attained only through faith in Jesus is a constant affirmation in the New Testament."⁵⁷ In the New Testament the faith of the

⁵⁵ *Dei Verbum* 2; see also EN 53; RM 5; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 65.

⁵⁶ *Dominus Iesus* 3.

⁵⁷ International Theological Commission, "Christianity and the World Religions", in *Origins* 27: 10, 1997, p. 155.

primitive Christian community found expression in various ways and each of the authors of the New Testament presents Jesus from his own point of view. But this diversity is not an obstacle to their fundamental agreement of faith in the divinity and humanity of Jesus. From beginning, the Christian community always believed in a man who was "Lord", that is to say, God, as pointed by Mark's formula: "The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mk 1,1).⁵⁸

The Act of the Apostles recounts the earliest apostolic preaching. In this preaching Jesus is presented as the one in whom the salvation offered by God to mankind is concentrated exclusively and totally. Pentecost is its primordial demonstration, perpetuated in the development of the Christian community. The risen Christ, raised up to the right hand of God pours forth the Holy Spirit. This is the essential fact that governs the earliest proclamation of the faith, as we see from the conclusion of Peter's discourse: "For this reason the whole house of Israel can be certain that God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ" (Ac 2, 36). Other comparable affirmations are made concerning Jesus in his glorious state: "By his own right hand God has now raised him up to be leader and Savior" (Ac 5, 31); "God has appointed him to judge everyone, alive or dead" (Ac 10, 42; cf. 17, 31).⁵⁹

Gerald O'Collins explains the omnipresent activity of the Christ's glorious states:

The resurrection transformed Christ's humanity and set it beyond the normal limits of space and time. In his glorified humanity he has become present to people of all times and places. Hence in this risen state Christ can "show the way to" and "strengthen" every person through his Holy Spirit, offering "to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery" (*Gaudium et Spes* 10 and 22). The omnipresent activity of the risen Christ universally mediates the divine life.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Cf. Jean Galot, S.J., *Who is Christ? A Theology of the Incarnation*, Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1980, pp. 101-102.

⁵⁹ Cf. Jean Galot, S.J., 1980, p. 67.

⁶⁰ Gerald O'Collins, *Interpreting Jesus*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983, p. 204.

The term "Christ" is used a number of times in the Act of the Apostles, not merely as a name given to Jesus but as a title. When Peter declares that Israel must acknowledge Jesus as "the Christ", he gives the name its full messianic value, understanding it in the light of Pentecost. Jesus is "the Christ", "the Anointed One" in the sense that he is filled with the Holy Spirit to the point of pouring him out upon mankind (cf. Ac 2,33).⁶¹

The title "Lord" which Peter associates with that of "Christ" also indicates a divine rank in the context in which it is spoken. Psalm 110 is cited in the perspective of transcendence over David, for the latter "never went up to heaven" (Ac 2, 34). According to the testimony of the Gospels, Jesus had cited this Psalm to evoke this transcendence, pointing out to his adversaries that the Messiah was to be the Lord of David rather than his son (cf. Mt 22, 45; Mk 12, 37; Lk 20, 44). Peter sees this transcendence in the light of Jesus' glorious elevation. Here, the "Lord" is the one who has power even over the Spirit, that is to say, supreme power.⁶²

It is above all the quality of "Savior" (Ac 5, 31) that witnesses to Jesus' divine power. In the Old Testament God was looked upon as the Savior: "Am I not Yahweh? There is no god besides me, a God of integrity and a Savior; there is none apart from me" (Is 45, 21)⁶³. This predicate is now transferred to Jesus, with the same exclusivism as one was shown for the God of Israel: "For of all the names in the world given to men, this is the only one by which we can be saved" (Ac 4, 12). Thus, Jesus also has a role that is God's own.⁶⁴

Saint Paul calls Jesus "the Son of God" (2 Co 1, 19; Gal 2, 20; Eph 4, 13), or categorically "the Son" (1 Co 15, 28). On a number of occasions he evokes the relationship between God and "his Son". God sent "his own Son" (Rm 8, 3; Gal 4,

⁶¹ Cf. Jean Galot, S.J., 1980, p. 68.

⁶² Cf. Jean Galot, S.J., 1980, p. 69.

⁶³ "In the Septuagint version the Greek term "Savior" (Soter) was habitually a predicate of God." (Jean Galot, S.J., 1980, p. 70).

⁶⁴ Cf. Jean Galot, S.J., 1980, p. 70.

4); he has intended us "to become true images of his Son" (Rm 8, 29), etc. When Paul was thrown to the ground on his way to persecute Christians, he understood that this Jesus was alive and endowed with divine power. It was in the glorious Christ that Saul recognized this divine power, and more specifically in Christ as he had manifested himself to him personally. But it must be stressed that Paul conceives the divine sonship not as acquired or the result of adoption. Christ's preexistence is implied in Paul's affirmation that God sent his Son: "God dealt with sin by sending his own Son in a body as physical as any sinful body, and in that body God condemned sin" (Rm 8, 3), "... when the appointed time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born a subject of the Law" (Gal 4, 4).⁶⁵

In the Prologue, John immediately shows how far his faith in the divinity of Jesus goes. The affirmation of Jesus' divinity is presented under a twofold aspect. Eternally, the Word "was with God" and the Word "was God" (Jn 1, 1). The Word has always an intimate relationship with the Father. Here the Word is presented as the only Son of the Father (Jn 1, 14-18). For John the attribute of Son of God is the essential object of faith. He declares he wrote his Gospel for the purpose of arousing this faith: "These are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through his name" (Jn 20, 31). If John preferred "Jesus is the Son of God", it would express the total mutual relationship between the Son and the Father as well as their complete unity: "The Father and I are one" (Jn 10, 30; 17, 21). John did not limit himself; he also describes the act of the Incarnation. He describes this act as the sending of the Son by the Father, an act in which God reveals his deepest reality: "God is love. God's love for us was revealed when God sent into the world his only Son so that we could have life through him" (1 Jn 4, 8-9; cf. 4, 10.14).⁶⁶ Through incarnation Christ, the Son of God, moved into new historical solidarity with all human beings.

⁶⁵ Cf. Jean Galot, S.J., 1980, pp. 73-74.

⁶⁶ Cf. Jean Galot, S.J., 1980, pp. 96-99.

In the words of *Gaudium et Spes*, by his incarnation “the Son of God has in a certain way united himself with each man” (n. 22). “Hence to receive salvation through other men and women is to receive salvation through the incarnate Christ.”⁶⁷

About the salvific value of the use of the title “Son” by Paul and John, Wolfhart Pannenberg writes:

The Son’s sending by the Father and his incarnation had as their goal the salvation of the world (Jn 3, 17). In keeping with this goal was the human distinctiveness of Jesus in his work and his history. For as he made place for God’s lordship among us, his work also sought a renewal of human society. Its messianic character as this found expression in his crucifixion and resurrection also meant an expansion of Israel’s messianic hope to the whole of the human race. Paul and John represented this expansion by their use of the title “Son”. The Son of the heavenly Father, who is the Creator and Father of us all, came to save the world in the person of Jesus. Paul emphasized the universality of this event by calling Jesus the absolute eschatological man, a second Adam.⁶⁸

Paul’s parallel between Adam and Christ (cf. 1 Co 15, 20-22. 44-49) implies the universal role of Christ. Paul underlines that Christ died for everybody, without any exception (2 Co 5, 14-15). Therefore, he is able to affirm that God has reconciled the world to Himself in Christ (2 Co 5, 19). In sharp contrast with the collective figure of Adam, who has brought sin and death to human beings, the obedient Christ has conducted all to justification and life (Rm 5, 12-21; 1 Co 15, 20-28. 45-49). This redemption will even have an effect on the whole of creation (Rm 8, 18-23) An ancient christological hymn quoted in a deuteropauline letter emphatically expresses the universality of the role of Christ in creation and in redemption (Col 1, 15-20).⁶⁹ “If the first Adam has a universal relevance as the first man and the first sinner, Christ also must have a salvific significance for all, even though the terms of this significance are not clearly spelled out. The vocation of

⁶⁷ Gerald O’Collins, 1983, p. 204.

⁶⁸ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology II*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd, 1991, p. 397.

⁶⁹ Cf. Gerald O’Collins, *Cristologia, uno studio biblico, storico e sistematico su Gesù Cristo*, Brescia: Queriniana, 1999, pp. 293-294.

every human being, who now bears the image of the earthly Adam, is to become an image of the heavenly Adam.”⁷⁰

It is obvious that the salvific work of Christ for us is not separable from his person and from his nature. All of the New Testament affirms without the least hesitation that Christ is the only Savior of all the people. The universality of the role of Christ means, particularly, that through him sins are forgiven, the life of justification and grace is granted and the new existence as adopted children of God is made accessible⁷¹. The role of Christ for human salvation could be synthesized in a new axiom: *Extra Christum nulla salus*.⁷²

1.2.2. The Universality of God's saving Plan

Firstly it must be noted that the mystery of the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, is the manifestation and fulfillment of the God's ultimate offer of unconditional love. The universal salvific plan of the One and Triune God has a center in love or, better said, God's saving plan is God's self-communication to us in love because “God is love” (1 Jn 4, 8). “This is the revelation of God's love for us, that God sent his only Son into the world that we might have life through him... that the Father sent his Son as Savior of the world” (1 Jn 4, 9. 14).

God's self-communication to human beings began when he created the world. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (Gen 1,1). For God “has no other reason for creating than his love and goodness.”⁷³ Creation

⁷⁰ International Theological Commission, 1997, p. 155-156.

⁷¹ There are three traditional models to interpret and express the redemption which Jesus brought to the human condition; namely, liberation from evil, redemption as expiation from guilt and transforming love (cf. Gerald O'Collins, 1983, pp. 142-167; 1999, pp. 279-292).

⁷² Cf. Gerald O'Collins, 1999, p. 293.

⁷³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* par. 293.

proceeds from God's free will" and "he wanted to make his creatures share in his being, wisdom and goodness: 'For you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created' (Rev 4, 11)."⁷⁴ "The ultimate purpose of creation is that God who is the Creator of all things may be at last become 'all in all', thus simultaneously assuring his own glory and our beatitude (AG 2; cf. 1 Co 15, 28)."⁷⁵ "Creation is the foundation of 'all God's saving plans', the 'beginning of the history of salvation' that culminates in Christ".⁷⁶ "Creation is revealed as the first step toward the covenant of the one God with his People, the first and universal witness to God's all-powerful love (cf. Gen 15, 5; Jr 33, 19-26)."⁷⁷

The Old Testament describes God as King first and foremost when seen as the Creator, the King of the universe, the Victor over the monster of chaos, the Sustainer of the universe. In the first chapter of Genesis, God gives dominion to human beings over the created order. This dominion is actually a stewardship since dominion derives from God alone. But it must be noted that here God is acclaimed and experienced not only as King of Israel, but in particular as the cosmic King who created the world by defeating the chaos of nothingness that stood in opposition to creation (Ps 74, 12-17).⁷⁸

But God did not create the world, leaving it itself. He is continually present in the world. Despite the refusal from the humanity, the initial action of love in creation is continued and broadened in the alliance between God and men. St. Irenaeus of Lyons wrote that God made four alliances with the human beings: that in Adam with the whole of humanity, that in Noah with all the nations, that in Moses with Israel and that in Jesus with the new people of God (cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 3,11,8). The preceding alliances were nevertheless ordered to

⁷⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* par. 295.

⁷⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* par. 294.

⁷⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* par. 280.

⁷⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* par. 288.

⁷⁸ Cf. John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God, the Message of Jesus Today*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis books, 1998, pp. 27-28.

the last one. Abel, Enoch and Noah, who were not Israelis, are proposed in the New Testament as models of faith (cf. Heb 11, 4-7). Melchizedek, king of Salem, the high priest of the nations, blesses Abraham, who is the father of all believers (cf. Heb 7, 1-17). In the book of Malachi God says: "From farthest east to farthest west my name is great among the nations, and everywhere incense and a pure gift are offered to my name, since my name is great among the nations" (Ml 1,11). So, the Bible introduces the action of God that transcends the confines of the chosen people to penetrate the history of all the nations and the life of each individual. God therefore is the Creator and the Father of all the people, of all the nations and of all the human beings (Am 9, 7; Is 19, 19-25; 45, 1).⁷⁹

The God who wants to save all is the Father (*Abba*) of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Father wanted to establish the covenant in Jesus, who perceived this as the Kingdom of God, which was to come through him into the world as God's unconditional love, a love "that knows no limits in fulfilling the age-old promise of salvation for every person and the whole of creation"⁸⁰. The breaking-in of the Kingdom of God takes place through the ministry of Jesus, in which the newness of the Kingdom visibly manifests itself. The Kingdom as a present reality becomes visible on Jesus' works and his life⁸¹. Jesus' miracles demonstrate that God wants to repair the brokenness of human existence and allow us to participate in the divine life. Healings, as well as exorcisms, demonstrate the presence of God's Kingdom in the world now. In his life, the criterion of the Kingdom becomes incarnate and is made visible. In the presence of God, Jesus lives as the Son with a total dedication to the Father who is everything to him. "My food is to do the will of him who sent me" (Jn 4, 34). In the presence of other human beings he lives as one who welcomes sinners, acts like a servant and demonstrates that every human being can

⁷⁹ Cf. Jose Kuttianimattathil, "Gesù Cristo Salvatore Universale", in Angelo Amato, ed., *Trinità in Contesto*, Roma: LAS, 1994, pp. 300-302.

⁸⁰ John Fuellenbach, 1998, p. 220.

⁸¹ Cf. John Fuellenbach, 1998, p. 221.

look forward to a future. He was totally dedicated to his mission, that is, to us. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15, 13). God's unconditional love reaches its ultimate climax in the death of Jesus. "In the cry of this dying Jesus of Nazareth, God's very nature is revealed: unconditional, compassionate love. How incomprehensible is God's love for us! (Eph 3, 14-19)."⁸² The cross becomes the climax of God's self-communication in the history of humankind.

Kahlil Gibran describes the God the Father's love that is proclaimed and realized by Jesus, very well:

This man Jesus, this Nazarene, He has spoken of a too great God to be extraneous to the soul of the man; much too great to punish; much too fond to put aside memory of the sins of his creatures.⁸³

God's plan of salvation in Christ precedes the creation of the world (cf. Eph 1, 3-10) and is realized with the dispatch of Jesus to the world, the proof of the endless love and the tenderness that the Father has for humanity (cf. Jn 3, 16-17; 1 Jn 4, 9-10). This love of God reaches up to the delivery of Christ unto death for the salvation of men and for the reconciliation of the world (cf. Rm 5, 8-11; 8, 3. 32; 2 Co 5, 18-19). The paternity of God, which the New Testament generally has connected with the faith of Jesus, opens to ampler perspectives in some passages (cf. Eph 3, 14-15; 4, 6). God is the God of the Hebrews and of the Gentiles; the salvation of God that is in Jesus, is granted to all the nations (cf. Lk 2, 30; 3, 6; Ac 28, 28).⁸⁴

According to 1 Tm 2, 3-4: "God our savior ... wants everyone to be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth." The will of salvation doesn't know restrictions, but it is united to the desire that the men know the truth. (Cf. 1 Tm 4,

⁸² John Fuellenbach, 1998, p. 234.

⁸³ Kahlil Gibran, "Gesù Figlio dell'uomo", in *Tutte le poesie e i racconti (edizioni integrali)*, Roma: Grandi Tascabili Economici Newton, 1993, p. 134.

⁸⁴ Cf. International Theological Commission, 1997, p. 155.

10: "God is the savior of the whole human race but particularly of all believers"). This will of salvation has, as a result, the necessity of the announcement of Christ. God the Father is also the destination toward which everything is moving. The last goal of the action of creation and redemption will be realized when everything is subjected to the Son: then "the Son himself will be subjected to the One who has subjected everything to him, so that God may be all in all" (1 Co 15, 28).⁸⁵

1.3. The Questions of Universal Salvation in Christ and in the Religions

"Is God listening to my Muslim neighbor's prayer?" The question is very simple, but Christians have difficulty in responding to it. At the heart of this question lie a number of profound theological issues. "With the unavoidable consciousness that Christianity exists in a world of religious plurality, the Christian attitude to other religions is a pressing issue on today's theological agenda"⁸⁶ and there is no room, if it ever was, in today's world for the arrogant domination of a religion claiming an exclusive mission and despising freedom.

"Does God save all or only those people who have embraced the Christian religion?" Theologically this question is expressed negatively by the axiom: *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus* ("Outside the Church there is no salvation"). These words are ancient and have the weight of a dogma⁸⁷. But for many today they are very questionable and, moreover, have no value. Wolfgang Beinert writes:

⁸⁵ Cf. International Theological Commission, 1997, p. 155.

⁸⁶ Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism, the Challenge of other Religions*, Oxford, 1986, p. 3.

⁸⁷ The Council of Florence (1442) in its *Decree for Jacobites* (profession of faith for the reconciliation of various groups of Monophysites) declared: "The Church firmly believes, professes and teaches that none of those who exist outside of the Catholic church, not only the pagans, but also the Jews or the heretics and the schismatic ones, can reach the life eternal; but they will go to the eternal fire, prepared for the devil and for his angels (Mt 25, 41), unless, before the end of their lives, they are joined to that same church.... No one, even if he shed his blood for the name of Christ, can be saved, unless he remain in the bosom and in the unity of the Catholic Church." (J. Neuner, S.J., and J. Dupuis, S.J., 1995, p. 285, par. 810; See H. Denzinger,

... In the supermarket of worldviews Catholicism and Christianity appear as one choice among many. Not everyone thinks this way, however. Within the Roman Catholic Church there are cadres of traditionalists and integralists who attribute this “supermarket mentality” to the fact that the *extra ecclesiam* statement has been forgotten or mitigated.⁸⁸

We have seen that God desires the salvation of all human beings and that “the life in the Spirit of God, which is the very essence of the grace of salvation, reaches each human being through the glorified humanity of Jesus Christ, inasmuch as the Spirit of God has become the Spirit of Christ and is communicated by him”⁸⁹. In accordance with the notion of God’s universal plan, Vatican II (LG 16) makes clear that salvation can be attained by anyone, be they religious or not, whether they have explicit belief in God or not, under three conditions⁹⁰: first, when through no fault of their own, they do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church; second, when they sincerely look for God and, under the influence of grace, strive to gratify the will of God; and, third, because these positive realities are but a preparation for the full and undiminished truth of the Gospel.

However, Vatican II did not intend to reject the “*extra*”-axiom, nor otherwise, to hold onto the axiom in its rigid form as Leonard Feeney (1949) did⁹¹. Although it can hardly be denied that this Council has marked a decisive change in Catholic thinking about the salvation of those “outside”, Vatican II provided a change of perspective that led to a way out. Its opening to other religions and the optimism which characterizes the approach of Vatican II to the question of salvation for the great majority of the people in the world who have never accepted Christian

Enchiridion symbolorum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum, bilingual edition edited by P. Hünermann, Bologna: EDB, 2000, par. 1351; also pars. 792; 802; 870; 875; 1870; 2865.)

⁸⁸ Wolfgang Beinert, “Who can be saved?”, in *Theology Digest* 38: 3, 1991, p. 223.

⁸⁹ Jacques Dupuis, S.J., 1991, p. 142.

⁹⁰ Gavin D’Costa, 2000, pp. 103-104.

⁹¹ Leonard Feeney (1949), a Jesuit priest, interpreted the axiom “*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*” literally, saying that there is “No salvation outside the Roman Catholic Church”. This dogma means that no one is saved who does not live and die as a Roman Catholic. He was excommunicated by an order of the holy see, approved by Pope Pius XII. (cf. Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., 1992, pp. 135-136.)

faith or baptism, do not mean that the Church has no role to play in the salvation of those who will never be her members on earth. Francis Sullivan explains the role of the Church according to Vatican II, writing:

Not only are they related to the Church by the grace which the Holy Spirit offers to them, but the Church is also the sign and instrument of their salvation. The necessity of the Church for the salvation of humanity, which the axiom "No salvation outside the Church" expressed in so negative and misleading a way, is the same truth that has received positive and profound theological expression in Vatican II's presentation of the Church as the "universal sacrament of salvation."⁹²

What is new in Vatican II is the idea of the Church as the "universal sacrament of salvation" (LG 48; cf. LG 1 and 9). What is meant is that the Church is primarily grasped as a societal reality. *Lumen Gentium* states that the sociological-empirical Church is "in Christ a... sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind" (LG 1). There is an intimate connection between salvation and Church, but not an identity. The sign is nothing without the signified, and the instrument cannot be separated from the work.⁹³ It is, however, clear that one is saved through Christ and at no time does Christ work without the Church. In this sense, then, the Church is in fact a necessary means of salvation. But it must be added that the Church should never forget that though a necessary means, it belongs to Christ.

There are some questions, which still require clarification. The more fundamental are: How and in what way does the Church actually effect salvation, especially when it is apparently not present? How does the salvific Mystery of Jesus Christ reach those who are outside the Church? What is the relationship between God's saving activity in the life, death and resurrection of Christ to God's presence

⁹² Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., 1992, pp. 160-161.

