3.
Towards a Dialogical Community

As observed in the previous chapter, Timothy Richard believed in the compatibility of Mahāyāna Buddhism with Christianity and therefore he held that one could actually be a Christian while adopting some Buddhist teachings. Paul Knitter goes further by personally claiming that without Buddha, he could not be a Christian. Knitter has been identified by Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, together with the Presbyterian John Hick, as an example of a promoter of religious pluralism. Ratzinger has also accused Knitter of emphasizing praxis over dogma and thus reducing dialogue to a political or ethical program.[1] Whether we agree with Ratzinger or not, it is important to study the works of Knitter as he is a leading advocate of religious pluralism and one of the key players in promoting not only dialogue among world religions, but also justice, peace, and ecological well-being as well. In fact, some of the issues that he has written about have been raised by Pope Francis in his encyclical, *Laudato Si'*: "I will point to the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet, the conviction that everything in the world is connected . . . the value proper to each creature, the human meaning of ecology."[2]

Ordained in Rome in 1966, Paul F. Knitter, a former Divine Word (SVD) missionary, studied under Karl Rahner at the Gregorianum and the University of Münster, and earned a doctorate at the University of Marburg, Germany. As a priest, he taught at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. Leaving the SVD in 1975, he worked as a professor of theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati for some thirty years. A

1. Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 123.
2. Pope Francis, encyclical letter, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*. http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf, no. 16.

"dialogical theologian," Knitter gave courses on Buddhism and Asian religions and is also a member of CRISPAZ (Christians for Peace in El Salvador) and the Interreligious Peace Council. In 2006, he was offered the Paul Tillich Chair of Theology, World Religions, and Culture at Union Theological Seminary. Most of his writings deal with religious pluralism, interfaith dialogue, social justice, peace, and ecological concerns. In this chapter, we will examine Paul Knitter's model of dialogue, which he put into practice through his encounter with Buddhism. In addition to Knitter's correlational approach to dialogue, we will also study John Cobb's engagement with Buddhism, which he describes as mutually transformative. We will conclude with Knitter's elaboration of the theology of religions and his effort to link it to the theology of liberation. The setting of Knitter's major writings is religious pluralism.

Reality of Religious Pluralism

For Knitter, the reality of religious pluralism is not just knowledge of many religions, but knowledge of other religious persons. It is one thing to have abstract ideas of other religious traditions and quite another to have friends who have a very different religious outlook from us. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, an influential religious scholar, said the religious life of humankind must be lived in a context of religious pluralism. This is true not only in the abstract sense but also as concrete reality that we face.[1] In the West, it is now common to have neighbors and colleagues who are Buddhists, Hindus, or Muslims. We encounter these people daily and learn their language in the literal and figurative sense. Christians may find this experience discomfiting. For example, a Buddhist neighbor may find peace through a practice that does not entail the presence of the divine; likewise a Hindu colleague will believe in reincarnation and worship many deities or avatars. These are people who live normal and respectable lives and thus, we may want to learn more about them and what their beliefs mean for us Christians.[2] The impact of non-Christian beliefs on Christians has far reaching significance, Knitter admits.

Although Christianity is now a global religion and its influence has spread far and wide through its educational and health institutions, the number of people converted to Christianity is minimal in

1. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Faith of Other Men* (New York: The New American Library, 1965), 11.
2. Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Names: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward World Religions* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1985), 3.

proportion to its massive effort. Christians are still a minority group in Asia. In other words, Christian missionaries have made very few converts from Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. This is quite shocking for a religion that claims to be the true faith revealed by God himself. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, describes itself as the one true church on Earth, as the unblemished bride of Christ, and as the only way to heaven. The fact is that the major world religions are still around, in fact growing, alongside Christianity. No amount of missionary work can wipe away the reality of religious pluralism.

Further, to the dismay of many fundamentalist Christians, there has been a resurgence and revival of Buddhism and Islam in many parts of the world led by their own missionaries. Like Christianity, they too claim to have a "universal relevance."[1] Their approach, however, is different to that of Christianity, Knitter observes, for Buddhism and Hinduism want to make their presence felt in the West not by conversion but by communication.[2] Competing with Christianity, they also want to make a contribution to the welfare of humankind.

