

## RETHINKING CHRISTIANITY IN PLURALISTIC CULTURES 'The Challenge of Inter-Faith Dialogue

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### ABSTRACT

The author discusses three directions in which Christianity can be rethought: exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist. While the inclusivist view is better than the exclusivist view, both views do not rethink Christianity in a way that it becomes suitable for a new age, i.e. globalization, in which we all have to deal with people from different faiths. Christianity is seen as superior in both the exclusivist and the inclusivist view. Whereas in the pluralist view Christianity is seen as one among many religions, which make a genuine dialogue possible.

**Key Words:**

- Christianity •Exclusivist •Inclusivist and Pluralist Views •Globalization
- Diversity •Inter-Faith Dialogue.

Today, people live in a world that is racially, culturally and religiously pluralistic. Globalization brings tremendous effects not only in the socio- economic and political realms but in the cultural and religious aspects as well. While a few countries, like India and Indonesia, have been multi-religious for much of their history, today almost all countries have become multi-religious.<sup>1</sup> The impact of globalization in drawing religious communities together is something we cannot overlook. Globalization is indeed creating a new religious reality and a new level of relationships between religious traditions. Thus, the reality of living together with people belonging to other faith traditions is inevitable.<sup>2</sup> Today the reality of the existence of other cultures and religions is no longer confined within a certain geographical location or in what was commonly conceived as 'distant lands'.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith aptly describes the current state of religious affairs in this manner: "The religious life of mankind from now on if it is to be lived at all, will be lived in a context of religious pluralism... This is true for all of us; not only for mankind in general on an abstract level, but for you and me as individual persons. No longer people of other persuasions peripheral or distant, the idle curiosities of traveler's tale. The more alert we are, and the more involved in life, the more we are finding that they are our neighbors, our colleagues, our competitors, our fellows. Confucians, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims are with us not only in the United Nations, but down the street. Increasingly not only in our civilization's destiny

affected by their actions; but we drink coffee with them personally as well."<sup>3</sup>

Mark Juergensmeyer's observes that scarcely any region in the world is today composed solely of members of a single strand of a traditional religion. He says that in an era of globalization the pace of cultural interaction and change has increased by seemingly 'exponential expansions of degrees'. These fluid processes of cultural interactions, expansions, syntheses, borrowings and changes have been going on from the earliest times of recorded history. Religion therefore has always been global in the sense that religious communities and traditions have always maintained 'permeable boundaries'. They have moved, shifted and interacted with one another around the globe. If one thinks of religion as the cultural expression of a people's sense of ultimate significance, it is understandable that these cultural elements would have moved as people have moved, and they would interact and change over time just as people have. Although some religious traditions claim ultimate basis of truth that are unchangeable, the fact remains that every tradition contains within it an enormous diversity of characteristic and cultural elements gleaned from its neighbors. Religion then is global in that it is related to the global transportation of peoples and transnational acceptance of religious ideas. Religions in modern times have become religions of plural societies.<sup>4</sup>

As religions and cultures move, and interact with each other, possibilities for immergence of new forms of religion or changes within each religious tradition is to be expected. Christianity is no exception to this process of movement, interaction, adoption, adaptation and change. In a pluralistic culture, it is impossible for Christians to ignore the existence of other flourishing world religions. The question then of how Christianity is supposed to understand and relate itself with other faith traditions in a pluralistic setting is something that Christians today must seriously consider. This question is quite sensitive and at the same time problematic. As it appears, Christians are divided on this issue and it is unfeasible to

generalize at this point and come up with something that we can call a Christian response to the challenge of religious and cultural pluralism. To do that is to deny the different contesting views held by various Christian groups with different claims and convictions.

In this paper, I lay out three dominant theological thoughts and perceptions on the relation of Christianity to other religions, and analyze these positions and relate them to contemporary issues of religious pluralism. I also propose new ways of thinking Christianity that is both consistent with the Christian faith and relevant to the current socio-cultural and religious context. Keenly aware of the threats and the dangers of inter-religious conflict and of the need for peace and cooperation between world religions, this paper poses the challenge of the necessity and urgency of inter-faith dialogue.

### 1. The exclusivist, absolutist view

The exclusivist concept is used to denote the historic Christian view that salvation cannot be found in other religions. Jesus is understood as both revealer and redeemer, the one individual through whom God has reconciled the world to Himself. Thus the only way that the salvation in Christ may be appropriated is by hearing and responding in faith to the gospel of the historic Jesus. Revelation and redemption come only in Christ Jesus and not through any other religion.<sup>5</sup>

Generally, the position that the Christian Church has maintained from the fifth to the sixteenth centuries is that of *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*, that is, outside of the Church there is no salvation. In 1442 BCE, the Catholic Church unequivocally stated, "The Holy Roman Church firmly believes, confesses and proclaims that no one outside the Catholic Church, neither heathen nor Jew nor unbeliever, nor schismatic will have a share in eternal life but rather is condemned to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels unless he joins the Catholic Church before his death.

