

Introduction

Long before interreligious dialogue was considered urgent and important for the church's formulation of policies and pastoral programs, there were extraordinary missionaries, religious thinkers, and theologians who sought to study and understand non-Christian religions. This was at a time when there was only suspicion and condemnation of these so-called "heathen religions." The results of these efforts were twofold: a better grasp of non-Christian religious traditions and a deepening of the missionaries' own religious convictions. By making a paradigm shift in missionary endeavors, some were able to win converts in a nation like China, which was hostile to foreigners and all that they stood for. Further, some of these forerunners of interreligious relations adopted double religious identities as a way of giving witness to their faith. This embracing of two religious identities, or some aspects of the second one, did not necessarily compromise their original religious convictions but actually enhanced and deepened them.

This study, entitled *Accommodation and Acceptance: An Exploration in Interfaith Relations*, explores the works of some prominent Christian missionaries and thinkers regarding non-Christian religions. By their innovations, these pioneers in interfaith relations have blazed new paths for better understanding between people of diverse beliefs in a world torn by conflicts and violence. The importance of faith in politics and international relations means that dialogue between different religions has become more urgent in light of globalization and increased divisiveness and confrontation between the East and the West. Hans Küng puts it succinctly: "No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundations of the religions."¹

1. Hans Küng, *Islam: Past, Present and Future* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), xxiii.

Massive immigration and the influx of refugees from the third world to the first has caused much pain and conflict and created moral dilemmas. As a result of this, the religious landscape in the West is changing rapidly and we are acutely aware of our religious diversity and our ignorance of “the Other.” The context of this work, thus, is religious pluralism, which is thriving and becoming vitally important. In the last few decades we have witnessed the growth of many non-Christian religions in Europe, which compete with its Christian tradition. At the same time, Asia has experienced a rapid expansion and flourishing of Christian churches, especially in South Korea and China, where the predominant religions have long been Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism.

Many thoughtful Christians have acknowledged the past mistakes of missionaries who were unwitting servants of colonial powers. Nowadays missionaries risk being servants of globalization and multinational corporations, which are ruthless in exploiting workers in third world countries. Nonetheless, we have to acknowledge that some missionaries have also been heroic defenders of the human rights of the native people whom they sought to convert. They have also built countless schools, colleges, and hospitals for local people. Many people in Asia would not have received a decent education were it not for the efforts of these foreign missionaries.

Nonetheless, the embracing of the Christian faith by the locals has also caused much pain and division within families that were traditionally Buddhist, Taoist, or Confucianist. In China, when the religious orders fought over the Rites controversy, resulting in tension between the Emperor and foreign missions, it was the local Roman Catholics who suffered most. Conflicts in Europe were brought over to Asia by rival western powers, which affected the local people in the worst possible ways. It is no wonder that after centuries of missionary toil, Christianity is still a minority religion in most parts of Asia.

The evaluation of other faiths through a Christian perspective, known as the theology of religions, has been conveniently classified into three categories by Alan Race: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. This model has been developed and refined by other scholars such as Jacques Dupuis and Paul Knitter. In spite of its limitations and shortcomings, this paradigm can serve as a useful guide in our study of interfaith relations.

- I. *Exclusivism*. The New Testament presents Christian faith as absolute and final: “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus also says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). Thus, the church’s predominant attitude throughout its history has been to regard other religious beliefs as false. In the Roman Catholic Church we have the axiom “*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*,” meaning “Outside the church there is no salvation.” Originally, the people this referred to were heretics and schismatics, but later the phrase also came to cover non-Christians.¹
- II. *Inclusivism*. This category implies “an acceptance and a rejection” of other religions. On the one hand, it accepts other religions as possessing some truths. On the other hand, it rejects them as not being valid paths for salvation as they do not recognize Christ who alone can save. Inclusivists believe that non-Christian religious truths belong, ultimately, to Christ alone, and thus they need to delineate the “lines between the Christian faith and the inner religious dynamism of other faiths.” Inclusivism attempts to integrate non-Christian religions into Christian reflection. It aims to hold together two fundamental principles: that God’s grace operates in all the great religious traditions of the world and that the uniqueness of the manifestation of this grace lies in Christ.²
- III. *Pluralism*. Pluralists hold that religious truth cannot escape its cultural conditioning. This means that the diverse forms of religious experience represent different cultural responses to the divine initiative. Therefore, no religion can claim a monopoly on truth.³ Religious pluralism holds all legitimate religions to be the same, in that they can help us to reach God or find salvation. It is important to recognize that pluralism, in the theology of religions, does not mean

1. See Francis Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 22-23.

2. Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), 38.