The reality of religious pluralism brings home to us the fact that there is no such thing as *only one way*. Thus Knitter asserts that pluralism is "the very stuff of reality, the way things are, the way they function."[3] This means that there can never be just one way, or one of anything – there has to be many. But the many cannot exist as many in splendid isolation but must relate to one another, to learn, and to help one another. This being the case, Knitter concludes that there cannot be only one religion and neither can there simply be many. This new experience of the multiplicity of religions means that Christian theology seriously needs to take into consideration the existence and renewed vitality of other religious beliefs. Perhaps the best way to take other religions seriously is to converse with their adherents.

Conversation

Knitter offers a correlational model of dialogue, which assumes that conversation among members of different religions is possible, profitable, and perhaps even necessary. This perspective implies that people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds can communicate with one another in an enriching and transformative way. The conversation, however, has to be conducted on an equal

1. Ibid., 4.
2. Ibid., 5.
3. Ibid., 6.

footing and with respect for the other participants. In other words, the dialogue must take place on a level playing field and no one can presume he or she has the monopoly on truth. Another important point in this model is that participants in dialogue must be convinced by and committed to what they hold to be true and good; they must speak boldly and enthusiastically and at the same time have the humility to listen to others. Knitter writes: "In a correlational dialogue, the yin of speaking has to circulate with the yang of listening; one has to be as committed to receiving truth as one is to delivering it."[1] This model also presumes that there are many true religions, so that dialogue can be inclusive, and the participants in dialogue must be convinced that they can learn something from each other, because truth can be found on both sides.

For Knitter, adopting a pluralist-correlational approach to dialogue is more than just a personal-existential experience or intellectual exercise, but a moral responsibility. It concerns our conscience, which makes us aware of our responsibility to understand the other. It is also important for us to enter into a dialogue with those who are different from us so that we can learn something new. Otherwise we will be lost as an individual or as a community. The fact is that there are many manifestations of truth and not just one. Knitter writes: "[E]very historical expression of the truth is *sadly limited* but *happily related*. We can overcome our *limitations* through *relations*; that is, by opening ourselves to, and entering into a conversation with, the many." Through conversation with the other, we learn to expand and correct the truth we possess. Knitter insists that our effort to know the truth must be both critical and corporate: critical in the sense that it is based on our effort to understand and to judge, and corporate in the sense that it is done with other people.[2] In other words, it is a mutual searching leading to diverse arguments, rather than the conclusiveness of one.

Knitter argues that to discover our own truth, we must dialogue with the truth of others. This will heighten our awareness of our own ideological stance which can penetrate the truth found in our own culture and religion. There is also the tendency in us to use "truth" as a means to promote our own political or economic agenda or "to use our own advantage or prestige as the subconscious criterion for determining what truth is." It is impossible to protect ourselves

1. Paul F. Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 24.
2. Ibid., 31.

from this "self-indulgent abuse of our own truth."[1] We need others to tell us that our religious truth is always limited and thus debatable. Hence, conversation with others allows us to be open to the views of others who may see the world differently from us. The others many even point out that our truth offends or excludes them – "Alone, in our own backyard, we cannot recognize the distortions of our own truth."[2] Max Müller said that to know only one religion is to know none. Worse still, as Walter Benjamin warned, to know one religion is to transform it into "a work of barbarism."[3] Hence, it is our moral duty to have dialogue with members of other religions to avoid conflicts, misunderstandings, and rivalries. Dialogue is a call to be enlightened by other religious beliefs and a call to conversion. In fact, Knitter sees it as a missionary endeavor – to proclaim, listen, and learn.

Mission as Dialogue

The church's primary task is to proclaim the gospel, but the acts of proclaiming and dialoguing cannot be separated because dialogue includes proclaiming and listening. In other words, both witnessing and listening must be undertaken in a dialogic manner. Knitter writes:

> If proclamation is not dialogical it degenerates into a meaningless monologue where no response is expected. Dialogue is not the denial of proclamation but its affirmation in a genuine Christian sense. . . .
>
> Dialogue is by its nature an "announcing," a "proclamation," a "witnessing," a "giving the reason for our hope." From our Christian angle, every Christian dialogue partner is invited and invites the other to be converted. . . . Dialogue is "mutual proclamation" – it is a "mutual witnessing." It is a mutual call to conversion.[4]

To define the church's mission as dialogue means to see its task as one of communication – "communicating mission." In other words, Christians must speak boldly and listen attentively at the same time. Mission is a call to communicate with people who have different worldviews and values from us. Further, the mission of God, as Karl

1. Ibid., 32.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Quoted in Ibid., 143-144.

Rahner maintained, is one of *self-communication*.[1] Communicating God's self and life is not a monologue but a dialogue. Even within God's very being, communication is relational between the three persons in the Trinity.[2] A trinitarian God is a dialogical one.