Faithfulness to the revelation in Christ as attested in Scripture requires everyone to believe that all those who have not made an explicit commitment of faith in Christ are eternally lost."<sup>6</sup>

Hendrik Kraemer, taking his clue from the well known protestant theologian Carl Barth, is one very important and strong proponent of this position. While he believes that religion is a widespread feature of human experience and while Christianity as it exists in history shares many of the characteristics of a religion, the gospel is the announcement of an unique event, something that cannot be put in a class along other events. Kraemer does not deny the universal graciousness of God towards all people, but he believes that the Church has been charged with the unique and unshareable responsibility of making known to all peoples the mighty event in which reconciliation is offered to the whole world. He does not recognize any of the world religions as salvation alternatives to Christ.<sup>7</sup>

Evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, who have maintained a conservative view and a narrow concept of salvation, also mostly hold this theological position. For instance, the Lausanne Covenant in 1974, which was attended by evangelical theologians from about 150 countries, reconfirmed the spirit of the Frankfurt Declaration. The declaration categorically rejected any possibility of salvation through other religions. And a dialogue with other religions would then mean a compromising with other faith traditions.<sup>8</sup> The Lausanne Covenant was a reaction to the increasing mood of dialogue with other religions since the New Delhi conference of the World Council of Churches in 1961. The Lausanne Covenant declared the uniqueness and universality of Christ as follows: "We also reject as derogatory to Christ and the Gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and ideologies. Jesus Christ, being Himself the only God-man, who gave Himself as the only ransom for sinners, is the only mediator between God and Man. There is no other name by which we must be saved."<sup>9</sup>

The Lausanne Covenant strictly rejected the tendency of syncretism and strongly denied the possibility of salvation through other religions. The Manila Manifesto, which came out during the 'Lausanne Manila' in 1989, expresses the same sentiment. The conference was attended by approximately three thousand evangelical Christians from 170 countries to reflect on the theme 'Calling the Whole Church to take the Whole Gospel to the Whole World'. The manifesto had twenty-one items of confessions. The seventh item of confession declared the impossibility of salvation through other religions as follows: "We affirm that the other religions and ideologies are not alternative paths to God, and that human spirituality, if unredeemed by Christ, leads not to God but to judgment, for Christ is the only way."<sup>10</sup> The third item of confession showed the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as follows: "We are called to proclaim Christ in an increasingly pluralistic world. Because human beings are sinful, even religious people are in need of Christ's redemption. We therefore reject both the relativism which regard all religions and spiritualities as equally valid approaches to God, and the syncretism which tries to mix faith in Christ with other faiths. In the past we have sometimes been guilty of adopting towards adherents of other faiths attitudes of ignorance, arrogance, disrespect and even hostility. We repent of this. We nevertheless, are determined to bear a positive and uncompromising witness to the uniqueness of our Lord, in His life, death and resurrection, in all aspects of our evangelistic work including interfaith dialogue."

This absolutist and exclusivist theological position implies that the only option that is open to Christians in relation to other religions is to preach the Gospel as respectfully and sensitively as possible, and to challenge other religions to Christian discipleship. The other implication of the position is that all religious traditions in themselves are devoid of the knowledge of God and are in fact in rebellion against God. This position is problematic and presents a lot of difficulties not only in a theological and doctrinal

sense, but also in the ethical and practical sense. As pointed out by Panikkar, it carries with it the obvious danger of intolerance and contempt for others. It further bears the intrinsic weakness of assuming an almost purely logical conception of truth and the uncritical attitude of an epistemological immaturity.<sup>11</sup> This position does not also allow any possibility for openness and acceptance of the validity of other religions. If Christianity is the only true religion, then logically it follows that all the rest are to be false. If salvation is in Christianity alone, then all the rest are condemned to eternal damnation and unless they turn and accept Christianity as the only true and valid religion they will never be saved. It must be observed that the over all witness of the Bible if taken from its proper context does not support exclusivism, but rather affirms diversity of faith expressions. In a culturally and religiously pluralistic world of today the exclusivist view exhibits the danger of promoting more mistrust, prejudice, hatred and violence. Thus, it requires a more careful rethinking and evaluation.