3. *Ibid.*, 76.

that all religions are equally valid as paths to salvation, but implies that at least some are. The main feature of religious pluralism is tolerance of differences in others. Advocates of pluralism stress that religions must learn from each other in order to have a better grasp of divine reality, since no religion has complete control over truth.

Outline and Sequence of the Work

Chapter 1 focuses on Matteo Ricci, who established the Roman Catholic Church in China in the sixteenth century. Ricci understood that the best way to reach non-believers was through accommodation rather than denunciation of their beliefs. A gifted scholar, Ricci mastered Chinese and translated Christian concepts into local vernaculars. This chapter studies how Ricci and his companions incorporated elements of Confucianism into Roman Catholicism as part of the Jesuit policy of cultural accommodation in the Far East.

Although this work is written from a Roman Catholic perspective, as an ecumenical gesture, I have included a Protestant missionary in Chapter 2. One of the greatest missionaries in China in modern times was the Baptist, Timothy Richard. Besides giving witness to the gospel and translating Buddhist texts into English, Richard was also very much involved in social, economic, and political reforms in China. This chapter explores the influence of Matteo Ricci on Richard regarding cultural accommodation and his efforts to be “Chinese in China.”

Chapter 3 examines the works of Paul Knitter regarding religious pluralism, interreligious dialogue, and its relationship with the theology of liberation. We will also focus on Knitter’s correlational approach to dialogue and his embrace of Buddhism, which is also part of his Christian identity.

Chapter 4 investigates Aloysius Pieris’s writings on Christianity and its relationship with Buddhism. Pieris believes that Christianity will be relevant in Asia only if it is willing to work as an equal partner with other religions in the continent to alleviate the sufferings and poverty of the masses.

An influential voice for promoting dialogue among world religions is Raimon Panikkar. In Chapter 5, we will study Panikkar’s attempt to embrace Hinduism and Buddhism as a Christian. Regarding his spiritual odyssey, Panikkar wrote that he left Europe as a Christian,

found himself a Hindu in India, and returned home as a Buddhist, all without losing his Christian identity. In this chapter we will examine Panikkar's influential work, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, first published in 1964.

Chapter 6 explores the spiritual journey of the English Benedictine monk, Bede Griffiths, who spent most of his life in India attempting to adapt Hindu teachings within the Christian framework. One aspect of Hindu philosophy is the notion of non-duality or *advaita*, which Griffiths adopted in his spirituality and in his understanding of other religions as complementary to Christianity. This *advaitic* approach to faith led him to conclude that all religions will eventually converge without losing their distinct identities.

Chapter 7 examines Teilhard de Chardin's inclusivistic approach towards other religious traditions. It attempts to show that his understanding of the evolution of humankind or the evolution of consciousness is related to his understanding of the evolution of the great religions in the world. He too believed that all authentic religions will eventually converge when the Kingdom of God is fully realized.

Chapter 8 examines Jacques Dupuis' work, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (1997), focusing on the issue of religious pluralism and the paradigmatic shift from church-centered to Christ-centered to God-centered and finally to Kingdom-centered Christianity. It is Dupuis' conviction that God reveals himself through all authentic faiths in many and diverse ways, and hence interfaith dialogue is important for us to deepen our understanding of the mystery of his will.

Chapter 9 analyzes Gavin D'Costa's trinitarian theology as an approach to interreligious dialogue. D'Costa believes that the trinitarian approach is more open and responsive to other religious traditions and at the same time faithful to official Roman Catholic teachings. This chapter also presents Peter Phan's multiple religious belonging as a more effective option in the Asian context when engaging in dialogue.

Chapter 10 presents the practice of mindfulness from the Buddhist and Christian perspectives. It emphasizes the fact that we do not have to be Buddhists or stop being Christians or Hindus to follow this aspect of Buddhist spirituality. We then conclude this work with Hans Küng's understanding of *humanum* as a criterion for determining the truth and goodness of a religion and Joseph Ratzinger's understanding of Christianity as the true religion.

This work is a modest attempt to provide readers with a sense of how the church, through its thoughtful members, has shifted its position since the sixteenth century from renunciation to accommodation and acceptance of other religious traditions. With this new level of consciousness achieved after Vatican II, the church has begun to look upon non-Christian religions as equal partners in building a better world and as fellow pilgrims in its journey towards the Kingdom of God.

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