⁹³ Cf. Wolfgang Beinert, 1991, p. 304.

and activity in all history? And last but not least, there is the question about the meaning of non Christian religions and their role in the salvation of the world: Are non Christian religions, per se, ways of salvation? The last and controversial question appears since it is uncontroversial within Catholicism that non-Christians may be saved.

Gavin D'Costa, in his book *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (1986), sees that the questions which appeared concerning the universal salvation in Christ in the context of religious plurality can be conveniently focused in relation to two basic elements of traditional Christian faith⁹⁴: are the necessary mediation of Christ and the universal salvific will of God. He writes that if salvation is through Christ alone (Jesus did say according to John's Gospel: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me" (Jn 14, 6)) can the Christian still believe in a God who desires the salvation of all humankind (Ac 14, 17; 1 Tim 2, 4; Rm 2, 6-7)? Alternatively, still according to D'Costa, if the stresses fall on the second element that God desires the salvation of all humankind, is this salvation gained through or despite the non-Christian religions? If salvation occurs through these religions, what of Jesus' claim that he alone is "the way, and the truth, and the life" and Christianity's claim to absoluteness? If, however, salvation can be found outside Christianity but only despite, and not through the various religions, then how precisely does this happen?

How are these questions being answered by theologians? How has theology made sense of these two Christian truths? In the second chapter, we will describe and analyze the theology of religions. Generally speaking, any theology of religions

⁹⁴ Gavin D'Costa, 1986, pp. 4-5.

offers an interpretation for Christians of the meaning of other religions and their role, if any, in the salvation of the world. A theology of religions must make sense of two Christian truths: the uniqueness of Jesus and the universality of God's will to save. The contrasting attitudes toward these two axioms account for the three basic positions of the theology of religions: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.

CHAPTER 2

THE CONTEMPORARY PANORAMA OF THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

In his article, "Christ and Church: A Spectrum of Views" (1976), J. Peter Schineller writes: "It is no longer possible (if it ever was) to live as a Christian, or to do Christian theology, without considering the questions asked of the Christian, and claims made, by non-Christians."¹ He then continues his remark asserting that these questions cause us to examine our theological stances and we must make adjustments of many of the older theories and positions simply which do not fit the new experiences in the context of religious plurality.² In an attempt to answer that challenges of the world of religions, the theology of religions emerged.

The theology of religions is a theological discipline that is still young. It is essentially formed to the beginnings of the twentieth century and has had one of first expressions beginning from the position assumed by Karl Barth. Inside the Catholic tradition, the theology of religions was born during the period surrounding the Council Vatican II (1962-1965). Despite its young age, this discipline has known such a wide growth, few of which are homogeneous, that it is very difficult to pull together a panoramic vision that is really exhaustive. This plurality of

¹ J. Peter Schineller, S.J., "Christ and Church: A Spectrum of Views", in *Theological Studies* 37, 1976, pp. 545-546.

² Cf. J. Peter Schineller, S.J., 1976, p. 546.

attempts is *per se* an eloquent sign of the actual condition of the human family, in which the reality of the religions imposes itself upon Christianity as a problem that must face without further delays.³

“In fact, the topic of Christ and world religions is occupying a central position in contemporary theological discussions.”⁴ “Every theology of religions must come to terms with the necessity of faith in Jesus Christ for salvation and the universality of God’s offer of salvation”⁵ and attempt to relate the two axioms to each other. In other words, all theologies of religion hold these two basic elements of the Christian truth together in one way or another.⁶ The theology of religions feels the need to find a proper epistemological status and today this has not been reached yet.

There have been several attempts to classify the various positions of the theology of religions according to some basic models. In his article cited above, Peter Schineller, for example, distinguishes the different views as (1) *ecclesiocentric universe, exclusive Christology*; (2) *Christocentric universe, inclusive Christology*; (3) *Theocentric universe, normative Christology*; (4) *Theocentric universe, no normative Christology*.⁷ His four types focus more directly on the place and necessity of Christ and the Church for the salvation of mankind. Paul Knitter, in an article entitled “Catholic Theology of Religions at the Crossroads” (1986), adopts the categories proposed by H. R. Niebuhr⁸ for the relationship between Christ and culture and distinguishes: *a Christ* (1) *against the religions*; (2) *in the religions*; (3) *above the religions*; and (4) *together with the*

³ Cf. Giovanni Odasso, *Bibbia e Religioni: prospettive bibliche per la teologia delle religioni*, Roma: Urbaniana University Press, 1998, p. 32.

⁴ Joseph H. Wong, O.S.B. Cam., “Anonymous Christians: Karl Rahner’s Pneuma-Christocentrism and an East-west Dialogue”, in *Theological Studies* 55, 1994, p. 609.

⁵ James L. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths, Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions*, New York: Paulist Press, 1999, p. 14.

⁶ Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 14.

⁷ J. Peter Schineller, S.J., 1976, p. 550.

⁸ H. R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951.

religions.⁹ Angelo Amato, in his book *Gesù il Signore, saggio di cristologia* (1999), expounds the four categories borrowed by Knitter from Niebuhr adding a fifth model. He distinguishes the different models as (1) *exclusive Christ Savior*; (2) *constitutive Christ Savior*; (3) *normative Christ Savior*; (4) *relative Christ Savior*; (5) *optional Christ Savior*.¹⁰

Nevertheless many recent theologians prefer a tripartite division of opinions. They distinguish three fundamental perspectives: *ecclesiocentric*, *Christocentric*, *theocentric*¹¹ and in parallel with these, three basic positions, respectively designated *exclusivism*, *inclusivism*, and *pluralism*.¹² These three paradigms are rough divisions only, not strict definitions. Within each paradigm there exists a wide range of differences and nuances. The following adopt this nomenclature: Alan Race¹³, Harold Coward¹⁴, Gavin D'Costa¹⁵, Jacques Dupuis¹⁶, and James L. Fredericks¹⁷.

Gavin D'Costa in his book *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (1986) isolates the dominant paradigms underlying the different Christian attitudes to other religions – pluralism, exclusivism and inclusivism. He shows that the three paradigmatic positions are generated from either one or both of two basic axioms of traditional Christian faith: the necessary mediation of Jesus Christ and the universal

⁹ Paul Knitter, "Catholic Theology of Religions at the Crossroads", in *Christianity among World Religions, Concilium* 183: 1, 1986, pp. 99-107.

¹⁰ Angelo Amato, *Gesù il Signore, saggio di cristologia*, Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, 1999, pp. 587-591.

¹¹ Aloysius Pieris makes an equivalent distinction: Christ against the religions; the Christ of the religions; Christ among the religions. (cf. Aloysius Pieris, "Speaking of the Son of God", in *Jesus, Son of God, Concilium* 153: 3, 1982, pp. 65-70.)

¹² Cf. Jacques Dupuis, S.J., *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000, p. 184.

¹³ Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, London: SCM Press, 1983.

¹⁴ Harold Coward, *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985.

¹⁵ Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism. the Challenge of other Religions*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.

¹⁶ Jacques Dupuis, S.J., *Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions*, New York: Orbis Press, 1991.

¹⁷ James L. Fredericks, 1999.

salvific will of God.¹⁸ While exclusivism relies on the first axiom, neglecting the second, and pluralism on the second, to the detriment of the first, inclusivism alone succeeds in accounting for and holding both at once.

In accordance with D'Costa's argument, I shall give a recent panorama of the Christian (Protestant and Catholic) theology of religions using the distinction of the three basic positions of exclusivism, pluralism, inclusivism. I shall present one or two theologians as representatives of each paradigm. In addition, in this panorama I understand the term "paradigm" in a sense analogous to that used by Gavin D'Costa – that proposed by the philosopher of science, Thomas Kuhn – as "a whole set of methods and procedures dictated by a central problem-solving model"¹⁹. Moreover, every paradigm will be examined and analyzed using two preconditions: responsibility to the tradition and creativity to the fact of religious diversity.

In order for a theology of religions to be adequate to the needs of Christians today, it must equip us for dealing both responsibly and creatively with the intrusive fact of religious diversity. In living well with their non-Christian neighbors, Christians must be responsible to the demands of the Christian tradition regarding the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the salvation of the world as well as the universality of God's will to save. In addition, Christians must be creative in their willingness to understand their tradition in new ways as a result of what they have learned from their non-Christians neighbors.²⁰

2.1. Exclusivist Paradigm

The exclusivist paradigm has been characterized as claiming that Christianity is the only true religion. No other religious path is founded on Jesus Christ, the unique and unsurpassable savior of the world. Exclusivist theologians of religion maintain that other religions are marked by humankind's fundamental sinfulness

¹⁸ Cf. Gavin D'Costa, 1986, p. 18.

¹⁹ Gavin D'Costa, 1986, p. 6.

²⁰ James L. Fredericks, 1999, pp. 19-20.

and are therefore erroneous, and that Christ offers the only valid path to salvation. Therefore, they state that God's salvation is available to all, but only through Jesus Christ.²¹

Exclusivism represents the most restrictive position regarding the relationship of Christianity to the other religions. Jesus Christ is understood as the exclusive center of the universe. No other name but Jesus can save us. In order to obtain salvation it is necessary to have an explicit knowledge of, and personal commitment to, Jesus Christ who is the one mediator of salvation. The axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ("no salvation outside the Church") became the traditional teaching of the Church, that was the standard position of the Catholic Church on the other religions until Vatican II.²² "This exclusivist stance is adopted by many today, often within the evangelical tradition, although there is considerable diversity and debate between exponents sharing this paradigm."²³

2.1.1. Karl Barth (1886-1968)

Karl Barth, the representative of dialectical theology and the author who has had such notable influence upon the theology of our century, may be considered as the chief exponent of exclusivism, especially on the Protestant side. The thought of Barth on the religions is characterized by a deep evolution that brings the researchers to clearly distinguish two phases in the conception of the known Swiss theologian. In a first phase, present in the first edition of his commentary to the Letter to the Romans, published in 1919, Barth admits that charitable persons, sustained by the light of the reason, can reach the knowledge of God. In this optic

²¹ Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, pp. 14-15.

²² Cf. Joseph H. Wong, O.S.B. Cam., 1994, p. 116.

²³ Gavin D'Costa, 1986, p. 52.

the religions are seen by him as the eloquent testimony of the ascension of man toward God. In other words, religion is understood as the human attempt to reach God. This vision is abandoned in the following phase. It can already be seen in the second edition of his commentary to the Letter to the Romans, published in 1922, and it is developed in an organic and systematic way in his monumental work *Church Dogmatics*.²⁴

In *Church Dogmatics*²⁵, Barth makes four basic points to defend his belief that non-Christian faiths do not lead to salvation.²⁶ Barth's first point has to do with revelation²⁷ that is strongly distinguished from religion. Revelation is God's sovereign self-manifestation. In revealing himself, God is not under any compulsion or in compliance with any requirement imposed on him. In revelation, the complete freedom and sovereignty of God is made manifest to human beings as an utterly unprecedented truth that cannot be fully explained or predicted by any form of human philosophy, a truth that cannot be known apart from God's free decision to reveal himself. For this reason, when human beings are confronted with the self-manifestation of the living God, they realize that God and God alone is the sovereign Lord over all creation. In front of this realization of God's awesome sovereignty, human beings come to understand their own powerlessness and sinfulness. In revelation, we are struck by the truth that we are incapable of saving ourselves by means of our own wisdom, energy, ingenuity, or strength. Moreover, not only are human beings unable to know God, we cannot do anything to help ourselves.

Only God can save humanity. Our only hope lays in God's unmerited love, which is bestowed on us through Jesus Christ. God's final, unsurpassable revelation within the history of the human race. This revelation does not fulfill our previous

²⁴ Cf. Giovanni Odasso, 1998, p. 58.

²⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I / 2, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956, especially pp. 297-325.

²⁶ Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, pp. 16-19.

²⁷ Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, pp. 16.

attempts to save ourselves. The grace of God in Jesus does not complete the plans and projects that human beings have already started, nor fit in with human philosophy to complete what was still partial. God's self-manifestation through Jesus Christ replaces all of our attempts to save ourselves, "putting them in the shadows to which they belong"²⁸. For this reason, God's revelation brings us to the understanding that salvation is always in the name of Jesus Christ alone.²⁹

The revelation of God in Jesus Christ maintains that our justification and sanctification, our conversion and salvation, have been brought about and achieved once and for all in Jesus Christ. And our faith in Jesus Christ consists in our recognizing and admitting and affirming and accepting the fact that everything has actually been done for us once and for all in Jesus Christ. He is the assistance that comes to us. He alone is the Word of God that is spoken to us.³⁰

Barth's second point has to do with the implications of his understanding of revelation for our understanding of what a religion is.³¹ If there can be no knowledge of God apart from his special revelation within history, Jesus Christ, and if all of our attempts to know God from our own standpoint, based on human powers of reason or mystical intuition, are wholly and entirely futile, then what is a "religion"? What are Christians to say of the devotion of the Hindus, the renunciation of the Buddhists, and the submission of the Muslims? Do the great religions of the world lead us to knowledge of God? In Barth's view, religions, all religions without exception, are merely human creations. They offer only one example after another of our foolish, sinful attempts to justify ourselves apart from the grace of God. Worse still, religions offer human beings a way to bolt and bar the door against revelation. Religion is condemned as "unbelief"³² because as human effort to know God and attain salvation it attempts to do what only Jesus Christ can do.

²⁸ Karl Barth, 1956, p. 308.

²⁹ Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, pp. 16-17.

³⁰ Karl Barth, 1956, p. 308.

³¹ Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 17.

³² Karl Barth, 1956, p. 299-325.

To present Barth's thesis of religion as unbelief (ger. *Unglaube*), Garrett Green writes in his article as follows:

In characterizing religion as *Unglaube*, Barth has in mind not primarily "beliefs" or doctrines but rather a lack of *faith*, in the Reformation sense of *fiducia*, trust or confidence in the promises of God. Religion, Barth is saying, is an expression of faithlessness, the proclivity of human beings to disbelieve God's assurance of salvation in Christ and to rely instead on their own resources. He develops the thesis in two constructive propositions. First, revelation is God's offering and presentation of himself (CD 301). The ability to know God is therefore based solely on God's self-revelation, not on an inherent human religious capacity. Second, revelation is the act by which God through grace reconciles humanity to himself. Since the practical aim of all human religious activity is self-justification and self-sanctification, it constitutes a barrier that must first be removed before people can receive revelation, which comes only by grace.³³

Barth does not believe that religion cooperates with revelation. In fact, the two are antagonistic. God does not reach out to his creatures through the religions. Moreover, revelation is understood as "the abolition of religion"³⁴. Thus religions cannot serve as a medium for revelation. "The *satori* of a Zen Buddhist and the ecstasy of a Muslim Dervish tell us nothing about God. The poetry of the *Baghavad Gita* and the ethics of the Confucian *Analects* reflect merely human wisdom."³⁵

This judgment is directed not only against other religions but also against Christian religion. As a religion, revelation exposes Christianity as well as a form of unbelief. This marks Barth's third point.³⁶ He states that "...in our discussion of religion as unbelief we did not consider the distinction between Christian and non-Christian religion. ...Whatever we said about the other religions affected the Christian similarly."³⁷ Christianity is also merely a human creation and thus also to be counted an expression of the rebellion of the creature against the sovereign will

³³ Garrett Green, "Challenging the Religious Studies Canon: Karl Barth's Theory of Religion", in *The Journal of Religion* 75, 1995, p. 480.

³⁴ Karl Barth, 1956, pp. 280-325.

³⁵ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 18.

³⁶ Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 18-19.

³⁷ Karl Barth, 1956, p. 326.

of the Creator. The goal of Barth's theology of revelation and his indictment of religions is not to promote Christianity as a superior religion. Barth, therefore, warns that Christians must always speak about non-Christians with tolerance. This tolerance is based in the "forbearance of Christ"³⁸ in the face of our continued rebellion against God. Christians understand that God has reconciled himself to sinful human beings through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Therefore the judgment that religions are "unbelief" is not the Christian believer's assessment of non-Christian religions, but rather God's judgment on all religions, including Christianity. The Christian, as much as any Jew, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist, is humbled before the majesty of revelation.

Related to Barth's fourth point, James Fredericks comments that Barth "seems to take back with one hand what he has just given away with the other."³⁹ Christianity may be "unbelief" like all the other religions, but at the same time it must be seen as the only "true religion"⁴⁰. For his own reason, God has decided to reveal himself to the world through the Christian Church. Thus, we can speak of Christianity as the "true religion" but only in the sense that Martin Luther could speak of a "justified sinner"⁴¹. Since God has saved sinners from their own self-destructive sinfulness, they cannot claim any virtue for themselves. Christianity, despite the fact that it has no "inward worthiness" or "any immanent rightness or holiness" of its own⁴², has been chosen by God for the salvation of all. Although it "cannot claim any innate superiority over other religions for being true", Christianity has been made true by the grace of God – it is the religion founded on the name Jesus Christ - and we, therefore, "need have no hesitation in saying that Christianity is the true religion". These four points, according to James Fredericks,

³⁸ Karl Barth, 1956, p. 299.

³⁹ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 19.

⁴⁰ Karl Barth, 1956, p. 325ff.

⁴¹ Karl Barth, 1956, p. 325.

⁴² Karl Barth, 1956, pp. 326-327.

lead Barth to an “inescapable conclusion” that only those who profess faith in Jesus Christ can be saved.⁴³

2.1.2. Hendrik Kraemer (1888-1966)

Among the disciples of Barth, Kraemer is the one who radically applies to the concrete religions the negative verdict that his teacher had pronounced on religion in that it is able to be distinguished from the salvific faith in the Gospel.⁴⁴ “Hendrik Kraemer was born in Amsterdam, Holland, on 17 May 1888.” Unlike Barth, Kraemer had served as missionary in Indonesia (1922-8, 1930-6) and the mission had assumed a fundamental place in his life. “Kraemer thought that knowledge and experience of other religions were essential for evangelization and dialogue.”⁴⁵ “In the continental tradition of Barth’s dialectical theology, and in sharp reaction to liberal theological trends, especially from America, Kraemer powerfully stated his position in the light of one fundamental tenet that determined his whole approach: God has revealed the Way and the Life and the Truth in Jesus Christ and wills this to be known through all the world.”⁴⁶

Kraemer’s attitude to the non-Christian religions is determined by his emphasis on the axiom that salvation is found only through the grace of God revealed in Christ. “This revelation is also the only possible truth criterion for Kraemer because here alone God has revealed himself.” In his very influential works, especially *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (1938) and *Religion and the Christian Faith* (1956), Kraemer propounded a dialectical theology that stressed Christ’s relationship to the religions as one of *discontinuity*

⁴³ Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 19.

⁴⁴ Cf. Giovanni Odasso, 1998, p. 78.

⁴⁵ Gavin D’Costa, 1986, p. 54.

⁴⁶ Gavin D’Costa, 1986, p. 53.

and judgement. Although Kraemer was not uncritical of Christianity as a religion, he thought that its special relationship to Christ gave it unique status among the world religions.⁴⁷

Related to this Kraemer's position, Gavin D'Costa states that to accept what Kraemer calls biblical realism involves a number of implications which cannot be avoided and which determine a Christian's attitude to the non-Christian religions.⁴⁸ "The first and foremost implication flowing from Kraemer's notion of biblical realism is the serious acceptance of the biblical witness." This means that "the most essential questions about humankind and God are only answerable in the light of the revelation in Christ." Consequently, "passages such as John 14,6 and Act 4,12 must be taken absolutely seriously." "Because the truth about God and humankind is revealed only in Christ, the Christian is obliged to proclaim this message to all people." The missionary imperative is an obligation for Christians and to reduce mission to service and sharing, however, obscures the demand of the Gospel that Christ be preached and accepted by all nations.

The second implication is necessary to understand the revelation of God's will and humankind's nature through Jesus Christ, if we are to appreciate his evaluation of all religions, Christianity included. This revelation gives access to two irreducible insights. The first is the fallenness of men and women. All people constantly try to justify themselves by means of false absolutes and human-made systems; in effect, by idolatry. He concludes by arguing that ultimately they are all human constructions of self-justification. This is why the Bible says that men and women wanted to be like God. Whenever a person does not submit to Christ and totally surrender to the mercy of God, revealed in Christ, however lofty and sincere his or her religion, the fundamental disobedience of humankind is reasserted. Thus under the searchlight of Christ, all religious life, the lofty and degraded, appear to

⁴⁷ Cf. Gavin D'Costa, 1986, p. 8.

⁴⁸ Cf. Gavin D'Costa, 1986, pp. 57-60.

lie under the divine judgement, because it is misdirected.⁴⁹ However, "Kraemer contends that if Christ brings judgement upon fallen humankind, he also brings mercy and forgiveness to a humanity seeking for God." This is the second irreducible insight. Complementing the "No" of judgement against all religions as forms of self-justification, is a "Yes" because of God's faithfulness and humankind's constant, although misdirected, search. Kraemer succinctly characterizes this dialectical evaluation when he writes: "By 'dialectical' is meant this condition, inherent in man, of saying at the same time yes and no to his true destiny and his relatedness to the eternal."⁵⁰ As a result of this dialectical evaluation, Kraemer's answer to the question of the Christian attitude to non-Christian religions is a mixture of both "No" and "Yes".⁵¹

The religious and moral life of man is man's achievement, but also God's wrestling with him; it manifests a receptivity to God, but at the same time an inexcusable disobedience and blindness to God ... Man seeks God and at the same time flees from Him in his seeking, because his self-assertive self-centeredness of will, his root-sin, always breaks through.⁵²

2.1.3. Exclusivism Evaluated

In the beginning of this chapter, in order to evaluate an adequate theology of religions, we have already said that every paradigm will be examined and analyzed using two preconditions: responsibility to the tradition and creativity in the face of religious diversity. Now, we shall examine that does Barth and Kraemer's exclusivist theology of religions measure up to this standard? Is it in keeping with

⁴⁹ "This theological starting point is also the reason why Kraemer rejects the notion of points of contact, continuity or natural theology. Natural theology denotes the process whereby persons can, by their own natural rational powers, arrive at a belief in God. According to Kraemer, the notion of natural theology is a rationalist divinization of reason. The points of contact and continuity are all irrelevant in the light of Christ's judgement upon all religions." (Gavin D'Costa, 1986, pp. 58-59).