## 2. The inclusivist view

Inclusivism allows that salvation is possible to adherents of other faiths, but attributes it to the secret and often unrecognized work of Christ in other religions. This is a view that there is a general revelation of God which is corrupted by human sin, a revelation sufficient to make people accountable for their sin but not to save them. Thus, some revelations may be found in other religions, but not in enough clarity to make salvation possible in any way apart from hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ. The most influential of this position is Karl Rahner, whose thoughts had strongly influenced and revolutionized the Roman Catholic's exclusivist position. Rahner affirmed that if God is present in other religions, people in those traditions may know God too. The awareness of the divine in other

religions tells us not to down play and ignore these religions.<sup>12</sup> The second Vatican Council of 1965 marked a significant beginning of a more open and tolerant attitude. For the first time the Catholic Church has formally declared itself against a narrow-minded, arrogant absolutism which posits its own truth absolutely over the truth of others.

In the Council documents, like *nostra aetate*, we see an opening for a reassessment of the issue. It says that “The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in other religions, and those also can attain everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Jesus Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God, and moved by his grace, strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them through the dictates of their conscience.”<sup>13</sup> Here, the Catholic Church affirms that the God revealed in Jesus Christ cannot be confined to the Christian Churches. He is the God and Father of all mankind therefore he is not only present in Christianity, but also in other religions. In a background paper prepared and presented for the Round Table Conference on Mission held in Hong Kong in 1999, Felix Wilfred pointed very clearly out the advances that have been made since the second Vatican Council in affording greater recognition to religions themselves as having a role in God's economy of salvation, and in looking upon the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit as affecting not only individuals “but all society, and history, peoples, cultures and religions.”<sup>14</sup>

Here, we see a significant shift and development in the Catholic Church's theological thinking. Whereas before the Catholic Church understood Christianity as the absolute religion being founded on the unique event of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, now there is a dawning realization that God's grace and purpose for salvation is for all mankind, therefore, salvation is available not only for Christians, but also for people of other faith traditions. However, a careful analysis of this position shows that still the one who accepts the gospel has a greater chance

of salvation than the 'anonymous Christian'. This view, though, allows the effects of Jesus' death and resurrection to actually work outside the Church within and through other religions. It only insists that in Jesus, God's gift of saving love, is actually offered or constituted, and therefore only in Jesus is God's truth fully revealed. In Jesus and in his Church alone all the truths and values of other religions are to find fulfillment.

Paul Knitter observes that Christians who have an inclusivist attitude are more open and tolerant and they may seek a more positive, a more dialogical Christian approach to other faiths than conservative Evangelical Christians. In this view, some people who have heard the name of Jesus may appropriate the saving efficacy of God's historic redemption in Jesus through a tentative but genuine faith response to the presence of cosmic Christ in general revelation. However, in this Christian view of other religions, the image of anonymous Christianity has clear limits. It states not only that there is saving grace won by Christ and essentially oriented towards him, but it also maintains that other religions are incomplete until they come to know and embrace Christ. Only in him can they find their true identity and the fullness of salvation.<sup>15</sup>

Leslie Newbigin sees inclusivism as quite appealing in that, it retains the unique centrality of Christ as the sole bearer and dispenser of salvation and yet at the same time avoids the morally hideous idea that God relegates to condemnation the majority of the human race, who has not accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior. It is thus a “comfortable package enabling Christianity to go on regarding itself as superior while at the same time being charitable to the people of other religions.”<sup>16</sup> Logically, if salvation is only through the atoning work of Christ, then salvation is by definition Christian salvation and it is asserted that Christianity alone knows and proclaims its fulfillment.

So, on the surface we see that the inclusivist position appears to be very tolerant, open and all-accepting. Nothing is rejected and all is fitted to its

proper place. It can easily embrace different thought and belief systems. However, it also has its own inconsistencies. While it acknowledges the validity of other faith traditions and the possibility of salvation for those who practice other religions, it presents Christianity as a superior religion, a super structure in which other religions find fulfillment and satisfaction. Of course, another question is whether or not, *nostra aetate* – the official pronouncements of the Catholic Church that calls for a more open and tolerant attitude towards other religions are expressed in actual missiological approaches and practices of the Roman Catholic Church and in its engagements with other faith traditions. Again, quite clearly, inclusivism, which in itself is not free from absolutism and superiority, does not encourage positive relations, but only triggers animosities and contempt between Christianity and other faith traditions. This position therefore is incapable of addressing current issues related to the problem of religious and cultural pluralism.