Finally, mission as dialogue means missionaries must proclaim, listen, and learn. Being good listeners to the Word of God, as that Word may be found in other religions, will make them better proclaimers. It is a two-way communication with the world in which Christians are open to learning from adherents of other faiths. Religious traditions like Buddhism, Confucianism, and certain forms of secular humanism have good resources for interpreting and directing human life and it would be an impoverishment if Christians did not avail themselves of these differing ways of being human. In other words, Christian theology cannot be just Christian.[3] Knitter personally has benefited through his dialogue with Buddhism and has arrived at a deeper understanding of his Christian faith to the extent that without Buddha, he could not be a Christian.

The Need for Buddha

First of all, Knitter insists that for conversation to be meaningful, Christians must be rooted in a deep commitment to the truth found in Christianity, and this must be matched by an openness to the truth found in Buddhism. This openness is fundamental because it reveals that God's love and presence are universal. At the same time, Knitter warns us, we must not ignore or overlook the differences, which must also be taken seriously. Sometimes these differences cannot be reconciled and it is here that Christians can learn most. He asserts that truth in religion is generally not a question of "either-or" but "both-and."[4] This suggests that every religious claim can be matched by a counter-claim. Differences in religions must be cherished and maintained because they make dialogue possible. Besides, differences can also be complementary. For example, the Buddhist is transformed through the image of *no-self* and the Christian is transformed through *new-self* in Christ.[5]

1. Ibid., 144.
2. Ibid., 145.
3. See Ibid., 159-189.
4. Paul F. Knitter, "Horizons on Christianity's new dialogue with Buddhism," *Horizons* 8, no. 1 (1 March 1981), 41.
5. Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, 25.

Knitter insists that dialogue with Buddhism must be based on praxis – personally entering into the experience of the Other. Unfortunately, he laments, Christians often misunderstand or misinterpret Buddhist concepts and symbols because the language in its sacred text is not primarily aimed to explain but to be experienced. In other words, "Buddhist terminology . . . is largely phenomenological and descriptive and it aims to portray an experience rather than a reality. It is not metaphysical but soteriological, and if we interpret it ontologically, Buddhism appears atheistic, monistic, or pantheistic."[1]

According to Thomas Merton, conversation with Buddhists must first be a "communion" before it is a "communication."[2] This suggests that experience is more important than understanding because communion transcends mere words. Hence, we should not be too fixated on correct interpretation or historical accuracy of sacred texts because dialogue, after all, is about the meeting of persons and not ideas.

Further, Buddhism also enables Knitter to repossess the Christian mystical tradition, whereby God is an "experience" before anything else. This includes the importance of silence and prayer, whereby God is experienced as a "mystery" and a "presence." In both Christian and Buddhist mystical movements, silence is of fundamental importance, and it is in this meditative silence that Buddhism and Christianity may discover each other.[3] The importance of silence is best expressed by a Buddhist paradox: "[W]ords about God can be valid and useful only if they flow from a profound experience of silence." Behind and within all Christian doctrine there must be . . . a silence which prepares the way for the word and the silence which is the word's highest utterance."[4]

Regarding the Christian understanding of God as "experience," Knitter thinks it resembles the Buddhist concept of *sunyata*, which refers to an "emptiness" that has no independent existence but exists in interdependency, in other words, "interBeing."[5] This understanding

1. Quoted in Knitter, "Horizons on Christianity's new dialogue with Buddhism," 42.
2. Ibid., 42.
3. Ulrich Luz and Axel Michaels, *Encountering Jesus and Buddha: Their Lives and Teachings*, translated by Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 31
4. Quoted in Knitter, "Horizons on Christianity's new dialogue with Buddhism," 47.
5. Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I could not be a Christian* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 17.

of God as emptiness also falls within the Roman Catholic mystical tradition of Meister Eckhart and St John of the Cross. The First Letter of John asserts that "God is love" (4:8). For Knitter, "love is this emptying, connecting, energy that in its power originates new connections and new life."[1] The Johannine tradition highlights the immanence of God in defining him as love. Unfortunately, Knitter laments, due to the influence of neo-platonism, Christians have placed more emphasis on God's otherness and transcendence and thus missed his immanence. Further, the idea of God as "interBeing" also refers to the Trinity whereby the nature of the divine is essentially a relationship; in other words, for God "to be" is for him "to relate."[2]