⁵⁰ Gavin D'Costa, 1986, p. 59.

⁵¹ Cf. Gavin D'Costa, 1986, pp. 58-60.

⁵² Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a non-Christian World*, London: 1938, pp. 126-127.

the Christian tradition? Does it empower Christians to live creatively with non-Christians? Does it invite Christians to learn more about their non-Christian neighbors? Does it suggest ways in which Christians might begin to learn from their neighbors in order to deepen their understanding of their own religious beliefs?⁵³

In regard to exclusivists' fidelity to the Christian tradition, they "can certainly appeal to passages in the Bible to support their views." However, "the Bible's support of exclusivism is ambiguous at best." The New Testament does claim that salvation is through "no other name" (Acts 4,10-12). But there are also passages that affirm God's will to save every human being. In addition to Paul's speech to the Athenians (Acts 17,22-23), this theme can also be found in 1 Tim 2,4 and Rm 2,6-7. In fact, as we have seen in the first chapter of this work, the Bible contains ample support for two basic Christian doctrines that affect the theology of religions. First, the scriptures affirm the "necessity of faith in Jesus Christ to be saved." Second, they also affirm that "God's saving love touches every human being." "Exclusivist theologies generally emphasize the former at the expense of the latter." Exclusivist approach "does not do justice to the fullness of the Christian tradition." "The God preached by Jesus of Nazareth and witnessed to in the New Testament is not indifferent or even hostile to the vast majority of the human race."⁵⁴

"A second problem with finding support for this exclusivism in the Christian tradition lies in its understanding of sin and damnation." In theologies that restrict salvation to Christians alone, it would seem that non-Christians are "damned not by any free act of their own but by quirk of fate." The problem with exclusivist theologies such as those of Barth and Kraemer is that the "predicament of some people (non-Christians) is significantly worse than of others (Christians)." Those who have heard the gospel can be damned only to the extent that they freely choose

⁵³ Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, pp. 20.

⁵⁴ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p.20.

to reject God's love. Non-Christians have not heard the gospel and are damned not by their free choice but by the historical accident of their birth as non-Christians. In this fashion, exclusivist theologies establish a "double standard" for salvation: "only a tiny minority of human beings have received the opportunity to respond to God's grace in freedom; everyone else is damned without a choice."⁵⁵

The third problem is that exclusivism does not seem adequate to the challenge facing Christians today. In the context religious plurality, we could ask the exclusivist theologies how they know that the religious lives of non-Christians are meaningless. "Barth's famous reply typifies his stance. When asked how he knew that Hinduism was unbelief when he had never met a Hindu, his immediate reply was *a priori*."⁵⁶ "Without studying the Vedas and Upanishads, without knowing anything about the avatars of Vishnu or the multiple manifestations of Shiva, must Christian believers judge Hinduism to be an expression of the creature's rebellion against the Creator? "Can Christians come to credible conclusions about non-Christians and their religions without knowing something about these religions?" "Barth's extreme distinction between revelation and religion safely protects him from the need to learn about non-Christian religions." If Barth's distinction between religion and revelation excuses Christians from the need to learn about their non-Christian neighbors, "it is also lures Christians away from the opportunity to learn from non Christians." This being the case, "exclusivist theologies should be judged a missed opportunity for Christians."⁵⁷

After doing the detailed investigation of the exclusivist Paradigm, Gavin D'Costa in his book frequently cited in this work summarizes that exclusivists, "while correctly stressing that salvation comes from God alone through Christ, sometimes fail to develop one of the major insights resulting from this revelation –

⁵⁵ James L. Fredericks, 1999, pp. 20-21.

⁵⁶ Gavin D'Costa, 1986, p. 54.

⁵⁷ James L. Fredericks, 1999, pp. 21-22.

that of the universal salvific will of God.” “Exclusivists rightly stress the normativeness of Christ in evaluating different religious truth-claims.” However, for some exclusivists, this criterion is used in a “narrow and restrictive fashion, tending unnecessarily to limit the revelatory activity of God to the Christ event.” Therefore, the exclusivists, when they “do acknowledge revelation outside Christianity, either deny it any salvific efficacy or tend to minimize the implication of this admission.” Finally, while in principle many exclusivists can and do avoid the “charges of superiority and chauvinism in dialogue,” it sometimes appears that as “a result of their theological axioms there is little place for mutual enrichment.”⁵⁸

2.2. Pluralist Paradigm

In contrast to exclusivist position, there is the pluralist one. “The pluralist paradigm has been characterized as one that maintains that other religions are equally salvific paths to the one God.”⁵⁹ In other words, “the pluralists claim that non-Christian religions are legitimate ways to salvation apart from the way of Christ.”⁶⁰ For the pluralist theologians, Christ is one way to salvation, but not the only way. Buddhism constitutes another religious path that leads to salvation. The same can be said for the religions of the Muslims and Hindus and the followers of the other great traditions. Within the universe of faiths, there are many ways of salvation.

Pluralists claim that “all religions lead to salvation, but not merely the salvation imagined by Christians”: the resurrection of the body, the beatific vision, justification before the Lord, the restoration of lost innocence, and being an heir to

⁵⁸ Gavin D’Costa, 1986, p. 75.

⁵⁹ Gavin D’Costa, 1986, p. 22.

⁶⁰ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 15.

the kingdom of God. This is why pluralists have been required to broaden considerably the meaning of the word salvation, going beyond traditional Christian images to the notion of a fundamental transformation of human existence. "This expansion of the meaning of the term salvation means that Christians who would be open to the truths enshrined in non-Christian religions should abandon Christianity's tradition claims about the uniqueness and necessity of Christ for salvation."⁶¹ Therefore as a general rule, pluralistic theologies are willing to abandon the traditional Christian belief in Christ as the one and only savior. There is nothing superior about Christianity.

This position, according to Gavin D'Costa, can be traced from Ernst Troeltsch, the German liberal Protestant, and William Hocking, the American philosopher. "Both were eagerly aware of and emphasized historical and cultural relativism and argued that Christianity could not viably claim special status among the world religions, but should be seen as just one among many equally salvific paths to the divine reality. Their thought signaled a radical shift of emphasis away from both the missionary task of the Church in terms of preaching and evangelization, and the claim that sole revelation of God was in Christ."⁶² Troeltsch, for instance, in his essay "The Place of Christianity Among the World Religions" (1923), acknowledged the manifestation and experiences of Divine Life within Christianity through Christ, while significantly adding that this experience is undoubtedly the criterion of its validity, but, be it noted, only of its validity for Christians. Hocking, in his essay "Re-thinking Missions" (1932), argued that traditional mission required supplementation by a different form of institution reflecting this new attitude. In his later book *Living Religions and a World Faith* (1940), he went so far as to suggest the future emergence of a world faith. Here the

⁶¹ James L. Fredericks, 1999, pp.7-8.

⁶² Gavin D'Costa, 1986, p. 7.

stress was upon a future of mutual enrichment and a transformation of Christianity and the other religions through their progressive interaction.⁶³

2.2.1. John Hick (1922-)

One of the most distinctive representatives of pluralist position is John Hick. Paul Knitter judged that "Hick is the most radical, the best-known, and therefore the most controversial of the proponents of a theocentric model for Christian approaches to other religions."⁶⁴ John Harwood Hick was born in Scarborough, Yorkshire, England, on 20 January 1922. After studying philosophy and theology at Edinburgh, Oxford and Cambridge, he lectured in the philosophy of religion in the United States and England. In 1967, he took up the H. G. Wood Professorial Chair in Birmingham University's Theology Department. As a Presbyterian pastor in Birmingham, he faced a number of the challenges of the diversity of religious traditions. This experience led him to reflect on the relation of Christianity to other religions and to begin a long process of working out a suitable theory to account for the diversity of religious paths in the world today.⁶⁵

According to James Fredericks, John Hick began his revolution in 1973 with the publication of his first book to deal explicitly with the problem of religious diversity, *God and the Universe of Faiths*.⁶⁶ Christians must undergo what Hick called a "Copernican revolution"⁶⁷ in their understanding of their faith in relation to

⁶³ Cf. Gavin D'Costa, 1986, pp. 7-8.

⁶⁴ Paul Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes to World Religions*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985, p. 147.

⁶⁵ Cf. John Hick, *God has Many Names: Britain's New Religious Pluralism*, London: Macmillan, 1980, pp. 1-9.

⁶⁶ John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973.

⁶⁷ Copernicus, in the fifteenth century, overturned the Ptolemaic astronomers that saw the earth at the center of the universe by placing the sun at the center and designating the earth as the third planet out from the sun. "In one simple stroke, this Polish priest abandoned centuries of belief about the stability of the earth at the

the vast diversity of religious traditions. As the sun replaces the earth as the center of all, Hick argued for a "theocentric" theology of religions, where God alone and not Christ or the Christian church is given pride of place at the center of things.⁶⁸ John Hick writes, "We have to realize that the universe of faiths centers upon God, and not upon Christianity or upon any other religion. He is the sun, the originative source of life and light, whom all the religions reflect in their own different ways."⁶⁹

Why did Hick demand a Copernican revolution in the Christian attitude to other religions? He characterized as "Ptolemaic" the long-standing and dominant exclusivist view, both Catholic and Protestant, that "outside the church, or outside Christianity, there is no salvation". This stance seemed blatantly incompatible with the venerable Christian axiom of God's universal salvific love and desire to save all people. Hick's primary theological argument for his Copernican theocentric revolution is based on the affirmation of the universal salvific will of God: "we say as Christians that God is the God of universal love, that he is the Creator and Father of all mankind, that he wills the ultimate good and salvation of all men."⁷⁰ Hick asks whether such a God could have "ordained that men must be saved in such a way that only a small minority can in fact receive this salvation?"⁷¹ His answer is "No". It is precisely the doctrine of a God of universal love, which dictates Hick's answer, and leads to a Copernican revolution in Christian theology. "The theological axiom of the universal salvific will of God is a fundamental tenet of the pluralist paradigm."⁷²

As is to be expected, this Copernican revolution involves a new Christology. The Christian claim to uniqueness and normativeness is based on the doctrine of the

center of the universe, to say nothing of the authority of Aristotle and the Bible." (James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 38).

⁶⁸ Cf James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 38.

⁶⁹ John Hick, 1980, p. 52.

⁷⁰ John Hick, 1973, p. 131.

⁷¹ John Hick, 1973, p. 122.

⁷² Gavin D'Costa, 1986, p. 25.

Incarnation, according to Hick, is mythical and needs reinterpretation. In his essay "Jesus and the World Religions" (1977)⁷³, Hick developed an interpretation of Jesus Christ that did little to quell the flames of controversy surrounding his pluralistic theology of religions. Christianity's doctrine of the Incarnation – developed in its essential lines from the First Council of Nicea in 325 to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 - holds that Jesus of Nazareth was at once fully human and fully divine.⁷⁴ In Hick's view, this teaching should not be taken as a literal fact. The belief that Jesus was fully human and at the same time fully divine must be understood a kind of "myth".⁷⁵ According to Hick, the doctrine of the incarnation is a poetic way of expressing a truth that cannot be stated directly and should not be taken literally. In defense of his controversial position, Hick argues that Christians should think of the incarnation as a model or paradigm for affirming the saving power of God at work in their lives. In Jesus Christ, "God and the human race have become perfectly reconciled to one another once again." The incarnation, then, is "a way of imagining" what is beyond all imagining: "the infinitely transcendent God touching the lives of each and every human being."⁷⁶

However, Hick wants Christians to recognize that the incarnation is not the only way God's salvation can be imagined. In fact, "Hick claims that the incarnation, as this doctrine was developed in the first several centuries of the

⁷³ John Hick, "Jesus and the World Religions", in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick and Paul Knitter, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977.

⁷⁴ The General Council of Chalcedon (451) declared: "We unanimously teach to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man composed of rational soul and body, the same one in being (*homoousios*) with the Father as to the divinity and one in being with us as to the humanity, like unto us in all thing but sin (cf. Heb 4,15). The same was begotten from the Father before the ages as to the divinity and in the latter days for us and our salvation was born as to his humanity from Mary the Virgin Mother of God." (J. Neuner, S.J. and J. Dupuis, S.J., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, New York: Alba House, 1996, p. 203, par. 614; see also H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, bilingual edition edited by P. Hünermann, Bologna: EDB, 2000, p. 169. par. 301.

⁷⁵ "For most scholars interested in religion, "myth" means a model or paradigm for understanding in a non-literal fashion realities that are considerably more complex. Much like the language of poetry, myths are true, but not literally true. In fact, to take a myth literally is seriously to misunderstand it." (James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 42).

⁷⁶ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 42.

Christian church, should be seen as merely a Greco-Roman way of affirming the saving power of God.” “The incarnation is merely one of several ways available to human beings for thinking about how God saves us.” Therefore, Hick concludes that the doctrine of the incarnation need not stand as a barrier to Christians in embracing a theocentric theology of religions. Jesus’ divinity is not to be taken as a literal historical fact. The notion of an incarnation can be “a fitting way for some religious people (Christians) to express their experience of being saved by a divine power that is at work in all the religions”.⁷⁷

In 1985, Hick published *Problems of Religious Pluralism*. This work is significant in that “it marks a move away from his theocentric model of religions to what he today calls *reality-centeredness*.” Hick’s move from Theo-centricity to reality-centeredness “was motivated by his recognition that not all religions are particularly interested in the divine.” To Hick, “terms such as the Real or Ultimate Reality are better than words such as God or the divine because they are more inclusive of both the personal and impersonal conceptions of the absolute.” Hick amended his view by saying that the great religions, in different ways, put their adherents in touch with the “Real” as it is in self.⁷⁸ Salvation, which - according to Hick - “should be defined more psychologically as a transformation of the ego,” entails a movement from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness. “Each of the great religions offers human beings a way of freeing themselves from the prison of their own ego for a life lived in unity with reality itself.” However this unity may be interpreted within the religious tradition themselves. All religions offer their believers paths that lead to the liberation of self from greed, cruelty, obsession and fear. “We are ‘saved’ when we move from being centered on the ego to being centered on reality itself”.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ James L. Fredericks, 1999, pp. 42-44.

⁷⁸ Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, pp. 48-49.

⁷⁹ John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985, pp. 34, 46, 92.

2.2.2. Paul Knitter

Talking about liberation in the context of the theology of religions, now we should look at the other pluralist, Paul Knitter, a Roman Catholic missionary and theologian. “Along with John Hick, Paul Knitter is the figure most associated with the call for a pluralist theology of religions.”⁸⁰ If Hick’s approach to religious diversity is philosophical, Knitter’s one is theological, or better liberationist. In his widely influential book *No Other Name?* (1985), he argues for the need to revise our understanding of Jesus, our Christology, in the light of the diversity of faiths. He also argues for the need to incorporate the justice concerns of the “theology of liberation”⁸¹ into Christianity’s view of non-Christian religions. Paul Knitter is interested in the historical Jesus and his original preaching of the kingdom of God. Jesus preached the liberation of every human being in the coming of God’s kingdom. “In this we can see the beginnings of Knitter’s concern for bringing together the theology of religions and the political concerns of the theology of liberation.”⁸² “As a Christian theologian his engagement with the religions has three overlapping interests. The first is that there be authentic dialogue with the listening

⁸⁰ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 55.

⁸¹ The inspiration for liberation theology came from the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, which was held at Medellin, Colombia, in 1968, on the subject “The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council.” The aim of the conference was to apply to the vast Latin American continent, the new self-awareness that the church had developed at the Second Vatican Council, as well as the church’s determination to open itself to the world and to the problem of the human race. The first systematic discussion of this new theological project was Gustavo Gutiérrez’s book *Teología de la liberación* (1971). From this point on, the new theology spread rapidly and produced a body of writing that soon become very extensive. Liberation theologians insist that theology should begin with reflection on the meaning of the gospel in the light of the efforts of Christians to work for the liberation of the oppressed. Theology that does not give a “preferential option for the poor” is theology in service of the oppression and injustice of the status quo and not faithful to Jesus’ liberating gospel of love and justice. (See Jacques Dupuis, “Liberation Theology”, in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000, p. 1091)

⁸² James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 56.

and speaking that this entails, and more importantly the sharing of forms of life. The second is that a preoccupation for a suffering humanity in a suffering planet becomes a focus of the interchange itself. The third is that Christian theology, especially in areas of Christology and ecclesiology, be so interpreted that these exigencies are empowered.”⁸³

According to Knitter, a Christology adequate for today, an understanding of Jesus that meets the needs of Christian believers in a world of religious plurality, must emphasize Jesus’ original proclamation of the coming kingdom of God. Jesus did not preach about himself. “Jesus preached about God and what God was doing to set free every human being. The theme of his preaching was the kingdom of God. There is wide agreement among scholars of the New Testament on this point. Knitter also acknowledges that most New Testament scholars are in agreement that Jesus saw himself as instrument, in some way, in the coming of God’s kingdom and that Jesus saw himself as the eschatological prophet who had come to fulfill the hopes of Israel.”⁸⁴ Nevertheless, in Knitter’s view, Jesus must be seen as a witness to God and not to himself. Therefore, according to Paul Knitter, John Hick’s call for a theocentric revolution is made all the more urgent because Jesus himself was theocentric.⁸⁵

Knitter, according to James Fredericks, “believes that a theocentric understanding of Jesus can even deepen and purify our faith in Jesus by returning our focus to the work of Jesus in proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. A true and mature faith in Jesus and his message does not require us to believe that Jesus is only savior known to human beings any more than the true and mature love of a spouse requires one to reject the fact that there are other women or men in the world who are as beautiful or noble as one’s spouse. Openness to others should be taken

⁸³ Roger Haight, S. J., “Review Symposium of Paul Knitter’s *Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility* book”, in *Horizons* 24: 2, 1997, p. 267.

⁸⁴ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 57.

⁸⁵ Paul Knitter, 1985, p. 173.

as a sign of depth and maturity.” Therefore, Christians should maintain their commitment to Jesus but “combine this commitment with a genuine openness to the truths of other religious paths.” A theocentric faith in Jesus and his witness to God therefore requires what Knitter calls an “open-ended confession”. In dealing with other religious believers, “Christians should explain, simply and humbly, what Jesus has done for them without making extravagant and unwarranted claims about his uniqueness and the superiority of Christianity over other religions”.⁸⁶

A Confessional approach, then, will be both certain and open-ended. It will enable Christians to take a firm position; but it will also require them to be open to and possibly learn from other positions. It will allow them to affirm the uniqueness and the universal significance of what God has done in Jesus; but at the same time it will require them to recognize and be challenged by the uniqueness and universal significance of what the divine mystery may have revealed through others. In boldly proclaiming that God has indeed been defined in Jesus, Christians will also humbly admit that God has not been confined to Jesus.⁸⁷

In the context of religious plurality, according to Knitter, the real question for Christians is to understand *how* Jesus is unique and how Jesus’ uniqueness is related to the unique characteristics of other saviors. Knitter wants to show how Christians can understand Jesus’ own uniqueness in a way that is faithful to the mission and message of Christ but also open to the unique truths of the other faiths. Knitter prefaces his statement about the indispensability of Jesus by reasserting that when Christians say that Jesus is truly the savior of the world, *truly* doesn’t mean “only”.⁸⁸ To believe that Jesus is truly a savior of the world does not imply that Jesus is the only savior of the world. Thus, contrary to traditional doctrines, “Christian faith does not require Christians to assert that Jesus, as a revelation from God, is full and definitive.” In Jesus, Christians have no monopoly on the revelation

⁸⁶ James L. Fredericks, 1999, pp. 63-65.

⁸⁷ Paul Knitter, 1985, pp. 203-204.

⁸⁸ Paul Knitter, “Five Thesis Regarding the Uniqueness of Jesus”, in *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul F. Knitter*, edited by Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes, New York, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997, p. 7.

of God. Knitter, however, still defends the doctrine of the incarnation but not its traditional interpretation. Jesus represents God's presence within the world but "does not exhaust it." The point of Christianity's teaching that Jesus was both divine and human is to affirm that divinity has taken on the fullness of our humanity. This affirmation, however, does not make Jesus the only way this truth can be affirmed. In Jesus, the fullness of God is present within the world as a particular, historical individual but not in any exclusive way.⁸⁹

Knitter's critical view of traditional teaching regarding the uniqueness of Jesus, as analyzed by James Fredericks, leads to some significant implications.⁹⁰ First, "if Christians are to continue to believe that Jesus makes salvation available to all, they must realize that this can be true only to the extent that the disciples of Jesus today are trying to make God's kingdom of justice and reconciliation a concrete reality throughout the world." Second, "since this is not yet the case, there is no basis for claiming that Jesus is the final, unsurpassable savior of the world." Third, "if absolute claims about Jesus are not possible, neither are they necessary. Christians should not become entangled in useless arguments about Jesus as the final and unsurpassable revelation of God. Instead, as disciples, Christians should do what Jesus did: work for bringing about God's justice for the poor and oppressed in the world." Finally, "a renewed emphasis on Jesus' preaching of the kingdom means that Christians should be more attentive to signs worldwide that the justice and peace God has planned for creation are coming about. This means that Christians must recognize at least the possibility that there are other saviors, other incarnations, other revelations from God in the world."