### 3. The pluralist view

Pluralism is the recognition of the integrity of each religion in all its diverse particularities. It renounces every claim that Christianity is absolute, unique, definitive, final, normative and ultimate or universal. Instead, Christianity must be viewed as only one religion among many, and Jesus as only one savior among others. John Hick is one of the most influential figures associated with this position. John Hick disclaims Christian absolutism and any uniqueness or centrality for Christianity among the religions. Using his well-known analogy of the Copernican revolution in astronomy, he has argued that we require a shift from the dogma that Christ is at the center to the realization that it is God who is at the center and that all religions of mankind, including our own, serve and revolve around him.<sup>17</sup>

John Hick and other proponents of this view argue that the witness of

the New Testament and the Christian tradition needs to be reinterpreted in the age of pluralism. While Christians can proclaim Jesus to be truly Savior of the world, yet, he is not the only savior of the world. In other words, the saving role of Jesus remains universal, that is, meant for all peoples, not just Christians; but this role is not exhaustive of what God is up to in the world. So, just as Christians may announce that Jesus and his message are necessary for humanity to understand and live what God intends for creation, so might other religious figures or revelations be equally necessary.<sup>18</sup>

This position that regards all religious traditions as equally necessary is based on three basic assumptions. Firstly, God is the Creator and Sustainer of all life, therefore, God is concerned with the whole human family. While God may call any one person or community into service to further God's purposes in the world, no community is closer or more important to God than another. All persons regardless of race, culture and religion are equally the children of God. God does not show partiality. Secondly, all human attempts to understand and respond to God are ambiguous and not absolute. All religious traditions are witnesses to specific events and specific salvific figures that are in the experience of the community. These specific events and faith experiences are special to the respective communities. It is therefore inappropriate for others who do not share the 'story' to judge the truth and authenticity of these experiences and affirmations. Thirdly, Christians are only one among many witnesses to God, and one people among many others who witness to a life in relationship to God. While Christianity is distinct and different from others, there is no reason to believe that it is in any way superior to others or that it has been the culmination or end of other revelatory experiences. This means that anyone who wants to talk about God must be attentive to what other experiences of God have been among other human beings. They are part of the data of theology. Therefore, people belonging to different faith traditions are fellow pilgrims in the journey of faith.<sup>19</sup>

Wesley Ariarajah observes that the Christian Church has reluctantly opened its door to the truth that each religious tradition is in some sense unique and has an inner cohesive vision of reality that is peculiar to the place of its origin or to the prophetic figure whose intense experience marked its beginnings.<sup>20</sup> The specificity of each religion is also expressed in the philosophical, cultural, linguistic and geo-political realities, the cultural traits of the periods of origin and other factors that shape its religious experiences, beliefs and practices.<sup>21</sup> Each religion also claims universality, either implicitly or explicitly. For instance, in religions like Christianity and Islam, belief in the universality of the respective faiths is built into their own self-understandings. It finds expression in the claim to validity of their faith experience to all people, which is backed up by the intention to bring the message to all human beings. The Jewish claim to universality is eschatological, it holds up the hope that in the 'last days' nations will come to Zion, the city of God, to confess the Lord as God and to walk in the ways of righteousness and peace. Buddhism also expresses the same claims to universality in its belief that all human beings will be liberated from their bondage to *tanha* (craving) or *avidya* (ignorance) if only they see what they have seen to be the truth about the nature of reality. Universality of religious traditions can also be argued on the basis that most of them emphasize common human values, like love, compassion, justice, peace and other common virtues.<sup>22</sup>

From this perspective, therefore, Christianity is only one of the strands of the religious history of humankind. The truth of what it says about God and how God relates to humankind should stand or fall on its own merit. The claims to one, only, decisive, final, etc., are human constructs and do not represent the overall message and testimony of the Bible. These affirmations seek to give theological reality and significance to other religious traditions that have generally been considered by Christians to be in error, or, in some sense, preparatory to the Christian message. This

position, while being widely and severely criticized among different Christian circles, appears to be more relevant and makes sense in addressing the current pluralistic conditions. Indeed, unless Christians get rid of the assumed superiority and absolutism they will never be able to engage themselves with other people belonging to different religious persuasions in a more genuine and meaningful way.

### **Rethinking Christianity: A theological and moral challenge**

It must be observed that the new global religious phenomenon has put the isolationist, absolutist and exclusivist tendency of Christianity under pressure. It threatens Christians' claims for supremacy and universal significance. In recent years, many Christian theologians have become increasingly aware of the necessity of positioning their own understanding of the Christian faith within a context of pluralism. Keenly aware of this religious phenomenon, Paul Knitter presents, what he calls, a paradigm shift from either exclusivism or inclusivism to pluralism, which is a move from insistence on absolutism toward a recognition of the independent validity of other ways.<sup>23</sup> He criticizes Christianity's claim of absolutism and insists that no religion has the monopoly of religious truth.<sup>24</sup> This conclusion leads to the dialogical imperative, because it is through dialogue with members of other faith traditions that we can expand or correct the truth that we have, thereby overcoming the limitations of our own viewpoint.<sup>25</sup>

Cantwell Smith dismisses, what he calls, the fallacy held by traditional Christians that they alone will be saved.<sup>26</sup> Smith regards Christianity's view that their own forms of doctrines and practices are given by God and other forms are not as idolatrous.<sup>27</sup> From a historical perspective, John Hick describes the destructive effects of the assumption of Christian superiority, which can be evidently seen in the anti-Semitism of Christians against the Jews and in the European colonization and imperial enterprise.<sup>28</sup> This

superiority complex breeds animosities and threatens peaceful coexistence among people belonging to different religious traditions.<sup>29</sup> John Cobb, in his book *Beyond Dialogue*, joins Knitter, Smith and Hick in rejecting the deep-seated tendency of Christians to absolutize their tradition. Supporting the need for Christians to engage in dialogue with members of other religious traditions, he insists that “Christians should set aside all claims of exclusiveness that entails a monopoly of wisdom and respect the other traditions as comparable in worth.”<sup>30</sup>

J.B. Banawiratma, using the Javanese traditional ritual of slametan as an example of communal and religious cooperation, strongly affirms the need for different religious traditions to move through the “dialogue of life with in a holistic paradigm.”<sup>31</sup> He maintains that there is a need for collaborative efforts among academicians, intellectuals, institutions, movements of civil society and different religious traditions for dialogue and reconciliation. He believes the current situation requires a new understanding of other faiths and other religions. People must create common ground and discover both what unites them and what can focus their divergent interests.

Aloysius Pieris maintains that each religious tradition is specific and that we need to respect this specificity in our relationships and dialogues.<sup>32</sup> In his view, “each religious tradition is a singular phenomenon and is in a way a judgment passed on every other religion.” He also maintains that religions are “so many alternative configurations of basic human values and that it is therefore in their nature to provoke comparison and mutual criticism, confrontation and reciprocal correction.” He sees these dimensions of relationship as positive signs for mutual understanding and dialogue. However, he is quick to point out that this is not the case, because Christianity, especially Western Christianity, has been passing judgment, criticism and corrections on other religions to articulate its own uniqueness.<sup>33</sup> Pannikar points out that since the Christianization of Europe, the West had one sole paradigm at its disposal to understand the

religious phenomenon: namely its own Christian experience. Thus, the “philosophy of one religion became the 'Philosophy of Religion'.”<sup>34</sup>

Kenneth Cracknell, in his book *Towards a New Relationship*, says that this development within the Western Christian tradition along with the “legacies of earlier missionary theologies” and the “prejudices stemming from the assumption of cultural supremacy by the colonizers” rolled into “one sad tangle” that “makes it difficult for Western Christians and for us who have inherited this heritage to think in new ways. Cracknell suggests that Christians must “unravel some of these unblest ties” that “binds them in knots.”<sup>35</sup> Paul Knitter suggests that the situation calls for a shift from alien to neighbor, from monologue to dialogue. He observes that throughout most of Church history, the religious others have been for Christians the alien others. If there was any positive Christian relationship with them it was one of trying to convert them, because they were moving away from God toward eternal damnation.<sup>36</sup> The encounter of world religions can lead to profound and transforming experiences. Deep affinities and deep divergences will be discovered. This kind of encounter can lead to a much deeper understanding of one's own religion. Deeper understanding may involve significant changes in a person's interpretation of his faith. Hocking calls the process as 'reconception' for what could and should happen when one religion meets another in real encounters.<sup>37</sup>

Owen maintains that the fact for the existence of other great living world religions, with ancient traditions, millions of adherents and claims to universality, cries out for reinterpretation from a Christian point of view. There is a necessity of a measure of world community in the face of cultural and religious diversity, and a necessity for the beginning of real encounters between adherents of the world religions.<sup>38</sup>