Two years after publication of *No Other Name?* Knitter worked with John Hick in putting together a collection of essays entitled *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* on the subject of a pluralistic theology of religions. This book included

⁸⁹ Paul Knitter, 1997, pp. 7-9.

⁹⁰ Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 61.

an essay by Knitter himself entitled "Toward a Liberationist Theology of Religions"⁹¹, "one of his most important contributions to the pluralist debate."⁹² Knitter believes strongly that the theology of liberation and the theology of religions need each other. The theology of religions will give liberation theologians a better sense of how religions can be forces for justice in the world. Otherwise, seen from the perspective of the theology of liberation, the primary purpose of inter-religious dialogue and a pluralistic theology of religions is not to promote tolerance but rather to bring the many religions together in the joint effort to address the reality of suffering and to bring about structural changes for economic and social justice.⁹³ "The theology of liberation reminds us that even the most fundamental of "orthodox" doctrines must be judged by the fruit they bear."⁹⁴

It is obvious that basing his pluralistic theology of religions on the theology of liberation, Knitter's view of religious diversity is very much different from that of Hick. When being asked, what makes mutual understanding and cooperation between religious traditions possible, John Hick has turned to a transcendent metaphysical truth that he recognized as common to all the religions. In his early work, he spoke of "the divine mystery" and then in his later work, Hick speaks of "the Real". "Paul Knitter believes that social justice concerns also provide a common basis for inter-religious understanding."⁹⁵ As a result of his own dialogue with the liberation theologians, "Paul Knitter has turned from his theocentric model to what he now calls a 'soteriocentric' model."⁹⁶ The central truth that links together all the religions and provides a basis for their coming together in dialogue is *soteria*, which Knitter defines as "the well being of human beings and the earth" or "the

⁹¹ Paul Knitter, "Toward a Liberationist Theology of Religions", in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, ed. John Hick and Paul Knitter, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987, pp. 178-200.

⁹² James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 66.

⁹³ Paul Knitter, 1987, pp. 179-181.

⁹⁴ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 67.

⁹⁵ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 68.

⁹⁶ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 69.

ineffable mystery of salvation”⁹⁷. As a ground dialogue, *soteria* is a good place to start, but it will constantly be shifting and clarifying itself as the dialogues proceeds. “Knitter believes that a concern to explore the reality of *soteria* should provide all religions with the ability to enter into dialogue with other religions. Religious believers have more in common in their quest for liberation than in their religious doctrines.”⁹⁸

2.2.3. Pluralism Evaluated

Each adequate theology of religions must be responsible to the faith of Christians and at the same time must assist Christian believers in dealing creatively with religious diversity. If these criteria apply to exclusivist theologians like Barth and Kraemer, they must also apply to pluralists like Hick and Knitter. How does pluralism measure up?

It is obvious that the pluralist paradigm of religions sets off alarm bells regarding the first of the two criteria.⁹⁹ A common theme among pluralist theories is the call to abandon or at least reinterpret traditional Christian teaching about Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁰ For Hick, the divinity of Jesus is not to be taken literally as a historical fact. Rather, the incarnation is one particular way, the Christian way, of taking about the same salvation experienced by others each in their own way. As an exponent of pluralism, “Paul Knitter has joined his voice to that of Hick in calling for a significant revision of Christianity’s tradition understanding of Jesus Christ as

⁹⁷ Paul Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995, pp. 79-82.

⁹⁸ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 69.

⁹⁹ Gavin D’Costa served as editor of a collection of essays critical of the pluralists theories entitled *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999. This volume contains essays by Gavin D’Costa, M.M Thomas, Francis X. Clooney, S.J., John Cobb, Jr., Wolfhart Pannenberg, Kenneth Surin and others.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 104.

the incarnation of the Word and unique savior of the world.” Paul Knitter proposal for a kingdom-centered understanding of Jesus Christ is “the most highly developed and best argued of all the pluralists”¹⁰¹. Knitter argues that Christians must renew their own faith by returning to the original concern of Jesus, God’s liberating kingdom.¹⁰²

Contrary to the pluralists, in fact, the Church preaches that the doctrine of the Incarnation is rooted in the historical Jesus himself. Moreover, “the bulk of New Testament scholarship has emphasized the thread of continuity linking Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom with the early church’s proclamation of Jesus as Lord.”¹⁰³ Jesus is not only a witness to the coming kingdom of God, but the kingdom of God also becomes historically present in the life, death and resurrection of the historical Jesus.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, according to N. T. Wright’s studies, “Jesus of Nazareth understood himself to be both Israel’s Messiah and, in some sense, *the very embodiment of Yahweh*.”¹⁰⁵ Therefore, the later church’s interpretation of Jesus as the incarnation of the Word is not a mythological way that Christians have for saying that Jesus is very important for them or simply another example of the tendency of religious believers to divinize the founders of their respective religious communities. “The doctrine of the incarnation is a consistent interpretation of Jesus’ own understanding of himself and his mission.”¹⁰⁶

In keeping with the original meaning of the doctrine of the incarnation, Christians have traditionally believed that Jesus is fully divine and fully human. The doctrine of the incarnation does not mean that God has become present in the world

¹⁰¹ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 120.

¹⁰² Cf. Paul Knitter, 1985, pp. 169-204.

¹⁰³ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 121.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God, the Message of Jesus Today*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998, specially pp. 211-235.

¹⁰⁵ Paul R. Eddy, “John Hick and Historical Jesus”, in Daniel Kendall, S. J. and Stephen T. Davis ed., *The Convergence of Theology: A Festschrift Honoring Gerald O’Collins, S.J.*, New York: Paulist Press, 2001, p. 313.

¹⁰⁶ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 122.

inside a human being. But, in the humanity of Jesus, God has present to us as a human being, a real person within history. In other words, through the humanity of Jesus, the infinity of living God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has become present within history in a limited, tangible, indeed a human way. Here when Hick asks, "How can the one undivided divine self be at once unlimited... and limited...?"¹⁰⁷ We can reply using the words of Gerald O'Collins who calls Hick as a neo-Arian, "unlimited *qua* God the Son and limited *qua* Jesus of Nazareth".¹⁰⁸ "In order to embrace deeply the truth that Jesus is fully divine and fully human, the presence of the infinite God within history in the life of a finite human being, we must change profoundly our understanding of what it means to be God and, therefore, what it means to be human.... By believing in the traditional doctrine that the divine and the human are not irreconcilable opposites, the Christian believer is profoundly transformed."¹⁰⁹

As we have seen, Hick's primary theological argument for his Copernican theocentric revolution is based on the affirmation of the universal salvific will of God. Thus, we can ask: "how does Hick ground his theocentric claim?" "How does Hick's mythological Christology answer that question?" If the Copernican revolution requires an all-loving God as its fundamental axiom, it means that Hick's Christian theocentricism cannot be severed from Christology. "The God of universal love at the center cannot be spoken of or recognized without Jesus." God "who desires the salvation of all is grounded the specific fact" that Christian experiences his or her own life "as made known to us by Jesus". "In this sense Jesus is *decisive* or *normative* for Hick.". Hick's mythological understanding still maintains "a normative ontological linking of Jesus and God". Related the axiom: salvation is found only through the grace of God in Christ, therefore, "in as much as

¹⁰⁷ John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, London: SCM Press, 1993, p. 69.

¹⁰⁸ Gerald O'Collins, S. J., "The Incarnation under Fire", in *Gregorianum* 76: 2, 1995, p. 275.

¹⁰⁹ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 124.

Hick accepts the former part of this axiom, he must then also accept the latter part: *in Christ.*"¹¹⁰ "Christian theology is not faced with the dilemma of being either Christocentric or theocentric; it is theocentric by being Christocentric and vice versa."¹¹¹

"A Problem endemic to pluralist theologies of religion is relativism."¹¹² About this point, James Fredericks¹¹³ gives some critical questions. "If all religions, potentially at least, can lead a believer to reality-centeredness, is every religion as good as every other religion?" Why then be a Christian or Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist? "If all religions, more or less, are salvific to the extent that they make *soteria* available to their believers, is any religion distinct in any significant way from any other religion? In order to live responsibly with the intrusive fact of religious diversity today, religious believers need not only to understand the teachings and mores of those who follow other religious paths, they need to be able to judge the value and effectiveness of these other religious paths as well."¹¹⁴

John Hick has recognized that point as well and has given a great deal of attention to the matter. In his book *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989), Hick claims that his reality-centeredness should be taken only as a hypothesis. Religious believers should adopt this view as a hypothesis to avoid either skepticism or dogmatism in facing the universe of faiths.¹¹⁵ But, is Hick's pluralist theory really a hypothesis? "If pluralism is really a hypothesis, we may rightly ask Hick to specify under which conditions the hypothesis could be proved wrong." If there is no way

¹¹⁰ Gavin D'Costa, 1986, pp. 30-33.

¹¹¹ Jacques Dupuis, S.J., 2000, p. 191.

¹¹² James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 70.

¹¹³ James L. Fredericks notes that Knitter is not a relativist. His strong commitment to following out the implications of bringing the theology of religions together with the theology of liberation provides a clear and decisive criterion for separating a true religion from false ones. Knitter's commitment to political implications of the theology of liberation has led him to recognition of the "indispensability" of faith in Jesus, the Liberator. (Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 76.)

¹¹⁴ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 70.

¹¹⁵ Cf. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, pp. 210-230.

for a hypothesis to be disproved, it cannot rightly be considered a hypothesis at all.¹¹⁶ It is clear, according to James Fredericks, that “pluralism is not a hypothesis but a religious assertion.”¹¹⁷

The pluralist paradigm is clearly not adequate to the demanding richness of the Christian tradition. But, is pluralism helpful for Christians interested in responding to religious plurality in new and creative ways today? Hick and Knitter, like many pluralists, are surely right in emphasizing that there is much to be learned from other religions. They are also right in pointing out that one’s religion is often determined by one’s birthplace. However, then to imply that, because of these, all religions are responses to or expressions of a transcendent Absolute (the Real, the transcendent Mystery) or that religions share in a common religious experience (faith) or that all religions are equal paths to the salvation is “to dismiss the real differences that distinguish religions from one another.”¹¹⁸ Linked to this assertion is the pluralist’s fondness for drawing a clear line between what can be known and what is utterly beyond our knowing. The question remains: “How do pluralists know that all the religions are but partial truths?”¹¹⁹

Furthermore, James Fredericks gives two difficulties of pluralistic theology of religions in responding creatively to religious plurality.¹²⁰ “First, Christians who adopt the pluralist model place themselves in a difficult position. As pluralists, these Christians claim to know more about other religious believers than these believers know about themselves. Second, Christians who adopt the pluralist position never have to change their minds.” The point here is not that Hick, Knitter and other pluralists are arrogant or narrow-minded. Moreover, “their good intentions are to take seriously the fact of the religious diversity for their theological reflections.

¹¹⁶ Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 107.

¹¹⁷ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p.108.

¹¹⁸ James L. Frederick, 1999, p: 108.

¹¹⁹ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 105.

¹²⁰ Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, pp.108-113.

Despite the good intentions, however, pluralism does little to equip Christians with the skills necessary for transforming their own religious views in light of the teachings and wisdom of other religious traditions." The points on which religious believers differ are precisely the issues of most value in inter-religious dialogue.

In sum, pluralist paradigm "rightly stress the axiom of the universal salvific will of God, while sometimes rejecting the basis for this axiom: that God's universal salvific will is made known in and through Christ." They also "rightly stress that dialogue needs to be free of superiority or chauvinism and characterized by mutual enrichment, sharing and cooperation." However, pluralists "often neglect the confessional and proclamatory elements of dialogue." Moreover, they raise "questions as to whether these two sides of dialogue are in fact compatible." Pluralists also "offer a theological framework for a positive appraisal of non-Christian communities." Unfortunately, "this framework raises major problems." John Hick, Paul Knitter, and other pluralists further "alert us to the complicated difficulties in assessing and determining questions of religious truth." At the same time they sometimes "neglect the implications of their own proposals or too excessively stress a complementary model of truth-claims as against the possibility of genuinely conflicting and differing truth-claims".¹²¹

¹²¹ Gavin D'Costa, 1986, pp. 45-46.

2.3. Inclusivist Paradigm

This paradigm has been characterized as one that “affirms the salvific presence of God in non-Christian religions while still maintaining that Christ is the definitive and authoritative revelation of God.”¹²² In other words, Inclusivist theologies claim that all salvation is in the name of Jesus Christ but all at once argue that “God’s saving grace is present universally and therefore no human being is untouched by the grace of the God revealed by Jesus Christ. Salvation outside the institutional borders of Christianity is a distinct possibility. Non-Christians are included, at least potentially, in the salvation enjoyed by Christians.”¹²³

Inclusivism can be further divided into “constitutive” and “normative” positions.¹²⁴ According to the former view, Jesus Christ is not only the decisive and normative revelation of God but is also constitutive of salvation. Vatican II presents this position by affirming that God “has established Christ as the source of salvation for the whole world” (LG 17). The normative position, on the other hand, presents Christ as not constitutive but only normative of salvation for all people. Inasmuch Christ is seen as the fulfillment of the human history, he is the decisive and highest revelation of God and of human existence. But the mediation of Christ is not constitutive for all. Salvation, “always possible for all humanity even apart from Christ, becomes normatively manifest in him.”¹²⁵

This paradigm of inclusivism is currently held by a large number of Catholic theologians. However, it must be noted, “inclusivism is by no means a modern Roman Catholic phenomenon.”¹²⁶ Its twentieth century roots go back to the Scottish Protestant missionary John Farquhar. In his *The Crown of Hinduism* (1913), John

¹²² Gavin D’Costa, 1986, p. 80.

¹²³ James L. Frederick, 1999, p. 15.

¹²⁴ Cf. Joseph H. Wong, O.S.B. Cam., p. 612.

¹²⁵ Joseph H. Wong, O.S.B. Cam., 1994, p. 612.

¹²⁶ Gavin D’Costa, 1986, p. 80.

l'arquhar, who spent years in India, gave forceful and clear expression to the view that Christ (and not Christianity) was the fulfillment and crown of Hinduism, analogous to Christ's fulfillment of the law and prophets of Judaism. For him, missionary activity sought not to destroy but to fulfill the potential in Hinduism, which only Christ could bring to fruition. Hence, in this view Hinduism is understood as included within the Christian plan of salvation. "This inclusivist note was echoed in later theology, especially in Roman Catholic circles surrounding Vatican II, with an emphasis on the fulfillment-taking place through the Christian Church and not in Christ alone."¹²⁷

2.3.1. Karl Rahner (1904-1984)

"If Vatican II marks the watershed in the Christian attitude towards other religions, Karl Rahner is rightly called the Council's chief engineer."¹²⁸ He was born on 4 March 1904 in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany. At the age of 28 he was ordained a Jesuit priest and then began his doctoral studies on Thomas Aquinas's epistemology. Rahner spent some time in Freiburg attending Martin Heidegger's seminars on Kant. In his doctorate, which was published as *Spirit in the World* (1939), he argued for the possibility of a post-Kantian metaphysics. His central notion of *Vorgriff* or what he also calls the "supernatural existential" in this early book is crucial for an understanding of Rahner's entire theology. In 1938 Rahner became Professor of Theology at the Jesuit faculty at Innsbruck where he began to collect his theological reflections together in what eventually extended to 20 volumes of *Theological Investigation*. Rahner's essays entitled "Das Christentum

¹²⁷ Gavin D'Costa, 1986, p. 7.

¹²⁸ Gavin D'Costa, 1986, 80.

und die Nichtchristlichen Religionen" (1962)¹²⁹ and "Die anonymen Christen" (1965)¹³⁰ contain his main contribution to the inclusivism paradigm.¹³¹

Rahner believes that we are faced with two basic principles with regard to the question of the salvation of non-Christians. On the one hand, in order to obtain salvation, there is the necessity of faith in God and in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, there is the universal salvific will of God that seriously intends to save all human beings. In order to reconcile these apparently conflicting principles, Rahner points out the possibility of having implicit faith in Christ. "It should be noted that for Rahner the two axioms are understood ecclesialogically; salvation comes only through the grace of God in Christ mediated in his Church."¹³² Consequently, Rahner proposes a broader concept of being related to the Church by affirming different degrees of relation to it, which would include the so-called "anonymous Christians" as well as the explicitly professed Christians.¹³³ He writes:

When we have to keep in mind both principles together, namely the necessity of Christian faith and the universal salvific will of God's love and omnipotence, we can only reconcile them by saying that somehow all men must be capable of being members of the Church; and this capacity must not be understood merely in the sense of an abstract and purely logical possibility, but as a real and historically concrete one.¹³⁴

The foundation for "anonymous Christians" is to be sought in the basic structure of humans as spiritual beings and in the design of God at the beginning of creation. As spirit, a human person is "a being of unlimited openness for the limitless being of God", whom Rahner designates as mystery. He considers

¹²⁹ Karl Rahner, "Das Christentum und die Nichtchristlichen Religionen", in *Schriften Zur Theologie V*, Einsiedeln Zürich Köln: Benziger Verlag, 1962, pp. 136-158; in this work I use the English translation: Karl Rahner, "Christianity and Non-Christian Religions", in *Theological Investigation V*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966, pp. 115-134.

¹³⁰ Karl Rahner, "Die anonymen Christen", in *Schriften Zur Theologie VI*, Einsiedeln Zürich Köln: Benziger Verlag, 1965, pp. 545-554; in this work I use the English translation: Karl Rahner, "Anonymous Christian", in *Theological Investigation VI*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1969, pp. 390-398.

¹³¹ Gavin D'Costa, 1986, pp. 80-83.

¹³² Gavin D'Costa, 1986, p. 83.

¹³³ Karl Rahner, 1969, pp. 390-391.

¹³⁴ Karl Rahner, 1969, p. 391.

“transcendence” the most distinctive characteristic of the human spirit, through which the Absolute is encountered, in each human act of knowing or loving any particular object. Thus the human being is constantly and inevitably surrounded by and ordained to the mystery as the ground and goal of human transcendence. From a Christian standpoint, Rahner maintains that this fundamental implicit communication with unlimited being in the act of knowing and loving is a basic openness in a person’s nature to the mystery of being, which is God.¹³⁵

Karl Rahner proposes four essential theses of the theology of the anonymous Christian, his most controversial contribution to contemporary theology. However, it must be noted that Rahner makes it clear that his starting point for reflection on the non-Christian religions is “out of the self-understanding of Christianity itself”, not as an empirical historian of religion but as a dogmatic and systematic theologian.¹³⁶ His inclusivist approach to religious plurality can be summarized in four statements.¹³⁷

First, Rahner begins with the thesis that represents the basis in the Christian faith of the theological understanding of other religions. “Christianity understands itself as the absolute religion, intended for all men, which cannot recognize any other religion beside itself as of equal right.”¹³⁸ The valid and lawful religion of Christianity is rather God’s action on men, God’s free self-revelation by communicating himself to man, and not the reflection and objectification of the experience, which man has of himself and by himself. This relationship of God to man is basically the same for all men, because it rests on the Incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Word of God become flesh. Since Christianity is founded in Christ by God himself to be the religious home for every human being,

¹³⁵ Karl Rahner, 1969, pp. 392.

¹³⁶ Karl Rahner, 1966, pp. 117-118.

¹³⁷ Karl Rahner, 1966, pp. 115-134.

¹³⁸ Karl Rahner, 1966, p. 118.

thus, Christ and his continuing historical presence in the world, which we call "Church", is the religion which binds man to God.

However, at this point, Rahner adds a crucial qualification to the first thesis which "significantly distinguishes his position from that Kraemer"¹³⁹ and other exclusivists. The fact that Christianity understands itself as the absolute religion and demands adherence has a "complex history"¹⁴⁰. In saying that "when the existentially real demand is made by the absolute religion in its historically tangible form"¹⁴¹ Rahner shows considerable sensitivity to the fact that the Christian Gospel has not reached all people and its universal validity cannot be seen in isolation from this historical fact. There were those who lived before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth and the foundation of Christianity and those who lived and live after the New Testament times but have never really encountered the Gospel, through no fault of their own.¹⁴²

If Christianity may be the absolute religion in a general and theoretical way, then what is the role played by non-Christian religions in God's overall plan of salvation? Rahner's second statement asserts that the religion of a non-Christian believer should not be considered merely a natural form of wisdom. Basing upon the universal salvific will of God revealed in Christ, the second thesis states:

Until the moment when the gospel really enters into the historical situation of an individual, a non-Christian religion (even outside the Mosaic religion) does not merely contain elements of a natural knowledge of God, elements, moreover, mixed up with human depravity, which is the result of original sin and latter aberrations. It contains also supernatural elements arising out of the grace that is given to men as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ. For this reason a non-Christian religion can be recognized as a lawful religion (although only in different degrees) without thereby denying the error and depravity contained in it.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ Gavin D'Costa, 1986, p. 84.