### The Challenge of Inter-faith Dialogue

In spite of the dominant exclusivist view among Christians, there is a



growing conviction that in a pluralistic setting Christian mission should be concerned with dialogue and encounters between persons or encounter between Christians and people of other faiths. In such dialogue and encounters, it should be presumed that particular local contexts in which people of different religious traditions live and work together are significant and should be respected for this encounter to take place. Stanley J. Samartha, a well-known Indian theologian, says that "dialogue is the most important essence to search Christianity itself. Therefore, the Christian Church must give attention to the importance of dialogue with other religions."<sup>39</sup> Raimundo Panikkar expresses the same conviction. He maintains that who wants to discern reality in this pluralistic world, must not depend on one's own conscience only, but also understand and receive the conscience of others.<sup>40</sup> The second Vatican Council's declaration on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions abandons Christianity's absolute claims on truth and expresses the need for inter-religious dialogues to unite different religions to work together for the common cause of promoting the well-being of mankind by forgetting the bitter memories of the past.<sup>41</sup> Here, we see the inevitable development of religious pluralism that poses critical challenges against traditional views of exclusivism. Thus, it poses the need for dialogue.

Indeed, the call for inter-religious dialogue is not new. In the past decades there have been attempts at initiating ecumenical dialogues that promote peace and mutual understanding among different faith traditions. For instance, The World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Pontifical Council for Interfaith Dialogue (PCID) have begun initiating moves for religious dialogues as part of their ongoing ministries.<sup>42</sup> There are also increased initiatives on the part of other religious communities to support dialogues among different faith traditions. The National Council of Churches in the Philippines,<sup>43</sup> for example, has also initiated peace programs and religious dialogues between Christians and Muslims in

Mindanao and the program has been going on for a number of years now. The proliferation of International Interfaith Organizations brings the possibility of interfaith experience to many thousands of people at all levels of responsibility within their religious communities. Schools in several countries have begun to discuss multi-faith curricula; university courses on inter-religious dialogue are being developed and offered. One example is the Inter-religious Study Program of the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, which brings together scholars from different religious traditions for mutual learning and enrichment.

These wider interfaith movements are further strengthened by calls to pray together on a number of occasions and invitations to engage in common struggles for peace, justice, human rights and other ethical and political issues that call for concerted efforts among different religious traditions. These interfaith dialogues are aimed at engaging in mutual interaction with a view of creating a community of conversation, learning from each other, mutual enrichment and cooperation. Some go further to envision the transformation of all religious traditions as the result of their encounters with others. The subjects of dialogue are either doctrinal and theological or common concerns that religious traditions face together in the world, such as issues of peace, justice, human rights, violence, environment, the place of women in religion and society, and so on.<sup>44</sup>

Looking back, however, one easily recognizes that there are aspects of the dialogue that remain unexplored. While it is true that there have been numerous interfaith dialogues at local, national, international and global levels, it seems to appear that the impacts of these dialogues are minimal and not much has been achieved in terms of fostering honest and truly enriching dialogues among different religious traditions. There are still elements of mistrust and doubts that need to be overcome for a real and genuine dialogue to take place. Again, it seems that most of the previous dialogues were top-level dialogues that involved only a few scholars and

academicians and not much has been done on the grassroots level. A dialogue should not be limited to academic discussions on conceptual ideas. The ongoing dialogue in day-to-day life should not be ignored. It should not only be among chosen representatives, but it should spread into wider circles involving larger numbers of people and communities. For inter-faith dialogue to create more impact, the 'dialogue of life' (as proposed by Banawiratma) that takes into account the daily encounters and fellowship of people within communities who belong to different faith persuasions, it should be pursued more vigorously. For inter-faith dialogue to prosper, it must go beyond mere formalities and top-level talks and move into the concrete and practical. The praxis of inter-faith dialogue is more important than its theories and abstract formulations. It must be seen in practice and in the ways people of different cultural and religious backgrounds and orientations relate to each other in daily life.

### Conclusion

There has been a growing realization among different Christian groups of the need to rethink Christianity in the light of the changing historical, socio-political and cultural context. The second Vatican Council marked a significant beginning of a new kind of thinking that moves away from the traditional exclusivist stance that regards Christianity as absolute and the only true religion. This significant shift in the Church's theological thinking allows some possibilities for other religions to possess some degree of truth, but it still views Christianity as the fulfillment of other religions. The most significant development that has revolutionized Christianity's way of thinking is the pluralist view, which maintains the validity and uniqueness of each religion. It questions Christianity's absolute claims as the only true, final and ultimate religion. Instead, Christianity is viewed as only one religion among many, and Jesus as only one savior among others. In spite of these recent developments, Christians are still divided on the

issue of whether or not Christianity should maintain her superior and exclusivist thinking and attitude. Some Christians are still exclusivists, some inclusivists, while some are pluralists.