¹⁴⁰ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 25.

¹⁴¹ Karl Rahner, 1966, p. 119.

¹⁴² Cf. Gavin D'Costa, 1986, p. 84.

¹⁴³ Karl Rahner, 1966, p. 121.

In the second statement, Rahner argues that “there are supernatural, grace-filled elements in non-Christian religions.”¹⁴⁴ “Rahner takes the theological axiom of God’s universal salvific will revealed in Christ absolutely seriously.”¹⁴⁵ If it is true that the eternal Word of God has become flesh and has died the death of sin for sake of our salvation and in spite of our guilt, then it means that “in Christ God not only gives the possibility of salvation, which in that case would still have to be effected by man himself, but the actual salvation itself, however much this includes also the right decision of human freedom which is itself a gift from God.”¹⁴⁶ God must also somehow offer grace to all those who have never properly encountered the Gospel. Rahner argues that grace must be made available through and not despite the non-Christian’s religion. In this sense, non-Christian religions may be called “lawful” when they mediate God’s grace.¹⁴⁷

His optimism in God’s “salvific will, which is more powerful than the extremely limited stupidity and evil-mindedness of men”¹⁴⁸, according to James Fredericks, leads Rahner to a daring conclusion: “God saves human beings *through* the non-Christian religions, not *despite* them.... Thus non-Christian religions, potentially at least, are ways that lead to the same salvation enjoyed by Christians.”¹⁴⁹ It is historically exemplified in the religion of Israel. Nevertheless, “it should not be inferred that Rahner thereby declares all non-Christian religions to be lawful, but only in principle this is perfectly possible.”¹⁵⁰ He clearly recognizes that there will be different degrees of error and truth found in various non-Christian religions.

¹⁴⁴ Karl Rahner, 1966, p. 121.

¹⁴⁵ Gavin D’Costa, 1986, p. 85.

¹⁴⁶ Karl Rahner, 1966, p. 124.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Karl Rahner, 1966, pp. 121-131.

¹⁴⁸ Karl Rahner, 1966, p. 123.

¹⁴⁹ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 26.

¹⁵⁰ Gavin D’Costa, 1986, p. 87.

If the second thesis is correct, we arrive at the third Rahner's statement, "Christianity does not simply confront the member of an extra-Christian religion as a mere non-Christian but as an anonymous Christian."¹⁵¹ Because of the universality of grace, Christians should not look upon the other religious believers as strangers to the saving grace of God. Nevertheless, in this thesis Rahner still argues that mission is absolutely necessary.¹⁵²

If non-Christians are actually anonymous Christians, then what is the purpose of the mission? If grace of God in Christ is available to a Muslim through Islam, why should a Muslim become a Christian? In his fourth statement that is about the church, "Rahner readily admitted that his inclusivist theology called for a reevaluation of the church's role in the world, especially in terms of its missionary effort."¹⁵³ The theology of the anonymous Christian is not intended to undercut the mission and Christianity remains the "absolute religion" intended for all human beings. However, Church cannot be seen as an elite and exclusive community of those who are saved as opposed to the mass of unsaved non-Christian humanity. The Church needs to remember that the salvation of the world is the work of Christ. It is but the "historically tangible vanguard and the historical and socially constituted expression of what the Christian hopes is present as a hidden reality even outside the visible Church."¹⁵⁴ "Rahner believes that the theology of the anonymous Christian should be seen as humility on the part of Christianity, not presumption. Taking an inclusivist approach to the problem of religious diversity allows God to be greater than the church."¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ Karl Rahner, 1966, p. 131.

¹⁵² Karl Rahner, 1966, p. 132.

¹⁵³ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 27.

¹⁵⁴ Karl Rahner, 1966, p. 133.

¹⁵⁵ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 27.

2.3.2. Inclusivism Evaluated

As we have seen above, exclusivism and pluralism take positions on the meaning of religious plurality that are contrary to one each other. "Both cannot be true, but both can be false."¹⁵⁶ Both paradigms for a theology of religions have their supporters. Both paradigms have their critics. However, it is obvious that exclusivism and pluralism fail in keeping with two criteria we have held up for an adequate Christian response to the fact of religious plurality: faithfulness to the Christian tradition and helpfulness in assisting Christians to respond creatively to religious diversity. How about Rahner's theory for an inclusivist theology of religions?

"Rahner's theology of the anonymous Christian is not without precedents in Christian history."¹⁵⁷ There are many passages in the Bible that speak of universality of God's will to save. In addition, there is a long tradition within Christianity of affirming that God's grace in Christ extends beyond the boundaries of church community. In the second century, Justin Martyr (*Apologia* 1.46.) argued that non-Christians, who live according to the truth, are Christians at least implicitly. As Abraham had an implicit knowledge of the Word of God (the eternal *Logos Spermatikos*), non-Christians may come to the explicit revelation of God in the Christian Church by following the implicit revelation in non-Christian wisdom such as Platonic philosophy. In the middle Ages, theologians such as Thomas Aquinas noted that there was a "baptism by desire" in which non-Christians could be saved by the grace of God without being baptized formally as Christians.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 103. He cited from Shubert Ogden, *Is There One True Religion or Are There Many?*, Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1992, p. 78.

¹⁵⁷ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 29.

¹⁵⁸ For study more detail see: Jacques Dupuis, S.J., *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000, especially pp. 53-129.

Karl Rahner has also had his followers and sympathizers, some of who went beyond Rahner own constitutive inclusivist position,¹⁵⁹ while others followed him with some caution, like J. Neuner, W. Kasper, J. Ratzinger, and W. Pannenberg.¹⁶⁰ Moreover, Gavin D'Costa argues that Rahner's inclusivist position alone is capable of holding together and harmonizing the two traditional axioms of Christian faith that remain obligatory for any Christian theology of religions. He writes:

... Rahner's inclusivist paradigm provides a satisfactory reconciliation of the strengths of the pluralist and exclusivist paradigms while overcoming their shortcomings and weaknesses. This inclusivist position intelligibly reconciles and holds together the axioms of the universal salvific will of God and the axiom that salvation alone comes through God in Christ in his Church. The first axiom is used by pluralists, while severing it from its historical and normative basis. The second axiom is used by exclusivists, often at the cost of minimizing the first.

The inclusivist position also overcomes the difficulties encountered by exclusivists in explaining extra-ecclesial salvation, while also avoiding the theological confusion entailed in the pluralist recognition of this fact. Furthermore, the inclusivist stance properly affirms that the only possible normative truth criterion for Christians (as is also upheld by exclusivists) is Christ, while accommodating the suggestive insights of pluralists concerning other criteria (such as the emphasis on right action), which they sometimes fail to ground in their proper theological context. The inclusivist paradigm also offers a Christian position, which is genuinely open to the history of religions without insisting on an *a priori* negative or positive judgement, although Rahner has been properly criticized for overemphasizing his optimism as to the positive outcome of this analysis.¹⁶¹

For all that, according to James Fredericks¹⁶², "many of Rahner's critics argued that the theology of the anonymous Christian is not an adequate response to religious plurality". If other religious believers are, or at least can be, "Christian without the name" then has Rahner not extended the boundaries of the church so far

¹⁵⁹ This position can be considered when Karl Rahner writes in his key essay on Christianity and Non-Christian Religions that "God desires the salvation of everyone; and this salvation willed by God is the salvation won by Christ." (Karl Rahner, 1966, p. 122.); see also Karl Rahner, "The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation", in *Theological Investigation XVI*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979, pp. 199-224.

¹⁶⁰ Jacques Dupuis, S.J., 2000, p.149.

¹⁶¹ Gavin D'Costa, 1986, pp.111-112.

¹⁶² James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 30.

beyond the visible community of Christian believers that the notion of the “church” has become meaningless? Hans Küng, one of Rahner’s most strident critics, castigated Rahner’s approach as merely a “theological trick” to sweep everyone into the church via the back door. Küng argued that Rahner has expanded membership in the church by including everyone of generic good will. Then, when the church becomes equivalent to almost everyone, what is to be said of the demanding message of the gospel to renounce all and become a disciple of Jesus Christ? Moreover, the term “anonymous Christian” is offensive to “non-Christians” because it defines them by what they disclaim to be, instead of expressing their own identity, as they themselves perceive it.¹⁶³

“Henri de Lubac, one of the Rahner’s best critics, protested that the theology of the anonymous Christian makes formal conversion to Christianity unnecessary.”¹⁶⁴ This criticism by De Lubac is, according James L. Fredericks, true in several ways.¹⁶⁵ First, if non-Christian can be saved by being good “anonymous Christians”, is there anything unique and necessary about the Christian community? “De Lubac reminds us that the gospel is a radical call to set aside our nets at the Sea of Galilee and follow Christ in a life of discipleship.” Second, “if there are several ways to salvation, is there anything unique about Jesus Christ as the historical incarnation of God within the world? Christianity teaches that in Jesus of Nazareth the Second Person of the Holy Trinity has come into the world as a specific human being. So, Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus separates Christianity from the other religions.” Third, “to claim that there are several ways to salvation would mean that our adherence to the truth ultimately separates us from one another. The human religious quest causes us to be dispersed into divergent paths that teach different doctrines. In effect, Rahner’s theology of the anonymous Christian makes

¹⁶³ Cf. Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, New York: Doubleday, 1977, pp. 97-98.

¹⁶⁴ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 30.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, pp.30-31.

the non-Christian religions into rival churches.” Although De Lubac still agrees with Rahner that saving grace can be found at work in the lives of non-Christian believers, he argues that this grace is not available through non-Christian religious traditions.

Does Rahner’s program for an inclusivist theology of religions assist Christians in living creatively with the diversity of religions today? On this issue, James L. Fredericks argues that there are two criticisms to Rahner’s inclusivist theology.¹⁶⁶ First, “Rahner’s theology of the anonymous Christian has been criticized for providing an excuse for Christians to ignore the challenge posed to their religion by religious diversity. In effect, these critics are claiming that Rahner’s inclusivism absolves Christians from the need to learn *about* non-Christians and their religions.” Second, besides serving as an excuse for not learning *about* our non-Christian neighbors, Rahner’s theology of the anonymous Christian also “serves as an excuse for not learning *from* them.”

Of course, that is not Rahner’s intent. Rahner explains that the term anonymous Christian should not be used as a label for non-Christians. Instead, his inclusivist position should be thought of as a program for guiding Christians in their relations with their non-Christian neighbors. He wants to get Christians to look on other religious believers with the greatest of respect and reverence and to remember that the Mystery of God is far more than Christians imagine.¹⁶⁷

“Rahner’s intent is certainly praiseworthy”, but an unhappy side-effect of Rahner’s theology, however, is that it puts Christians into a position of claiming to know more about non-Christians than the non-Christians know about themselves. For example: a Muslim claims that Jesus, a prophet and not a divine savior, did not die on the cross or rise from the dead. But since the Muslim is really an “anonymous Christian”, Christians know what the Muslim does not, namely, that

¹⁶⁶ Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, pp. 31-33.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 32.

the grace of Jesus Christ, the divine savior of the world, is at work in the heart of the Muslim's religion. Rahner's inclusivist approach implies that Christians know the relationship between their religion and other religions irrespective of any concrete knowledge of those other religions. In other words, Rahner's inclusivism does not lead Christians to learn about other religions as a creative response to religious diversity today. Moreover, Rahner's theological program tends to highlight the similarities that Christianity shares with other religions. As such, it tends to blind us to the real, enduring differences, which distinguish non-Christian religions from Christianity. "This means that non-Christians have nothing of real significance to teach Christians."¹⁶⁸ Thus, there is no real learning from one another. The point is that the theology of the anonymous Christian is inadequate to the challenge facing Christians today.

2.4. The Impasse of the Theology of Religions

Christian theology's basis and center is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Its particular objective is the critical understanding of the content of the Christian faith so that the lives of believers may be fully significant in their situation and context. In other words, the task of theology – that has been classically expressed as *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding) - is to "make use of various discourses of human thought and experience to explain the Christian message in terms that are both faithful to the inherited tradition and intelligible to contemporary human beings."¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 33.

¹⁶⁹ William Henn, "Theological Pluralism", in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000, pp. 783-784.

Today religious plurality may be said to characterize contemporary society as a whole. "Christians become more and more aware of rapidly growing religious plurality in which we live from day to day in the midst of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and members of other religious traditions."¹⁷⁰ Religions such as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism are ancient and highly sophisticated ways of imagining the world and the meaning of human life within the world. "Like Christianity, these religious traditions have been the inspiration for the building up of great civilizations. Like Christianity, these religions equip their believers with a compelling vision of the meaning of human life and the fate of the individual."¹⁷¹ Each of these faiths proclaims its own message of eternal truth and salvation. Obviously, it is a fact that contemporary society is strongly religious pluralistic.

Today to presume that it is possible to do theology without paying attention to the fact of religious diversity is naïve. Equally naïve would it be for Christians to presume that they can live their own faith while ignoring their non-Christian neighbors. In the context of religious plurality it is obvious that Christians must take their non-Christian neighbors seriously and should *creatively respond to religious diversity*.

In addressing religious diversity, Christians need to be responsible to the demand their religious tradition places on them. At the same time, Christians should respond creatively to the enormous opportunity that religious diversity offers to Christians to think about their own religious tradition in new way today.¹⁷²

The diversity of religions poses a challenge to Christians but also offers them an opportunity of incomparable value. "When they recognize in their neighbors not only similarity but also genuinely significant differences in their deepest-held religious convictions, Christian believers will not be left untouched. The depth and

¹⁷⁰ Mariasusai Dhavamony, "Theology of Religions" in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000, p. 886.

¹⁷¹ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 5.

¹⁷² James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 8.

richness Christians find in the religious lives of their non-Christian neighbors can be threatening. By taking non-Christian religions seriously, Christians may feel the anxiety that comes from realizing that their religion is but one among many. The religious traditions of our non-Christian neighbors enable them to lead full and humane lives quite apart from faith in Jesus Christ. Encounters with their non-Christian neighbors, on the other hand, can also be an opportunity for Christians to learn much of value and to return to their own religious tradition with new insight.” This is what is meant by a “creative response to religious diversity.”¹⁷³

Does the theology of religions equip Christians to respond to the threat and opportunity of religious plurality today? Until now we have been examining and analyzing each paradigm of the theology of religions: exclusivism, pluralism, and inclusivism, that wish to contribute to a better understanding of world religions and to carry on a fruitful-dialogue with the adherents of non-Christian religions. The analysis has been centered on the problem of an adequate “theology of religions” using the two criteria: (1) faithfulness to the Christian tradition and (2) helpfulness in assisting Christians to response creatively to religious diversity.

In light of the challenge and opportunity of Christians encountering their non-Christian neighbors, we have seen that each approach to religious diversity has been found wanting. Exclusivism, while rightly stressing that salvation comes from God alone through Christ, fails to develop one of the major insights resulting from this revelation: the universal salvific will of God. Moreover, the exclusivist distinction between religion and revelation excuses Christians from the need to learn about and from their non-Christian neighbors. In contrast to exclusivism, pluralism, while rightly stressing the axiom of the universal salvific will of God,

¹⁷³ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 104.

rejects the basis for this axiom: that God's universal salvific will is made known in and through Christ. In other words, "the proponents of the pluralistic approach have been very successful in exposing the inadequacies of more traditional views of Christian in relation to other religion."¹⁷⁴ Nevertheless, The pluralist theology of religions has been met with a storm of protest from many sides. "Their critics have also been successful in exposing the inadequacies of the pluralists."¹⁷⁵ Inclusivism, while providing a satisfactory reconciliation of the strengths of the exclusivist and pluralist paradigm, overcomes their shortcomings and weakness. Nevertheless, "there are a number of issues raised by inclusivist theory which need further explanation: what is the most appropriate form of mission, what are the principles of dialogue, and what kind of truth criteria may be employed in the encounter with non-Christians."¹⁷⁶ Like exclusivism and pluralism, however, inclusivism serves an excuse for not learning about and from our non-Christian neighbors. In sum, none of the three of the basic options for a theology of religions provides Christians with a theological understanding of non-Christians and their religions that is adequate to the needs of Christian believers today.

Today, according to James Fredericks, "most participants in the debate over an adequate theology of religions would agree that the discussion has come to an impasse. Fundamental differences have come to the surface and been clarified, but not resolved."¹⁷⁷ Exclusivism, pluralism and inclusivism are theoretical approaches to religious plurality. They think of religious plurality as a theoretical problem to be solved. In this chapter, we have being seen that there are some fundamental differences that have come to the surface and been clarified but the answer is not

¹⁷⁴ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 8.

¹⁷⁵ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 8.

¹⁷⁶ Gavin D'Costa, 1986, p. 112.

¹⁷⁷ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 10.

yet found. The debate over the question of a theology of religions adequate for the world of vast religious plurality that Christians face today has come to an impasse.

However, in spite of the impasse of the contradictory debate over theology of religions, we can note some points for a post-conciliar theology in the context of religious plurality. While avoiding on all sides *absolutism* as well as *relativism*, “plurality needs to be taken seriously and to be welcomed, not merely as a matter of fact but in principle. Its place in God’s plan of salvation for humankind must be stressed. It must also be shown that commitment to one’s faith is compatible with openness to that of other; that the affirmation of one’s religious identity does not build on confrontation with other identities.”¹⁷⁸

Now there is a new development having to do with Christianity and its relationship to other religions, a development that holds great promise for Christians who wish to think about their religion in relationship to their non-Christian neighbors. A small number of Christian theologians are beginning to argue that the time has come to turn away from the questions and the controversy over a theology of religions. “A small but growing number of Christian theologians” are beginning to think about Christianity in relation to other religions comparatively, studying the teaching and practices of non-Christian religions seriously. They are also beginning to return to Christian religious tradition “with new insights and new questions and to share their insights with the larger Christian community”. Going beyond the impasse in the theology of religions, they are doing theology comparatively.¹⁷⁹

What is meant by a “comparative theology”? What is the difference between Comparative theology and theology of religions? To answer these questions, in the following chapter we will look at the definition and method of comparative

¹⁷⁸ Jacques Dupuis, S.J., 2000, p. 201.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 139.

theology. Suggesting comparative theology as an alternative to the theology of religions, moreover, in the last chapter of this work, we will give a perspective toward a post-conciliar theology in the context of religious plurality, in order to be both faithful to the inherited tradition and intelligible to contemporary human beings.

CHAPTER III

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

3.1. Defining Comparative Theology

Historically, according to David Tracy, the term *comparative theology* has been used in a variety of ways since at least the 19th century.¹ For example, in his *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, F. Max Muller used the term to refer to that part of the “Science of Religion” that analyzes “historical” forms of religion, in contrast to *theoretic theology*, which refers to analysis of the philosophical conditions of possibility for any religion. In 1871, James Freeman Clarke, in his work entitled *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology*, used the term to indicate the study of the history of religious doctrines in different traditions.² “In many of its Christian instances, however, it seem to have designated what today might simply be called the ‘theology of religions’, i.e., Christian reflection on the general idea of other religions, in light of some particular understanding of the Christian faith.”³

¹ Cf. David Tracy, “Comparative Theology”, in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 14, New York: Macmillan, 1987, p. 446.

² Cf. David Tracy, 1987, p. 446.

³ Francis X. Clooney, S.J., “Comparative Theology: A Review of Recent Books (1989-1995)”, in *Theological Studies* 56, 1995, p. 521.

Today, however, the “contemporary scholars in history of religions or religious studies do not use the term *comparative theology* in Muller’s or Clarke’s senses”.⁴ The term *Comparative theology* is also no longer used to designate the “theology of religions”; on the contrary, the term must be understood “in lieu of a fully systematic theology of non-Christian religions, as a creative and responsible way of addressing the intrusive fact of the diversity of religions today”.⁵

As we have seen in the previous chapters, it appears that to be religious today and in the years to come is to be inter-religious. It is no longer sufficient merely to acknowledge the fact of religious plurality. We are at a point where inter-religious dialogue and comparative study must become integral to all Christian theologizing if Christianity is to become truly catholic.⁶ Confronting this new situation, among the most noticed debates in current Christian theology is that over the significance of the plurality of religions. Much attention has been given to the quest for an adequate theology of religions. Now, however, we may recognize that the debate over the merits and drawbacks of the major positions of exclusivism, pluralism, and inclusivism for the world of vast religious plurality that Christians face today has come to an impasse.

From within this debate, however, there is emerging a potentially more significant discussion between those who are confident that the systematization represented by the theology of religions is a plausible and worthwhile goal and those who argued against such grand systematizations. Francis X. Clooney, in his article “The Study of Non-Christian Religions in the Post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church” (1991), believes that “this latter divide – between those who have faith in large theories and those who do not – is the one likely to dominate the

⁴ David Tracy, 1987, p. 446.

⁵ James L. Fredericks, “A Universal Religious Experience? Comparative Theology as an Alternative to a Theology of Religions” in *Horizons* 22: 1, 1995, p. 68.