The present socio-cultural and religious context, however, calls for a new and a more meaningful understanding and interpretation of the Christian faith. Today, everybody is the next-door neighbor and spiritual neighbor of everyone else in the world. People of different races, colors, cultures and religions not only meet but interpenetrate each other's lives. Every religion that exists in the world is like all cultural possibilities and actualities of other people. They have become part of one's own existential situation. No longer merely theoretically but in concrete reality of living together in one community. This particular context puts the absolute claim of our own faith into question. How is Christianity supposed to deal with today's pluralism? What should be the Christian position with regards to the religious pluralism in the world of today? From the earliest times, Christianity understands itself as the absolute religion, intended for all. Christianity cannot recognize any other religion beside itself as equal of right. The traditional relation of the Christian Church to other religious traditions was that of proselytizing evangelism. This kind of thinking and attitude, however, is brought into serious question by current realities and appears not consistent with Christianity's basic teachings. The Vatican Council, for instance, states: "The Church denounces any sort of discrimination as something that destroys universal brotherhood. We cannot call on God, the Father of all men, if there are any men whom we refuse to treat as brothers, since all men are created in God's image." The Bible teaches that man's relation to God the Father is connected with his relation to his fellowmen in such a way that scripture says 'He that loveth not, knoweth not God' (1 John 4:8). The Church condemns all discrimination between men and all conflicts of race, color, class or creed as being contrary to the mind of Christ.

This Christian idealism must be seen in practice. It is not easy and many of us have yet to learn what it is to live together as partners in a world of religious and cultural plurality. But the only way Christianity can become consistent with her faith is to live out the spirit of love, compassion, humility, brotherhood and sisterhood and other Christian values that promote peace and harmony among all peoples of the world. Not to do that is to deny the Biblical vision of full humanity and harmony among all God's creations. Unless men and women can learn to be loyal and committed to each other across religious boundaries, unless we can build a world in which people of different faiths can live together and work together peacefully and harmoniously, then peace will remain an illusive dream and will not become a reality. Faced with alarming realities of wars, poverty, environmental destruction and other pressing global issues, cooperation among different religious traditions is a moral imperative.

The call for continues inter-faith dialogue is relevant. Through dialogues we strive to break down barriers and recognize all men and women as neighbors, as fellows, as sons and daughter of the universal Father. Wilfred Cantwell Smith strongly asserts that we do not become truly Christian until we have reached out towards a community that turns mankind into one total 'we'. He says that in today's highly pluralistic society the question is whether it is morally right for Christians to say, "We are saved" and you are "damned", "we believe that we know God and we are right, you believe that you know God but you are totally wrong." Smith believes that this attitude antagonizes and alienates rather than reconciles, it is arrogant rather than humble, it segregates rather than unites.<sup>45</sup>

Dialogue with other religions is essential to human survival and necessary for the sake of peace in the world. In our present historical milieu, Hans Kung strongly suggests that different world religions should be keen to recognize their responsibility for peace, love of neighbor, reconciliation and forgiveness instead of creating conflicts.<sup>46</sup> With that, the question is

whether or not Christians should really stick to their traditional exclusivist and absolutist way of thinking, or is there a need for Christians to rethink and reshape their theological understanding in a manner that is both consistent with their faith and relevant to the present context. If Christians believe that God works among all, regardless of race and creed, then, there is a need to respect and show appreciation to what God is doing in the lives of people who do not adhere to what Christians believe in. To say that God is not present in all is blasphemy. It is false witness against the Creator. It is a human attempt to put limits on God and to dictate to God where God might and might not be active.

#### End Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> Bonjour Bay, *Religious Pluralism and Missionary Dialogue* (Seoul: Sungkyul University 2007), 38.
- <sup>2</sup> Carlo Fonseka, "Globalization and Universality of Humankind," in *Dialogue, New Series* 24 (1997), 2.
- <sup>3</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Faiths of Other Men* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 11.
- <sup>4</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, "Thinking Globally About Religion," in *Global Religions, An Introduction*, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4-5.
- <sup>5</sup> Bay, *Religious Pluralism and Missionary Dialogue*, 38.
- <sup>6</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, "The Christian Faith and the World Religions" in *Christianity and Other Religions*, eds. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001) 106-107.
- <sup>7</sup> Newbigin, 107.
- <sup>8</sup> Bay, *Religious Pluralism and Missionary Dialogue*, 40.
- <sup>9</sup> John Stott, "The Lausanne Covenant an Exposition and Commentary," *Lausanne Occasional Papers* 3 (1975).
- <sup>10</sup> J.D. Douglas, ed., *Proclaim Christ Until He Comes* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: World-wide Publications, 1990), 26.
- <sup>11</sup> Raimundo Panikkar, "The Rhetoric of the Dialogue," in *The Intra-Religious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999) 5.
- <sup>12</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations, Vol. 5, Christianity and Non-Christian Religions* (New York: Seabury, 1974), 115-134.
- <sup>13</sup> Walter M. Abbot, ed., "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*)," trans. Joseph Gallagher, in *The 14 Documents of Vatican II* (New York: America Press, 1966), 661-663.