⁶ Cf. Stephen J. Duffy, “A Theology of the Religions and/or a Comparative Theology?” in *Horizons* 26: 1, 1999, p. 105-106.

theological debate about religions over the next generation: On what basis can there be a Christian explanation of other religions? What in practice might lend credibility to it? Finally, is such an explanation even desirable?"⁷ Moreover, Clooney states that this debate may also be taken as indicative of a generation gap between "those whose theological education was essentially complete before Vatican II and before they began their reflection on other religions, and the newer, "post-Vatican II" theologians who were educated after the Council and whose education has often included the study of other religions from the start."⁸

In contrast to those who held that there could be a systematized explanation of the relationships among religions, during the past five to fifteen years, a new generation of scholars with roots in Christianity, many expert indologists, buddhologists, and islamicists, "confront the divergences among traditions rather than vaporizing them away in a haze of presumptive generalities and assumed convergences".⁹ They have been producing an increasing number of studies that either the authors or others have identified as "comparative theology".

Though in either its theoretical or practical dimensions is still young and not mature, David Tracy, who reminded us that reflection on "other religions" has been present in the Christian tradition from its beginnings although the realities of pluralism have never been so evident as they are today,¹⁰ suggests that one can understand comparative theology either as a part of the history of religion or as "a more strictly theological enterprise...which ordinarily studies not one tradition alone but two or more, compared on theological grounds."¹¹ In addition to Tracy's two interpretations, Francis X. Clooney suggests that comparative theology can also be thought of as "truly constructive theology, distinguished by its sources and ways

⁷ Francis X. Clooney, S.J., "The Study of Non-Christian Religions in the Post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church", in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 28: 3, 1991, p. 483.

⁸ Francis X. Clooney, S.J., 1991, pp. 483-484.

⁹ Stephen J. Duffy, 1999, p. 110.

¹⁰ Cf. David Tracy, 1987, pp. 448-452.

¹¹ David Tracy, 1987, p. 446.

of proceeding, by its foundation in more than one tradition (although the comparativist remains rooted in one tradition), and by reflection which builds on that foundation, rather than simply on themes or by methods already articulated prior to the comparative practice. Comparative theology in this third sense is a theology deeply changed by its attention to the details of multiple religious and theological traditions; it is a theology that occurs truly only *after* comparison.”¹²

“Comparative theology is not comparative religions. It is not interested in investigating a theory of religion in general. It does not begin in a pan-religious perspective. Comparative theology is Christian theology in its basic sense: the project of interpreting the Christian tradition.”¹³ James Fredericks defines the task of comparative theology as seeking “to interpret the Christian tradition conscientiously in conversation with the texts and symbols of non-Christian religions.”¹⁴

Based on both David Tracy and Francis Clooney’s suggestions, John Renard, in his article “Comparative Theology: Definition and Method” (1998)¹⁵, describes an integrated framework within which to situate a set of models for understanding comparative theology as a bridge between Historical Theology and Systematic Theology. Renard defines comparative theology, taking a clue from the *via negativa* and specify what comparative theology is not and how it differs from other sub-disciplines of theology and religious studies that have used comparative methods: History of Religion(s), Comparative Religion, Theology of Religion(s) and Theology of Dialogue.¹⁶ “All of these four sub-disciplines are a but a subtle attitude

¹² Francis X. Clooney, S.J., 1995, p. 522.

¹³ James L. Fredericks, “The Incomprehensibility of God: A Buddhist Reading of Aquinas”, in *Theological Studies* 56, 1995*, p. 506 (NB. The symbol “*” is used just to distinguish this article from the other article that James L. Fredericks wrote at the same year.)

¹⁴ James L. Fredericks, 1995, p. 68.

¹⁵ John Renard, “Comparative Theology: Definition and Method”, in *Religious Studies and Theology* 17: 1, 1998, p. 4.

¹⁶ “The History of Religion(s) provides data on individual traditions by serving as a clearing house for input from specializations in the various major traditions; by bringing those traditions together under the larger rubric of a global history, it invites comparative studies. Comparative Religion then selects and categorizes

shift away from polemics and apologetics and can all too easily slip across the line into triumphalism and exclusivist views.”¹⁷ Unlike those four sub-disciplines, comparative theology offers a serious academic and genuinely theological framework that integrates both a-confessional and confessionally based sub-disciplines. From the perspective of theological education and pedagogy, John Renard tries to situate comparative theology solidly within the context of the two already well-established sub-disciplines of Historical Theology and Systematics.¹⁸

On one side, “as a historical discipline, comparative theology investigates the mechanisms and assumptions behind both the implied and expressed comparisons that have resulted in theological change in a variety of historical and cultural contexts.” On the other side, “as a systematic discipline, comparative theology builds on the historical data as it seeks to elaborate not only the relationships between Christian and other theological systems, but the very shape of Christian theology itself.” Here, according to John Renard, comparative theology contributes “to the ongoing evolution of Christian thought, by introducing a note, not of relativism, but of realism about the wider context in which any theology worthy of the name must be done.” Moreover, comparative theology “strikes a balance between claiming the definitive superiority of one tradition and simple resignation in the face of religious pluralism.” Finally, comparative theology “avoids polemics

data with a view to pointing out explicit parallels and dissimilarities. In its “classic” form, Comparative Religion has drawn heavily on phenomenologically derived categories such as scripture, paradigmatic or foundational figure, ritual, law, and theology. More recently the sub-discipline has begun to incorporate more ethnographic and other anthropological material. Neither History of Religion(s) nor Comparative Religion presupposes any particular confessional allegiance on the part of the investigator; both claim a certain objectivity and try to avoid evaluative judgments. The theology of Religion(s), however, does presume a standpoint within one of the traditions and seeks to articulate a “super theology” that can situate all of the major traditions within its systematic structure. Though its theological embrace is ample, Theology of Religions from whatever angle is inherently evaluative and inevitably cedes priority to one tradition. ... The sub-discipline many Christians call Missiology implies a Theology of Religions; Islam and Buddhism, the other great missionary religions, have their “missiologies” as well. A pastoral, rather than theoretical, concern similar to the one that underlies Missiology has also prompted the study of the history of Inter-religious Relations; that in turn has supported developments in the Theology of Dialogue, a variation on the theme of Theology of Religions.” (John Renard, 1998, pp. 4-5.)

¹⁷ John Renard, 1998, p. 5.

¹⁸ Cf. John Renard, 1998, p. 5.

while nevertheless arriving at solid historical and systematic judgments about the dynamics of theological change.”¹⁹

Suggesting a way of drawing explicit attention to an aspect of theological thinking that has always present at least implicitly, namely its comparative dimensions; John Renard defines comparative theology or theology in comparative context:

It is the study of how theological change has taken place historically in the context of inter-religious relations, and of the implications of serious interchange between and among religious traditions for the future of Christian theology. My objectives are 1) to articulate a set of fundamental concerns of the emerging sub-discipline of Comparative Theology, 2) by employing a set of four Historical and three Systematic models as hermeneutical tools by which to 3) reconstruct and interpret historical and systematic theological case studies as background against which to 4) appreciate the importance of the larger world religious scene as the context in which Christian theologians must learn to do their work for the next century.²⁰

In other words, using James Fredericks' words, comparative theology is “the attempt to understand the meaning of Christian faith by exploring it in the light of the teachings of other religious traditions.” Doing theology in comparative context means “Christians look upon the truths of non-Christian traditions as resources for understanding their own faith.” It is clear that “the purpose of comparative theology is to assist Christians in coming to a deeper understanding of their own religious tradition.” Comparative theology is “a better way for Christian to respond creatively to the fact of religious diversity today.”²¹ In the framework of the task of theology: *fides quaerens intellectum*, comparative theology is “the attempt to establish mutually critical correlations between an interpretation of a particular

¹⁹ John Renard, 1998, p. 5.

²⁰ John Renard, 1998, p. 6.

²¹ James L. Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths, Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions*, New York: Paulist Press, 1999, p. 139-140.

religious tradition and an interpretation of the contemporary situation.”²² It attempts to arrive at the Christian truth with a set of resources that includes non-Christian elements but without claiming to know more about other religious believers than these believers know about themselves.

3.2. Method of Comparative Theology²³

When offering the working description of comparative theology, John Renard situates comparative theology solidly within the context of the two already well-established sub-disciplines of Historical Theology and Systematic. He outlines seven models, four historical and three systematic, as the basis of his description.

About the inter-relationships among the seven models, Renard argues that there are three salient features. First, there is by design some overlapping among the historical models as well as among systematic models, and between the historical and systematic groupings. There is a mutually supportive, even symbiotic, relationship between Historical Theology and Systematic Theology. It may help to imagine the seven models arranged around a circle rather than arrayed along a horizontal continuum. Second, all three systematic models presuppose a hermeneutical framework selected either from some confessionally “neutral” theoretical perspective or from within the Christian tradition. In the latter instance they can assist what Francis Clooney calls “constructive” theology; in the former, the result is still systematic theology, but one that envisions a much wider field of vision. Finally, one can use any of the models from either explicitly confessional or non-confessional standpoints, depending on one’s ultimate theological purpose. The

²² David Tracy, 1987, p. 452.

²³ This part is reproduced and summarized from John Renard, “Comparative Theology: Definition and Method”, in *Religious Studies and Theology* 17: 1, 1998, pp. 6-14.

important proviso is that one be as clear about one's evaluative criteria as possible from the outset. In general, however, it is envisioned the historical models as hermeneutical devices in service of an approach as unfettered by confessional biases as possible, with the systematic models more readily adapted to the ends of confessional systematic theology.²⁴

3.2.1. Historical Models

Four historical models are useful for defining and analyzing historical circumstances of theological change as it has occurred both within religious traditions and as traditions have encountered each other. Each of the models is built around seven elements: 1) a consideration of *method* that describes in general terms the kinds of historical settings and data, 2) a specific *focus* on the mechanisms or model of interaction within and between traditions that one can identify as precipitating theological change, 3) basic *assumptions* or presuppositions, 4) *hermeneutical principles and structural metaphors* most evidenced by the model in question, 5) *historical and geographical contexts* that exemplify the method and its focus more concretely, 6) *themes* that is possible to investigate further using the model in question, and 7) a *case study* exemplifying an application of the model. All these models are anchored in specific historical contexts, with problematic defined by some aspect of interaction or parallel development in two or more traditions. The historical models involve the study of the theological implications of those encounters for the interlocutors and their fellow believers. Results are akin to what Bernard Lonergan calls theology as "indirect discourse"²⁵ in that these models

²⁴ John Renard, 1998, pp. 15-16.

²⁵ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1972.

lead to reporting on what others have said as a result of, or in the context of, their at least implicitly comparative engagement with another tradition.²⁶

a) *Model 1 Inter- and Intra-developmental: How communities of faith are formed and defined*²⁷

The Inter/Intra development model studies historical settings in which 1) one tradition develops out of or in direct relation to other, or 2) one tradition experiences internal differentiation resulting in processes of mutual theological definition and the articulation of the categories of schism and heresy, or 3) a new tradition is created as a deliberate syncretistic amalgam of features from two existing traditions. Here the specific focus will be on the mechanisms by which one tradition seeks to establish itself in relation to another, either older to newer or vice versa, and on the nature of the transition itself.

This model assumes that theologies evolve and change as communities of faith coalesce and rub elbows. It also presupposes that one can define a body of belief with sufficient clarity to identify it as distinctively Christian, Islamic, etc. Structural metaphors that emerge from the use of the model include, for example, those that emphasize family ties (Abrahamic traditions); characterizations of religious groups as reforming, renewing or correcting original revelation; descriptions of the “authentic” way as a *via media*; and the concepts of finality or definitive revelation.

Examples of historical and geographical contexts might include, for example, developments of Christianity in relation to Judaism, Buddhism in relation to Hinduism, Baha’i tradition in relation to Islam, Sikhism in relation to Islam and Hinduism. Themes might include any specific point of doctrine, theoretically; in

²⁶ John Renard, 1998, p. 6.

²⁷ John Renard, 1998, p. 7.

particular, this model is useful for getting at implied theologies of history or religion or inter-religious relations, political or liberation theologies. One case study might be Ibn Taymiyya's response to Jewish and Christian sources by defending Islam as middle path in that it neither rejects Christ and Mary as Jews do, nor does it deify Jesus; Islam combines the Mosaic emphasis on justice with Christian emphasis on charity in its moral exhortation.

b) *Model 2 Inculturation and Conflict: How communities of faith interact with each other and with new cultural matrices*²⁸

For its overall method this model can help frame setting in which 1) "imported" traditions engage indigenized traditions or new cultural setting, and redefine themselves within the new contexts, and/or 2) one tradition seizes political control over a region in which another tradition has long been established. The distinction is in the manner in which a tradition becomes transplanted, i.e. without or with political patronage, but since political contexts change.

Here the specific focus is on the mechanisms of theological adaptation/assimilation or self-definition/isolation, include, for example, 1) juxtaposition, in which one symbol or image is accepted into another culture without change in meaning; 2) convergence, in which both cultures share similar interpretation of one symbol or image; 3) syncretism, a condition sometimes overlapping with convergence, observable when a single symbol or image is invested with very different meanings in two cultures; or 4) fusion: when two similar symbols or images becomes fused into a third "hybrid".

To use this model one has to assume that it is possible to identify the "growth-plates" characteristic of a particular tradition. A useful hermeneutical

²⁸ John Renard, 1998, pp. 8-9.

principle emerges from Nathan Katz's use of gestalt method, whereby he analyzes which among the major clusters of images associated with a tradition rise to the foreground and which recede to the background, depending on the cultural/religious matrix into which they are inserted. Dominant metaphors that emerge here are those that suggest one tradition's discernment of another as kindred souls united by a long-lost historical or ethnic connection or cultural affinity. Middle Eastern Christians of late antiquity, for example, often perceived Byzantium as alien while sensing a bond with their fellow Middle Easterners, the Muslim invades also of Semitic origin.

Among the immense range of historical and geographical contexts one might include the spread of Islam into India, of Buddhism into China or Japan, of Judaism and Islam into Spain and the Americas; early Christian expansion out of the Middle East and into Europe; and modern Christianity's transplantation into the Americas. Themes around the general notion of development of doctrine are related to a host of venues – development of holy places of interest to members of more than one tradition, for example, in India where both Muslims and Hindus visit the same saint's tombs. Nathan Katz's study of "The Judaisms of Kaifeng and Cochin"²⁹ is a fine example of a case study, using a double comparison by showing how Jews adapted very differently in India and China.

c) Model 3 Inter-Textual: How one community reads another's texts³⁰

As general method, one can use this model to study situations and texts in which 1) the scripture of one tradition directly engages, or explicitly discusses its relationship to, another tradition's scripture (as in texts of the Qur'an or the Book of

²⁹ Nathan Katz, "The Judaisms of Kaifeng and Cochin: Parallel and Divergent Styles of Religious Acculturation", in *Numen* 42, 1995, pp. 119-140.

³⁰ John Renard, 1998, pp. 9-10.

Mormon that refer explicitly to the Bible), or 2) theologians of one tradition engage the scriptures or theological texts of another directly. It is clear that much in sources of this type will be polemical, but they can also yield signs of serious theological engagement beyond the needs of apologetics. Here the specific focus is on the manifold historical circumstances that gave rise to the engagement and on the relationship between the issues discussed and the religious, political and cultural situation.

Among the model's assumptions are the following: Believers assume absoluteness and universality of their sources, and sometimes that the other tradition's scripture was actually written for *them*, so that they have the right and responsibility to show how it complies with their doctrine. The comparativist assumes one cannot truly encounter the central texts of another tradition and dismiss them while one's own views remain unaltered. Further one must assume that one can distinguish in the writings of a given author what represents merely the repetition of commonly accepted notions about another tradition and what suggests the author's own development within the context of traditionally available ideas.

Hermeneutical principles are intimately related to some of the already mentioned structural metaphors that suggest how one tradition characterizes its relationship with another (parent, fulfillment, sibling, etc.). Among the more important hermeneutical principles are: first, the linguistic, which argues that another text is actually talking about a key figure or concept in one's own tradition (e.g. the Muslims argument that when John's Gospel says *parakletos* it really means *periklutos*, "highly praised" the Greek equivalent of *Muhammad*). Second, the doctrinal, by which one shows similarities and/or differences in central systematic concepts. Third, the historical, whereby one understands the other's text in light of what its transmitters could have known or "had" to say in order to communicate to their people. Fourth, the exegetical, according to which one applies one's own principles and scriptural tools to another's text. Finally, there is the principle of

multi-levelled revelation, which makes room for other scriptures by assigning priority, identifying one as primary and others as secondary texts (e.g. Judaism's distinction between written and oral Torah.)

Historical and geographical contexts include the whole enormous spectrum of situations in which one tradition's texts become available to scholars of another in various forms, and in which either political pressures, the demands of a patron, intellectual interest, or a combination of such things, prompts a direct response. As for themes, the possibilities are even greater. In addition to a broad range of doctrinal issues there are questions of scriptural priority, canon and relationships among sacred texts, authority and transmission, to name only a few large categories. One fruitful case study is Nicholas of Cusa's (mid. 15th c.) "Sifting of the Qur'an" using the theological hermeneutical principles of *pia interpretatio, docta ignorantia, concordantia, and coniectura*.³¹

d) *Model 4 Literary and Artistic Interchange (Genre-evolution): How communities influence and borrow from each other's textual/visual arts*³²

Cutting across the kinds of situations envisioned in the first three models, this model comes at the data from a slightly different angle. Its purpose is to study parallel literary and visual genres in the contexts in which they arose in the respective traditions, tracing developments in terms of theological themes, presuppositions, and implications. The model focuses on the historical mechanisms by which various genres of literary and visual expression have evolved in a given tradition, especially in relation to the interaction of theological communities as

³¹ See James Biechler, "Nicholas of Cusa and Muhammad: A Fifteenth Century Encounter", *Downside Review*, 1983, pp. 50-59; Biechler's "Christian Humanism Confronts Islam: Sifting the Qur'an with Nicholas of Cusa", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 13: 1, 1976, pp. 1-14.

³² John Renard, 1998, pp. 10-11.

described in the previous three models. The point is to suggest likely points of contacts and means by which common element came to be shared.

Among the model's assumptions, three stand out. First, it is possible to identify similarities and differences in modes of communication across traditional lines. Second, those similarities and differences offer clues to the ways theological traditions accommodate to one another in practice if not in theory. Third, similarities in formal and functional usages between two traditions developing in geographical proximity are in many instances not merely the result of chance.

Several hermeneutical principles are useful here. The notion of intertextuality employed in earlier models helps to deal with the virtual free-flow of material across cultural and religious boundaries. Narrative development and other literary theory that explains transformations of stories are also included. Historical and geographical contexts can include any of the setting envisioned in the previous three models. However, this last historical model concentrates primary on formal and stylistic affinities and secondarily on parallel in function and content. Given that breadth of approach, any number of literary forms can provide material for comparison: exegesis, homiletical texts, treatises, devotional and liturgical poetry, hymns, apocalyptic, etc. Material for literary case studies include, for example, Zacharias Thundy's work on infancy narratives in Gospels and Buddhist sources,³³ and Neal Robinson's work on connections between Gospel and Hadith.³⁴ This fourth historical model lends itself readily to the more a-historical study of parallel themes, and thus functions as a methodological bridge to the first of the systematic models.

³³ Zacharias Thundy, *Buddha and Christ: Nativity Stories and Indian Traditions*, Leiden: Brill, 1993.

³⁴ Neal Robinson, "Varieties of Pronouncement Stories in Sahih Muslim: A Gospel Genre in the Hadith Literature", in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 5: 2, 1994, pp. 123-146.

3.2.2. Systematic Models

Here the angle of approach shifts, along the lines of Bernard Lonergan's distinction between theology as indirect discourse, which reports on what other have said, and theology as direct discourse, which speaks in the first person. The three systematic models study ways in which theologians have articulated their positions, and continue to do so, as a result of either explicit or indirect comparison with the texts and thought of other religions. Here the purpose will be to understand the hermeneutical principles by which various traditions' theologians have processed the data, the impetus for change, generated by the various types of historical encounter described in the first four models. Each model turns around the same elements, as did the historical models, except that the systematic models do not attend to historical and geographical contexts. The systematic models do not presuppose historically identifiable encounters, but are nevertheless dependent in some ways on the data generated by historical studies.³⁵

a) Model 5 Phenomenological/Thematic: How theologians can clarify their understanding of their own traditions by observing parallels in others³⁶

The phenomenological/thematic model studies formal and/or theologically functional commonalities or parallels evident in two or more traditions. Emphasis here shifts from the issues of historical development of literary and artistic forms to explicitly doctrinal themes. Our focus here is on parallel doctrinal symbolism and the theological implications of comparable structural elements, sorting out key notions by using concepts of *theological* (rather than literary or visual) *form and function* as guides in comparison and contrast. This model naturally includes some

³⁵ John Renard, 1998, pp. 11-12.

³⁶ John Renard, 1998, pp. 12-13.

historical features, but deals rather with how theologians working now can use comparative method to shed light on their own and other doctrinal systems. This is perhaps the most widely used general method in comparative religious studies, but the theologian goes a step further than the religionist, using the results of thematic comparison as an aid to the further theological articulation.

A primary assumption is that it is possible to define some theological concepts as genuinely comparable within the broader categories of theological form and function. For example, one might posit formal comparisons between the Qur'an and the Bible on the grounds that both are scriptures, or between Muhammad and Jesus on the grounds that both are foundational figures. These are formal similarities; but if one wishes to establish parallels in theological function, one needs to compare the Qur'an and Jesus, on the grounds that they function in their respective traditions as the Word of God. Major hermeneutical issues revolve around defining principles of comparability and around how to formulate systematic theological questions and conclusions. A key question is this: to the extent that one can find genuine similarities, what causes, beyond mere chance, can one suggest?

A virtually limitless reservoir of themes is available here, including, for example, the place and function of scripture within a theological system, images of God, personifications of holiness, views of community, sin and grace, soteriology, anthropology, ethics, eschatology, and hermeneutics. One intriguing case study might ask whether there is such a thing as an "Islamic Christology". It may well seem so, to the extent that Jesus, last prophet prior to Muhammad, and his mother Mary play major roles in the Qur'an. But further investigation raises critical questions as to whether, and to what degree, Jesus is "Christ" in Islamic thought.³⁷

³⁷ See e.g. Mahmoud Ayoub, "Toward an Islamic Christology", in *Muslim World* 66:2, 1976, pp. 163-188.

b) *Model 6 Inter-Textual hermeneutic: How a theologian today can profit from reading another's sacred text without resorting to polemics*³⁸

As for its general method this model envisions a close reading of another's texts in light of one's own tradition, taking care not to read into the text signs of Christianity by another name. It focuses on the specific theological issues discussed or implicit in the other tradition's text as stimulus for reflection on Christian issues.

One of its basic assumptions is that virtually any sacred text can raise questions worthy of reflection. It asserts that by virtue of their authority for and within major communities of belief, the scriptures of all traditions have a legitimate claim on the attention of members of other communities. It assumes further that it is possible to respect the religious integrity of another scripture while interrogating it from the perspective of one's own tradition.

Within the limits of broad canons of "orthodoxy" of the traditions in question, theologically significant themes in the scriptures of one tradition are natural filters through which to interpret the scriptures of another. This model does not go looking for "borrowings" or "influence", nor does it seek to dilute or undercut the authority of another tradition's sacred texts. Available themes for study are limited only to issues suggested by a particular text. A fine example of this kind of cross-traditional theological reading is Francis Clooney's work.³⁹ He suggests a way of reading the Bhagavad Gita in light of the Gospels.

³⁸ John Renard, 1998, p. 13.

³⁹ Francis X. Clooney, S.J., "Peering into the Mouth of God", in *The Santa Clara Lectures 2: 2*, 1996; see also his *Seeing Through Texts: Doing Theology among the Shrivaisnavas*, Albany: SUNY, 1998.

c) *Model 7 Parallels in Methodology and Structure: How theologians can gain insight from the way their counterparts in other traditions have worked*⁴⁰

This model involves comparison and contrast via broad structural and/or methodological elements. Here are examples of three very different approaches, any of which might be used in exercises of this kind. Bernard Lonergan's *Method in Theology* offers a useful framework for comparison of the ways theologians within different traditions perform various theological tasks or operations. Parallel in the sub-disciplines that contribute to eventually result in theological statements can be instructive in understanding how and why different communities of belief work out their theological rationales as they do. But Lonergan's framework does not work so neatly in relation to communities of belief that have no history or tradition or explicit systematic theological elaboration. To study African Traditional Religion or Native American communities, for example, from this perspective, one can profitably use the structure offered by Reat and Perry in *A World Theology: The Central Spiritual Reality of Humankind*.⁴¹ They propose the categories of undeniability, elusiveness, and desirability as essential qualities of a given tradition's "central spirituality reality". Each tradition has its unique way of describing those characteristics through four different types of symbolism: intellectual, moral, mythological, and spiritual.

The model can focus on either 1) analysis of the theological method, whether implied or explicit, employed by a particular theologian in some other tradition, as basis for comparison with method in the work of some Christian theologian; 2) a set of comparable features arranged on a grid such as the one that emerges when one

⁴⁰ John Renard, 1998, p. 14.

⁴¹ Ross Reat and Edmund Perry, *A World Theology: The Central Spiritual Reality of Humankind*, New York: Cambridge University, 1991.

sets out Reat and Perry's three qualities expressed in each of four types of symbolism; 3) a larger methodological category that appears to be a feature of two or more theological traditions, a category such as "scholasticism".

A basic assumption here is that one can identify functional similarities in the ways different traditions "do theology" and that one can "parse" major elements from another theological tradition. Primary hermeneutical principles involve use of structural categories to determine, first, how theologians in another tradition go about the various critical theological operations, and second, how the role of those operations in the systems of the other tradition compare or contrast with those of one's own tradition.

One can choose themes in various ways: either according to Lonergan's eight "functional specializations" (namely Research, Interpretation, History, Dialectic, Foundations, Doctrines, Systematics, Communications), by applying Reat and Perry's categories, or by using a larger structural notion such as scholasticism. Two specific case studies, one very broad and the other restricted to a comparison of two major theologians are Jose Ignacio Cabezon's *Scholasticism: Cross-Cultural and Comparative Perspectives*⁴² and Thomas Puttanil's *A Comparative Study on the Theological Methodology of Irenaeus of Lyons and Shankaracharya*.⁴³

3.3. Comparative Theology: An Alternative to the Theology of Religions

Defining comparative theology and observing its methods, it appears that comparative theology is not another theology of religions. It is different from all theology of religions, be they of the exclusivist, pluralist, or inclusivist variety,

⁴² Jose Ignacio Cabezon, ed., *Scholasticism: Cross-Cultural and Comparative Perspectives*, Albany: SUNY, 1998.

⁴³ Thomas Puttanil, *A Comparative Study on the Theological Methodology of Irenaeus of Lyons and Shankaracharya*, Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1990.

which are theoretical approaches to religious plurality. They think of religious plurality as a theoretical problem to be solved. Then, no matter how different those religions seemed to be, they never doubted that they could interpret the new data in an already articulated Christian language.⁴⁴ Every *a priori* theologies of religions “reduces all faith traditions to a generic religion, in which no living community might recognize itself”⁴⁵ because they knew from the outset that they could locate them within a coherent Christian worldview.

However, we have seen that, on one side, it would be absurd to declare all religions of equal value. On the other side, it would be naïve to prejudice about other religions before studying them seriously. Today, a fully systematized theology of non-Christian religions is not longer possible. This claim is not to promote a kind of agnosticism about the meaning of the diversity of religions for Christian believers. Instead, the point is to direct Christians to a more creative way for responding to religious diversity today. Before Christians can fully understand themselves and the role of their religion in the history of the world’s many religions, we must first learn about other religions. In other words, the central fact of religious diversity has challenged Christians to take the truths of non-Christian religions seriously. Here, then, is yet another reason that our response to religious plurality needs to be not only responsible to the originality of our religious tradition to which we ourselves witness, but also “creative in interpreting the tradition in new and innovative ways in the light of our new appreciation of religious diversity.”⁴⁶

In order to be creative in responding to the fact of religious plurality and in understanding our own faith anew, according to James Fredericks, we should stop theorizing about non-Christian religions and start learning about and from them. The process or practice, not a theory, of exploring Christianity, guided, stimulated,

⁴⁴ Cf. Francis X. Clooney, S.J., 1991, p. 484.

⁴⁵ Stephen J. Duffy, 1999, p. 109.

⁴⁶ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 9.

empowered by the questions and insight of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam or other religions, is to do Christian theology comparatively.⁴⁷ In other words, it means that we should put aside the questions of a theology of religions and look for new ways to respond to our historical situation.

Contrasted with the theology of religions, an *a posteriori* comparative theology demands detailed knowledge of other traditions. One must listen to, hear, and understand the other. The comparativist must possess an analogical imagination that can detect similarity and unity in difference through critical study and understanding of other systems and practices. And then he or she must engage in the difficult task of integrating them where possible into one or other of the diverse areas of Christian theology. One then becomes more aware of the borders of one's own religious world and of the frontiers that lie beyond.⁴⁸ Stephen Duffy comments the contribution of comparative theology as following:

Through this *a posteriori* stage we may become defamiliarized with our own tradition and there-by discover within it possibilities forgotten or unrecognized because silted over by centuries of self-satisfied familiarity. There may be a rethinking of all theological issues, including those arising in one's theology of the religions, which may have to be revised in light of comparative analysis.⁴⁹

Even though practice of comparative theology has only begun, it now "coming to the fore" as "alternative ways in which to think about religion theologically or even in which to think theologically at all."⁵⁰ In comparative theology, Christians will find a way beyond the current impasse in the theology of religions.

⁴⁷ Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 10.

⁴⁸ Cf. Stephen J. Duffy, 1999, p. 109.

⁴⁹ Stephen J. Duffy, 1999, p. 109.

⁵⁰ Francis X. Clooney, S.J., 1991, p. 484.

Commenting on the inadequacies of the theology of religions to the need of Christians today, in his book *Faith Among Faiths* (1999)⁵¹ James Fredericks draws our attention to the fact that, on the one hand, theologies of religion can easily become a sophisticated way to avoid dealing with the moral, theological, and spiritual challenges that non-Christian religions pose to Christian believers today. The great religions of the world, including Christianity of course, cannot be reduced to variant expressions of the Gold Rule or differing interpretations of the same ultimate reality. They differ from one another in ways of great religious importance and theological interest. The differences that distinguish religions need to be recognized and respected. Christian believers should not be required to reformulate their beliefs in compliance with the demand that their beliefs become acceptable to all other religious believers. Living responsibly with non-Christian believers, according to James Fredericks, means living with Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and other religious believers in a way that is true to what is most basic and most demanding about the Christian tradition.⁵²

On the other hand, a theology of religions can become a sophisticated way to refuse to take advantage of an enormous opportunity for Christians today: the chance to learn from their non-Christian neighbors. It can also act as a “mask for a subtle form of religious intolerance.” If we should believe that all religions are ultimately saying the same thing or responding to the same ultimate reality, then there is nothing a Buddhist or a Confucian or a Muslim could say that would require me, as a Christian, to change my mind, at least regarding matters of great theological importance.⁵³ Doing otherwise – taking the teaching of other religious traditions seriously as a source of inspiration and insight – does creative response to the fact of religious diversity.

⁵¹ James L. Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths, Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions*, New York: Paulist Press, 1999.

⁵² Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 163.

⁵³ Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 164.

The same author, in his article "A Universal Religious Experience? (1995),⁵⁴ which examines Liberal Theology's claim regarding a universal religious experience that is put as the basis for the transcendental unity of religions,⁵⁵ argues that the Liberal notion of religious experience is ambiguous. Fredericks writes:

The ambiguity lies in the fact that, on the one hand, the Liberal notion of religious experience can act as an impetus to engaging in inter-religious dialogue. On the other hand, it can also be less than helpful by promoting (a) theological indifference toward the doctrinal claims of other religious traditions, (b) a subtle theological imperialism, or (c) an uncritical syncretism which obscures real differences. If all religions are ultimately expressing the same ultimate, ineffable truth, why need theology interest itself in the complexities of other religions? Herein lie the roots of a new kind of theological indifference toward other religions.⁵⁶

"In contrast to a theology of religions, comparative theology does not concern itself with the development of such general theories of religion but instead engages in limited comparison or case studies."⁵⁷ Comparative theologian begins to explore the truths of Christianity by comparing their faith with the faith of their non-Christian neighbors. This means that a comparative theologian requires a detailed understanding of a specific non-Christian religion on its own terms instead of a theory of religion in general. Here, different from theology of religions, comparative theology honors differences as much as similarities.

At this time in the history of Christianity, Christians should be interested in talking to their non-Christian neighbors about what is that makes their religious tradition distinct from Christianity, including their claims about the uniqueness of

⁵⁴ James L. Fredericks, "A Universal Religious Experience? Comparative Theology as an Alternative to a Theology of Religions", in *Horizons* 22: 1, 1995, 67-87.

⁵⁵ "Beginning with Friedrich Schleiermacher, the appeal to a universal religious experience linking together all religions has served as the cornerstone for much modern thought about religion. Authors taking this position include Rudolf Otto, Friedrich Heiler, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith in the history of religions; Huston Smith, John Hick, and Frithjof Schuon in the philosophy of religion; Ernst Troeltsch in the sociology of religion; and Arnold Toynbee in the history of ideas. This belief has no lack of supporters among Christian theologians as well. Notice how echoes of this theme can be heard in the work of Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan, and Raimundo Panikkar." (James L. Fredericks, 1995, pp. 67. 73-74.)

⁵⁶ James L. Fredericks, 1995, p. 76.

⁵⁷ James L. Fredericks, 1995, p. 84.

their religion. If in the first centuries of the Christian movement, Christianity's encounter with Greek thought proved immensely important in gradual development of Church's recognition of Jesus as the incarnation of God within history, today the Church's encounter with non-Christian believers may prove to be equally stimulating for Christian as they seek to interpret anew the meaning of Jesus Christ in their lives. "Christianity's encounter with non-Christian faiths is already puzzling. The encounter can also be transforming."⁵⁸

Furthermore, being not as another candidate for a theology of religions, comparative theology "does not start with a grand theory of religion in general that claims to account for all religions."⁵⁹ It does not look for some abstract essence that all religions share, but make use of both similarities and differences for exploring their own beliefs. After studying other religions on their own terms, comparative theology then ready to learn from them in the hope of deepening their understanding of Christianity. In other words, comparative theology does not start with the presumption that non-Christian religions all reveal the mystery of Christ in their depths, as with Rahner's inclusivist theology of religion, or that all religions are attempts to name the same transcendent reality, as with pluralist theologies of religion, or that non-Christian religions are merely human creations, as with exclusivist theologies. Instead, comparative theology begins with what non-Christian believers actually believe and then go on to reflect on this beliefs in away that prove helpful for Christians trying to understand themselves in relationship to their neighbors who follow different religious paths.

By comparing their own faith with the faith of other religious believers, Christian can deepen their own religious lives and come to a better understanding of the Gospel. And in the very process of doing this, Christians will also come to a deeper knowledge and appreciation of believers who follow other religious paths. Thus, by exploring the meaning of their own faith by doing theology in dialogue with their

⁵⁸ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 126.

⁵⁹ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 167.

non-Christian neighbors, Christians will have developed practical skills for living responsibly and creatively with non-Christians.⁶⁰

We are not without examples of such limited comparative experiments as an alternative to a theology of religions. Take, for examples, Francis X. Clooney and David Carpenter's exploring Christianity by comparing Christian texts with Hindu texts. David Burrell studies Islamic thought in order to deepen his understanding of the Christian doctrine of God. John Keenan, John Cobb and Leo Lefebure are asking new questions about the meaning of Christ using Buddhist thought. Donald Mitchell is exploring Christian spirituality using Zen Buddhism from Japan. James Fredericks is using Dogen's understanding of life and death in order to deepen Christian truth of the doctrine of the resurrection.⁶¹ These theologians put aside the question of the theology of religions. Instead, they are exploring the Christian truths in comparing with another religious traditions. By exploring the truths of Christianity in dialogue with the teaching and traditions of other religions, we will come to embrace our own cherished beliefs in new ways. In the practice and process, we will forge bonds of respect and even admiration with our non-Christian neighbors. Comparative theology is the best way for us to respond to religious diversity responsibly and creatively.

⁶⁰ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 167.

⁶¹ Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Theology After Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology*, Albany: SUNY, 1993; David Carpenter, *Revelation, History, and the Dialogue of Religions: A Comparative Study of Bhartrhari and Bonaventure*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1995; David Burrell, C.S.C., *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993; John Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahayana Theology*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1989; John Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982; Leo Lefebure, *The Buddha and the Christ: Explorations in Buddhist and Christian Dialogue*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993; Donald Mitchell, *Spirituality and Emptiness*, New York: Paulist Press, 1991; James L. Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths, Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions*, New York: Paulist Press, 1999. About a general observation of comparative books published since 1989, see also Francis X. Clooney, S.J., "Comparative Theology: A Review of Recent Books", in *Theological Studies* 56, 1995, pp. 521-550.

3.4. Comparative Theology: A Perspective Toward a Post-Conciliar Theology In the Context of the Religious Plurality

Comparative theology is Christian theology. As theology, it consists most basically in faith seeking understanding; its ultimate horizon can be nothing less than knowledge of the revelation of God in Christ. In other words, the central content of comparative theology is “Jesus of Nazareth as the eternal Son of God who assumed a human existence, to bring salvation through his life, death, resurrection and gift of the Holy Spirit to all men and women of all times and places.”⁶² Therefore, comparative theology’s task is to understand the content of faith in faithfulness to the inherited tradition and to explain it in terms that are intelligible to actual human beings. It offers its contribution so that “the faith might be communicated” and “appealing to the understanding of those who do not yet know Christ, it help them to seek and find faith.”⁶³

“As one of the theological disciplines, comparative theology is marked by its commitment to the detailed consideration of religious tradition other than one’s own.”⁶⁴ Therefore, to do comparative theology is required a comparative theologian who is competent Christian theologian and also have a degree of professional competence in the traditions, texts, languages, symbols, etc. of other religion. Comparative theology requires Christians to study non-Christian religions seriously, seeing non-Christian religions “on their own terms, not as Christians want these religions to be in order to conform with Christian doctrine or a philosophical presupposition about religions in general.”⁶⁵

⁶² Gerald O’Collins, “The Incarnation Under Fire”, in *Gregorianum* 76: 2, 1995, p. 263.

⁶³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian (Donum Veritatis)* 7.

⁶⁴ Francis X. Clooney, S.J., 1995, p. 521.

⁶⁵ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 169.

As Christian theology, unlike the philosophy of religion or comparative religion, comparative theology is “carried out within the context of the Christian traditions as well as the academy.”⁶⁶ Although being in a crisis of understanding fomented by the intrusive presence of the other, the comparative theologian enters into a professional study of another religion with hopes and expectations because his/her purpose is neither to protect Christianity from the threat of other religions nor to harmonize religions by means of a hierarchy of truths. “The comparative theologian seeks to place Christian discourse in conversation with discourses taken from various religions in the hope that they might enhance one another.”⁶⁷

This means that comparative theology combines a careful study of non-Christian religions and a commitment to discovering more about the meaning and significance of Christian faith. These two inseparable aspects of comparative theology form a tension. There is always commitment to the Christian tradition, but at the same time, there must be openness to the truths of non-Christian religions. In other words, comparative theology is a form of theology that requires Christians to critically understand the content of Christian faith in the context of religious plurality, keeping the tension between “loyalty to Christian truth and vulnerability to the transformative power of the other”⁶⁸ creatively. It is a creative fidelity and a faithful creativity.

Thus, in doing theology comparatively, there will always be a tension between our commitments to the Christian tradition, on the one hand, and on the other, to the allure of other religious traditions. In order to understand Christianity in comparison with other religious traditions, we must resist the temptation to overcome this tension. Losing our commitment to the Christian tradition leads to the problem of relativism that sometimes troubles pluralist theologies of religions. Losing our sense of the allure of other religious traditions, however, is also disastrous for comparative theology, for this would mean that we, as Christian seekers, have cut ourselves off from the power of non-Christian religions to inspire

⁶⁶ James L. Fredericks, 1995, p. 87.

⁶⁷ Cf. James L. Fredericks, 1995*, p. 520.

⁶⁸ Cf. Francis X. Clooney, 1993, pp. 4-5.

new insight within us. The tension should not be lost. The real challenge is how to keep this tension creative.⁶⁹

Doing theology comparatively that means to keep the tension between commitment to Christianity and openness to other religious truths, however, is “to place Christian theological understandings at risk.”⁷⁰ How does a particular non-Christian religious claim, a claim that may be radically at odds with the claims of Christianity, require and enable us to revise our present understanding? It is right that to do Christian theology in such a manner is to place Christian self-understanding at risk. But, this manner is taken with a conviction that there is an opportunity for the enrichment of faith. Comparative theology is “an act of resistance and hope.”⁷¹ It resists the tendency to close itself off from the demanding and transforming truths of other religious traditions. It is an act of hope in that it looks to other religions as a means to understand more fully the truths of Christian faith. Comparative theology begins with openness and an act of hope on the part of Christian: the meaning of Christianity can be embraced at a deeper level by using the insights of non-Christian religions as a resource.

The deepest aspiration of comparative theology is a spiritual transformation of Christian believers, a transformation that will be reached only through the transformation of Christian believers themselves. The Christians always needs *metanoia* (reform), following the path of penance and renewal. It was also the Second Vatican Council’s intention, content and pastoral orientation. *The Constitution on The Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium)*, the first document the Council promulgated, states that the Council’s first and most general goal was

⁶⁹ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 170.

⁷⁰ James L. Fredericks, 1995, p. 87; 1995*, p. 520.

⁷¹ James L. Fredericks, 1995, p. 87.