- <sup>14</sup> Felix Wilfred, "Drawing a Deep Breath, Development in the Understanding of Mission Since Vatican 11," cited by Wesley Ariarajah, "Asian Christian Theological Task in the Midst of Other Religious Traditions," in *Visioning New Life Together Among Asian Religions*, eds. Daniel S. Thiagarajah and A. Wati Longchar (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 2002), 12-19.
- <sup>15</sup> Paul Knitter, *No Other Names? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 97.
- <sup>16</sup> Newbegin, "The Christian Faith and the World Religions", 108.
- <sup>17</sup> John Hick, "The Theological Challenge of Religious Pluralism," in *Christianity and Other Religions*, eds. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Oxford: Oneworld Press, 2001), 163-64.
- <sup>18</sup> John Hick, p. 164.
- <sup>19</sup> Ariarajah, "Asian Christian Theological Task in the Midst of Other Religious Traditions," 10.
- <sup>20</sup> Ariarajah, 6
- <sup>21</sup> Ariarajah, 7
- <sup>22</sup> Ariarajah, 7
- <sup>23</sup> Paul Knitter, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, cited by David Ray Griffin, ed., *Deep Religious Pluralism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 7.
- <sup>24</sup> Paul Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 28.
- <sup>25</sup> Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 36.
- <sup>26</sup> Cantwell Smith, *Theology and the World's Religious History*, 61.
- <sup>27</sup> Smith, "Idolatry in Comparative Perspective," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness, Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, eds. John H. Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1987), 63-64.
- <sup>28</sup> "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, 18.
- <sup>29</sup> John B. Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 14.
- <sup>30</sup> John B. Cobb, *Transforming Christianity and the World: A Way Beyond Absolutism and Relativism*, ed. Paul Knitter (Maryknoll, N.Y. Orbis Books, 1999) p. 35, 50.
- <sup>31</sup> J.B. Banawiratma, "Inter-Religious Relationship in Indonesia," in *Viele Wege, ein Ziel*, Ludweg Bertsch et. al, eds. (Freiburg: Herder), 81-83.
- <sup>32</sup> Aloysius Pieris, "Western Christianity and Asian Buddhism, A Theological Reading of Historical Encounters," *Dialogue, New Series V* 11, no.2 (1980), 49.
- <sup>33</sup> Ariarajah, "Asian Christian Theological Task in the Midst of Other Religious Traditions," 50.
- <sup>34</sup> Raimundo Panikar, "Philosophy of Religion in the Contemporary Encounter of Cultures," in *Contemporary Philosophy: A Survey*, ed. R. Klibansky (Florence 1971)
- <sup>35</sup> Kenneth Cracknell, *Towards a New Relationship: Christians and People of Other Faiths*, (Epworth Press, 1986), p.9.
- <sup>36</sup> Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 1.
- <sup>37</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 234.
- <sup>38</sup> Thomas C. Owen, ed., *Attitudes Toward Other Religions, Some Christian Interpretation* (London: SMC Press, 1969), 11.

- <sup>39</sup> Stanley J. Samatra, *Courage for Dialogue* (New York: Orbis Books, 1981), 99.
- <sup>40</sup> Raimundo Panikkar, "Dialogical Dialogue," in *The World's Religious Traditions*, ed. Frank Whaling (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1984) 204.
- <sup>41</sup> John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, eds., *Christianity and Other Religions* (Oxford: One World Publications, 2001) 39-43.
- <sup>42</sup> Maurice Borrmans, ed., *Interreligious Document 1, Guidelines for Dialogue Between Christians and Muslims, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue*, trans. R. Marston Speight (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 5-7.
- <sup>43</sup> The National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) is a national ecumenical organization of mainline Protestant churches in the Philippines.
- <sup>44</sup> Ariarajah, "Asian Christian Theological Task in the Midst of Other Religious Traditions," 4.
- <sup>45</sup> Cantwell Smith, "The Christian in a Religiously Plural World," 50-52.
- <sup>46</sup> Hans Kung, *Global Responsibility, In Search of a New World Ethic* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xv.

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- J.B. Banawiratma, "Inter-Religious Relationship in Indonesia," in *Viele Wege, ein Ziel*, Ludweg Bertsch et. al, eds. (Freiburg: Herder).
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