“to impart an ever increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful” (SC 1). This most basic principle of Vatican II: renewal of the Church that comes about through its members’ growth in holiness is also strongly underlined by Council in *the Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, (Presbyterorum Ordinis)*, December 7, 1965.⁷² This spiritual renewal reflects the inspiration and intention of Pope John XXIII, who convoked the Council. In his Opening Speech of the Council, October 11, 1962, Pope stressed that it was called to strengthen spiritual energies so that the Church will become greater in spiritual riches.⁷³

The Popes to follow him, Paul VI and John Paul II would look at the Council no differently. Paul VI in his *Encyclical on the Church, (Ecclesiam Suam)*, August 6, 1964, articulates renewal of the Church in a systematic and comprehensive way. Its three-point outline of the renewal process reinforces the call to holiness as “the most characteristic element in the whole magisterium of the Council, as so to say, its ultimate purpose.”⁷⁴ For Paul VI, renewal begins with awareness, which means, “the Church should deepen its consciousness of itself”(ES 9). “The starting point of renewal is to turn to the sources of revelation expecting to be challenge by God’s Word, which comes to us anew.”⁷⁵ After awareness comes renewal proper. *The Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio)* describes the essence of renewal. “Every renewal of the Church is essentially grounded in an increase of fidelity to her own calling” (UR 6). But, it is interesting that Paul VI puts “dialogue” as the final step of renewal. Following the pattern of the dialogue of salvation between

⁷² *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 12 says, “Hence, this holy Council, to fulfill its pastoral desires of an internal renewal of the Church, of the spread of the Gospel in every land and of a dialogue with the world today, strongly urges all priests that they strive always for that growth in holiness by which they will become consistently better instruments in the service of the whole People of God, using for this purpose those means which the Church has approved.”

⁷³ Cf. Douglas G. Bushman, “General Introduction” in Marianne Lorraine Trouvé, general ed., *The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II*, Boston: Pauline Book&Media, 1999, xv.

⁷⁴ Pope Paul VI, *Motu Proprio Sanctitatis Clarior*, March 29, 1969: AAS 61, 1969, p. 149.

⁷⁵ Douglas G. Bushman, 1999, xvi.

God and his people in divine revelation, in dialogue the Church carries out its mission of salvation in the world.

... For it becomes obvious in a dialogue that there are various ways of coming to the light of faith and it is possible to make them all converge on the same goal. However divergent these ways may be, they can often serve to complete each other. They encourage us to think on different lines. They force us to go more deeply into the subject of our investigations and to find better ways of expressing ourselves. It will be a slow process of thought, but it will result in the discovery of elements of truth in the opinion of others and make us want to express our teaching with great fairness. It will be set to our credit that we expound our doctrine in such a way that others can respond to it, if they will, and assimilate it gradually...⁷⁶

In the same way, Pope John Paul II sees the plan of renewal of Vatican II. In his *Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay faithful in the Church and in the World (Christifideles Laici)*, December 30, 1988, John Paul II writes: "The Second Vatican Council has significantly spoken on the universal call to holiness. It is possible to say that this call to holiness is precisely the basic charge entrusted to all the sons and daughters of the Church by a Council which intended to bring a renewal of Christian life based on the gospel" (CL 16). And at the beginning of the new millennium, John Paul II, in his *Apostolic Letter Novo Millennio Ineunte*, January 6, 2001, invites the Bishops, Clergy and Lay faithful to: "put out into the deep". Citing the words: "*Duc in altum*" (Lk 5,4), the Pope invites us to remember the past with gratitude, to live the present with enthusiasm and to look forward to the future with confidence: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Heb 13,8) but also to examine how far the Church had renewed herself in order to be able to take up her evangelizing mission with fresh enthusiasm⁷⁷ in the guidelines offered to us by the Second Vatican Council "as the

⁷⁶ *Ecclesiam Suam* 83.

⁷⁷ *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 2.

great grace bestowed on the Church in the twentieth century: there we find a sure compass by which to take our bearings in the century now beginning".⁷⁸

John Paul II, who on January 24, 2002, went to Assisi to pray for the peace together with many non-Christian leaders and believers, believes that inter-religious dialogue is form of fidelity to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. Therefore, strongly he states that a relationship of openness and dialogue with the followers of other religions must continue (NM 55). Showing the place of inter-religious dialogue in the mission of the Church, Paul John II writes:

... Inter-religious dialogue "cannot simply replace proclamation, but remains oriented towards proclamation". This missionary duty, moreover, does not prevent us from approaching dialogue *with an attitude of profound willingness to listen*. We know in fact that, in the presence of the mystery of grace, infinitely full of possibilities and implications for human life and history, the Church herself will never cease putting questions, trusting in the help of the Paraclete, the Spirit of truth (cf. Jn 14,17), whose task it is to guide her "into all the truth" (Jn 16,13).

This is a fundamental principle not only for the endless theological investigation of Christian truth, but also for Christian dialogue with other philosophies, cultures and religions. In the common experience of humanity, for all its contradictions, the Spirit of God, who "blows where he wills" (Jn 3,8), not infrequently reveals signs of his presence, which help Christ's followers to understand more deeply the message that they bear. Was it not with this humble and trust-filled openness that the Second Vatican Council sought to read "the signs of the times"?⁷⁹

"The relationship between renewal and dialogue is the key to grasping the centrality of the call to holiness in Vatican II's teaching."⁸⁰ There are two elements of the spirit of *aggiornamento* permeate the conciliar texts. The first, implications for the Church's inner life, especially focuses on holiness, which self-entrusting to God expresses. It also attempts to translate the Church's deepened self-understanding into more adequate practical and canonical organization of ecclesial

⁷⁸ *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 57.

⁷⁹ *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 56.

⁸⁰ Douglas G. Bushman, 1999, xvii.

life. Through renewal in the holiness of God's own life, Vatican II hoped to make the Church a transparent witness to Christ. The second element regards the Church's relationship with the world. This is directly related to the enrichment of faith and holiness, as the Church's own life in Christ compels it to engage in a dynamic dialogue with the various groups of people to whom the Church is related included non-Christian believers. The dialogue with the world is the fruit of increased spiritual transformation.⁸¹

This spiritual transformation of Christian believers is that deeply inspires to do theology comparatively. In this respect, the goal of comparative theology is the same as the goal of all Christian theology. It should contribute to a deepening of life of Christian believers and the Church as a whole in Christ, and in him, in the life of God by the encounter between the truths of Christianity and the truths of non-Christian religions. In this renewal, "Christian believers will find a way to deal with religious diversity in away that is responsible and creative, responsible to the demands of their own religious tradition and creative in looking on the greatness of other religious tradition as a way to plunge more deeply into the greatness of their own."⁸²

However, it is obvious that the interpretative task of the comparative theology is not simply and easy. It requires the double-skills, both in Christian tradition and non-Christian one. Furthermore, classic religious texts are not simply resources for understandings the mores and conflicts of long-dead cultures or historical epochs. They are freighted with meaning and significance that are inseparable. These texts and the communities that contextualize them, and that the texts in turn continue to energize, make truth claims, not just for their

⁸¹ Douglas G. Bushman, 1999, xxvi.

⁸² James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 179.

contemporaries but also for succeeding generations, inside and outside their traditions.⁸³

Therefore, according to Stephen Duffy, a true comparative theology “interrelates meaning and significance, tests claims of validity, and asks what claims these texts may lay upon present understanding of ourselves, our world, others, and the transcendent.”⁸⁴ “The interpretive task of the comparative theologian is not simply to understand by thick description and narrative the self-identity of another religious tradition as an isolated historical reality but to critically interact with it by drawing it into conversation and comparison with his or her own tradition.”⁸⁵ After doing comparison, it will just be a result.

As a result of that interaction, the efforts of comparative theologians to recontextualize Christianity in the world of religions may allow us to tap into lodes of new meanings. Neglected meanings of the Christian tradition may be retrieved; established meanings may be extended and enhanced; meanings perhaps unintended by authors of our texts may, through the process of distanciation, occur to newly situated readers. Norms by whom we judge others and ourselves may be enlarged by new appreciation of the importance of the historical, linguistic, cultural, and theological contexts that make each tradition what it is. As a consequence, Christian theologies may undergo rewriting as they inscribe within themselves transformative readings of non-Christian traditions and reappropriate and reconstruct Christian identity as catholic. ...⁸⁶

In the spirit of Vatican II, implicit in doing comparative theology is a hope that Christianity’s encounter with non-Christian religions can lead to a profound self-transformation as a religious community of believers. Of course, this is not drastic transformation and change for its own sake is nothing praiseworthy, especially when we are dealing with matters as important as our religious commitment. In other words, “comparative theology does not envision the

⁸³ Cf. Stephen J. Duffy, 1999, p. 110.

⁸⁴ Stephen J. Duffy, 1999, p. 110.

⁸⁵ Stephen J. Duffy, 1999, p. 111.

⁸⁶ Stephen J. Duffy, 1999, p. 111.

abandonment of Christian belief, but rather its slow and careful transformation.”⁸⁷ As a form of Christianity’s hope, comparative theology is a form of fidelity to Christian truths. But, this fidelity requires discerning its meaning and significance through the signs of the times. To attain the objective truth of our faith, we need humility, the disposition of being ready to defer to what is of truth in another.

⁸⁷ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 178.

CONCLUSION

The arguments and reflections in this work have led to the suggestion that comparative theology provides the new approach to the fact of religious plurality as an alternative to the theology of religions. In the context of religious plurality, a religious fact that characterizes contemporary society as a whole, however, it cannot be denied that the question of the "many religions" is "one of the issues that most disturb and therefore can most invigorate Christian consciousness."¹ In contrast to theology of religions, comparative theology positively approaches the fact of religious diversity as opportunity to deepen the Christian faith.

In the first chapter of this work, I described the horizon of the world's religions, in which we can recognize that there are some similarities, but also many differences with Christianity. Realizing this new situation, the Second Vatican Council has tried to go beyond an absolutist notion of Christianity. Vatican II, in *the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)*, states that individual religions are to be praised for the way they have responded to "the unsolved riddles of human condition" (NA 1). Moreover, in *the Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church (Ad Gentes)*, Vatican II gives a positive expression of the spiritual riches given by God to the national and religious

¹ Paul F. Knitter, "Key Questions for a Theology of Religions", in *Horizons* 17, 1990, p. 92.

traditions and, therefore, invites Christians to recognize, to converse and learn with them.

In order that (all Christians) may be able to bear more fruitful witness to Christ, let them be joined to those men by esteem and love; let them acknowledge themselves to be members of the group of men among whom they live; let them share in cultural and social life by the various undertakings and enterprises of human living; let them be familiar with their national and religious traditions; let them gladly and reverently lay bare the seeds of the Word which lie hidden among their fellows. At the same time, however, let them look to the profound changes which are taking place among nations, and let them exert themselves to keep modern man, intent as he is on the science and technology of today's world from becoming a stranger to things divine; rather, let them awaken in him a yearning for that truth and charity which God has revealed. Even as Christ himself searched the hearts of men and led them to divine light, so also his disciples, profoundly penetrated by the Spirit of Christ, should know the people among whom they live and should converse with them, that they themselves may learn by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a generous God has distributed among the nations of the earth. But at the same time, let them try to furbish these treasures, set them free, and bring them under the dominion of God their Savior.²

Underlining the needs of openness to and tolerance of the nations and other religious traditions does not mean that Vatican II makes the mission activity of the Church less important. On the contrary, the Council even proclaims that "the pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature", a fact that finds its origin in "the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit ... in accordance with the decree of God the Father" (AG 2). Emphasizing the Trinitarian foundation of its mission, the Church understands itself only through the light of God's universal salvific plan through Christ in the Holy Spirit. As "Jesus Christ is the light of nations" (LG 1), so also the Church is sent to the nations of the world to be unto them "a universal sacrament of salvation" (AG 1; LG 48).

For Vatican II, it is very obvious that in and through Jesus Christ, the unique Savior, the universal design of God for the salvation of the world is carried out. In other words, Jesus Christ is a real mediator between God and men who through the

² *Ad Gentes* 11.

event of his incarnation, death and resurrection has brought God's work of salvation to fulfillment, and who sent from the Father his Holy Spirit to carry on inwardly his saving work and prompt the Church to spread out.³ In the framework of the question of universal salvation, the Second Vatican Council affirms that the two teachings that all are saved in Christ and that God wills all to be saved; are not in contradiction with each other, without further giving explanation of how other religious believers can be saved.

In the second chapter, I analyzed how theology of religions steps forward to answer and solve the most "disturbing" questions of universal salvation in Christ. "Any theology of the religions, the *a priori* in our endeavor, derives from what can be said about religious pluralism by appealing solely to the faith commitments and the theological positions held within a Christian community."⁴ All of the paradigms of the theology of religions: exclusivism, pluralism and inclusivism, try to solve the "problems" of religious plurality by giving a systematized explanation of the relationship among religions.

In the same chapter, we noted that all *a priori* approaches to religions are "formally alike in that they are abstract and do not necessarily derive from any detailed knowledge of other communities aside from the bare fact of their existence."⁵ Using the two criteria we have held up for an adequate Christian response to the fact of religious diversity: 1) faithfulness to the Christian tradition and 2) helpfulness in assisting Christians to respond creatively to religious plurality, however, we recognize that the debate between exclusivists, pluralists and inclusivists has reached an impasse. In addition, we find the facts that the theology of religions can easily become a sophisticated way to avoid dealing with the moral,

³ Cf. *Ad Gentes* 2; 3; 4; *Lumen Gentium* 2; 3; 4; 8; 13; 17; 28; 52; *Dei Verbum* 3; 4; *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 5; 6; *Unitatis Redintegratio* 2; see also *Dominus Iesus* 5; 10; 11; 12; 13; 14; 16.

⁴ Stephen J. Duffy, "A Theology of the Religions and/or a Comparative Theology", in *Horizons* 26: 1, 1999, p. 106.

⁵ Stephen J. Duffy, 1999, p. 106-107.

intellectual and spiritual demands religions make and, at the same time, it can act as “a mask for a subtle form of religious intolerance.”⁶

Saying this would not imply the judgement that personally Karl Barth, John Hick, and Karl Rahner have no tolerance. In fact, Barth, who claimed that all religions are “unbelief”, nevertheless begins his discussion of non-Christians religions with a strong statement about the necessity of tolerance. For the sake of tolerance, Hick moves from the Christocentric model to the theocentric model of religions, and then from theocentric model to what he calls “reality-centeredness”. Rahner’s inclusivist theology of the anonymous Christian is intended to lead Christian believers to tolerance as well. However, “in none of these cases is tolerance based on a recognition of the religious and theological value of the real differences that distinguish the religions of the world from one another.”⁷ Today tolerance, based on an *a priori* theoretical recognition of the plurality of religions has been found wanting. We need another way to deepen our understanding of Christian faith and to live creatively our relationship with other religions.

To answer the need for a new approach to the fact of religious plurality, I suggest comparative theology. It is not another candidate for a theology of religions. In the third chapter, I described that comparative theology is very different from any theologies of religion. Comparative theology thinks of religious plurality as an opportunity to “invigorate Christian consciousness.” Comparative theology, as an alternative to the theology of religions, “goes beyond tolerance to a point where the differences between religions are seen as valuable opportunities for deepening our own religious commitments in conversation with other religious believers.”⁸ While still looking for the similarities among or between the religious traditions, comparative theology pays attention to the differences as providing insight to

⁶ James L. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths, Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions*, New York: Paulist Press, 1999, p. 164.

⁷ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 172.

⁸ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 172.

deepen our understanding of own religious tradition. Therefore, to do theology comparatively requires Christians to learn about their non-Christian neighbors and, then, to learn from them.

Of course, Christians can learn much about other religious traditions by reading books, attending lectures or exploring web sites. But, to respond to religious diversity by doing theology comparatively, the best beginning is to “cultivate friendships with the non-Christian neighbors” as suggested by James Fredericks.⁹ In inter-religious friendships, “truths foreign to my own religious convictions become living realities and real possibilities for shaping my religious beliefs and giving new direction to my religious life.” In other words, in an inter-religious friendship, “differences in belief are never abstract.” “In order to do theology comparatively, Christians will do well to develop deep and abiding friendships with their non-Christian neighbors as a useful way to disagree with honesty and depth.”

I have called comparative theology *an alternative to*, rather than a *substitute for* the theology of religions because an important debate is quietly going on between some theologians of religion and some comparative theologians. In fact, Francis Clooney believes that the debate between those who have faith in large theories and those who do not is “the one likely to dominate the theological debate about religions over the next generation.”¹⁰ Stephen Duffy, moreover, in his article: “The Theology of the Religions and/or a Comparative Theology?” (1999), argues that “both an *a priori* theology of the religions and an *a posteriori* comparative theology are integral parts of a single theological project”. He writes that:

...Theologies of the religions and comparative theologies are two essential and interrelated moments of a single undertaking ... Together they are, respectively, the *a priori* and *a posteriori* dimensions of our effort to interrelate Christianity and other traditions in a way that, while exploiting resources available within the Christian tradition, respects the complex particularities of other traditions, studies

⁹ James L. Fredericks, 1999, pp. 173.

¹⁰ Francis X. Clooney, S.J., “The Study of Non-Christian Religions in the Post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church”, in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 28: 3, 1991, p. 483.

them for their own sake and, where possible, integrates them into our theology. There they may have transformative effects as we reread the Christian story with new eyes.¹¹

After analyzing the inadequacies of the theology of religions, in the last chapter of this work I suggested comparative theology as an alternative. Confidently, I propose comparative theology as the best way for us to respond to religious diversity responsibly and creatively. Doing theology comparatively, we can come to a better understanding of our Christian faith and, at the same time, come to a true appreciation of believers who follow other paths. Taking other religious traditions seriously and cultivating friendships with Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians, and other religious believers will certainly help Christians to become “skillful in the art of changing our minds well.”¹²

I have also titled this work *A Perspective toward*, rather than *A Post-Conciliar Theology in the Context of Religious Plurality* because I well aware that many questions are in need of further exploration before comparative theology can be fully accepted. “Still, one may ask: are there themes which are specifically those of the comparativist, by which one can define this discipline thematically? Are the questions of the theology-of-religions discipline (such as how religions are connected, which religion is true, or truer?) the issues that ought to preoccupy comparative theologians?”¹³

Although John Renard, in his article “Comparative Theology: Definition and Method” (1999),¹⁴ attempted to define comparative theology situating it within the context of the two sub-disciplines of Historical Theology and Systematic Theology, and suggested some possible themes of comparative theology, Francis Clooney’s

¹¹ Stephen J. Duffy, 1999, p.106.

¹² James L. Frederick, 1999, p. 178.

¹³ Francis X. Clooney, S.J., “Comparative Theology: A Review of Recent Books (1989-1995)”, in *Theological Studies* 56, 1995, p. 549.

¹⁴ John Renard, “Comparative Theology: Definition and Method”, in *Religious Studies and Theology* 17: 1, 1998, pp. 3-18.

conclusion in his survey of the recent comparative books seems still true: “comparative theologians are still finding out how to do their work properly, they have not agreed on a specific thematic agenda; and the fruits of comparative work pertain to every area of theology, they are not comfortably apportioned to one corner of theological discourse.”¹⁵

One must not forget that comparative theology is very young and immature. Christian comparativists skillful in Christian theology are all too few; dual competence, a “bilingual” capacity, is not easily come by.¹⁶ Comparative theology may give a hopeful perspective to the near future of post-conciliar theology in the context of the religious plurality based on the hope that the meaning and significance of Christianity can be embraced at a profound level by using the insights of non-Christian religions. Nevertheless, this hope will not always be fulfilled. There are two extremes, which shadow the practice or process of theology comparatively: “sometimes comparisons will yield only superficial similarities” or, at other times, “comparisons will run up against insurmountable differences.”¹⁷ To be always alert to these extremes is another task of the comparative theologians.

In sum, today the time has come to do theology comparatively. Comparative theology may only proceed slowly, if it is to lead sure results. As making use the study of inter-religious friendships, comparative theology is an alternative to the theology of religions. To do theology by maintaining the tension between commitment to Christianity and openness to other religious truths is a necessary perspective for a post-conciliar theology in the context of the religious plurality. How does this honest alternative and hopeful perspective become a bright prospect for theological studies, which will be very useful for the Christianity’s self-transformation to be truly Christian and Catholic? Francis Clooney, who reminds

¹⁵ Francis X. Clooney, S.J., 1995, p. 550.

¹⁶ Cf. Stephen J. Duffy, 1999, p. 114.

¹⁷ James L. Fredericks, 1999, p. 178.

comparative theologians of the need to “remain connected with the lineage of Missiology”¹⁸ gives the best answer: everything depends “on how well comparativists do their comparisons and ... too on how well the general theological community pays attention to these new resources.”¹⁹

In this religious pluralistic world, where “the relatedness of religions, in their similarity and in their profound differences, is not accidental to their basic character” but “needs to be seen as a constitutive quality of all religions”²⁰, as Christians, on the one hand, the Church is “challenged, in the spirit of a *freedom* founded on Christ, to think afresh about the question of *truth*. For, unlike caprice, freedom is not simply freedom *from* all ties and duties, in any negative sense, but it is at the same time a freedom *for* a new responsibility: towards our fellow human beings, ourselves, the Absolute. True freedom is, therefore, freedom for truth. ...The witness to truth includes the courage to recognize and to articulate the untruth.”²¹ On the other hand, as Catholics we are challenged, in the hope of a spiritual transformation, motivated by the Holy Spirit, to plunge more deeply into the greatness of our Christian faith by cultivating friendships with our other religious neighbors and by taking the truths of other religious traditions seriously.

¹⁸ Francis X. Clooney, S.J., 1995, p. 523.

¹⁹ Francis X. Clooney, S.J., 1995, p. 550.

²⁰ James L. Fredericks, “Inter-religious Friendship: A New Theological Virtue”, in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 35: 2, 1998, p. 174.

²¹ Hans Küng, “Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Religions: Some Theses for Clarification”, in *Christianity among World Religions. Concilium* 1986, p. 120-121.

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