The Christian view of God can be further illuminated by Buddhist enlightenment, especially the idea of the divine as the connecting Spirit that enables us to experience wisdom, and compassion for living things. Knitter suggests that just as Christians affirm that God is love, so Buddhists can affirm that wisdom is compassion. "InterBeing" cannot take place without compassion. Buddhist philosophy helps Knitter to accept the pain and horror in human existence courageously, with patient wisdom and compassion, and to see the good in every evil that occurs.

Knitter claims that the title of Buddha as "the Awakened One" is also appropriate for Jesus in the sense that Jesus's understanding of his divinity was a process that gradually dawned upon him. In other words, he "woke up" to it or grew in his divinity.[3] It was a gradual process. This understanding of Jesus as "the Awakened One" belongs to the tradition of *Sophia* or Spirit Christology, in which the Son of God is led, filled, and empowered by the Spirit.[4] Knitter's understanding of Buddhism in relation to his Christian identity is very much influenced by the process theologian par excellence, John B. Cobb.

Mutual Transformation

The main thesis of John Cobb's book, *Beyond Dialogue: Towards a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism*, is similar to Paul Knitter's *Without Buddha I could not be a Christian*: that none of our religious beliefs, including those of Christianity, can give us the fullness of understanding of the ultimate reality. For a more comprehensive

1. Ibid., 18.
2. Ibid., 19.
3. Ibid., 114.
4. Ibid., 115.

vision of the divine, we need to engage with people of different religious traditions in dialogue – a mutually transforming process of encounter to share our spiritual insights. In other words, by taking part in dialogue and going beyond it, Buddhists and Christians can help each other to have a deeper and more complete understanding of their beliefs.

Going beyond dialogue means being transformed by this spiritual encounter. Cobb writes: "[O]nly those Christians who have been transformed by appropriation of the universal truth found in other religious Ways can proclaim the universal truth of Jesus Christ without a false imperialism."[1] This means that through multiple dialogues with Buddhism, Christians will have a deeper appreciation of the mystery of Jesus Christ. Going beyond dialogue, however, cannot be only for the enrichment of Christianity; it should also be for the benefit of the dialogue partner. Dialogue has a missionary purpose: that Christians should make a difference in the lives of others.

Unlike Knitter, Cobb does not downplay Christology. Critical of Knitter, who moves away from Christocentrism, he argues that this seems to deny the humanity of Christ. For Cobb, to deny belief in the Incarnation for the sake of dialogue would impoverish us and our dialogue partners as well. He thinks that Knitter's criticism of Christocentrism is misplaced. Devotion to Christ will not affect dialogue negatively or interfere with truth seeking. For Cobb, "Christ is present in authentic dialogue."[2] Faith in the living Christ, in the divine presence in our lives, and in the Incarnation of Jesus is fundamental to Cobb.

Regarding Christology, Knitter argues that Christians can understand the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in a way that will enable them to be open to genuine conversation with followers of other religions. For Knitter, Jesus is *truly* the Son of God, the savior, but not *solely*. Further, "when one knows that Jesus is truly savior, one does *not* know that he is the *only* savior. One's experience is limited and has not been able to take in the experiences and messages of all other so-called saviors or religious figures."[3] This means that the existence of other saving figures would not be an obstacle for Christians to proclaim that Jesus is truly Lord. Jesus cannot exhaust all the truth that God has to reveal; Christians cannot claim "a *definitive* Word of

1. John B. Cobb Jr., *Beyond Dialogue: Towards a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1982), ix.
2. Ibid., 46.
3. Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, 72.

God in Jesus" because divine truth can exist outside him; therefore, God's saving word in Jesus is not "unsurpassable" because he can reveal more of his fullness in other ways and at other times.[1] To put it succinctly, the good news of Jesus *defines* God but does not *confine* him.

Both Knitter and Cobb, however, affirm the uniqueness of Christianity as well as other religions. Cobb claims that his unique claim for Christ does not conflict with the Buddhist claim for Buddha. In fact, Christians should "strive to share what has been exclusive to other traditions. This is what a Christianized Buddhism and a Buddhized Christianity are all about."[2] Cobb admits that Buddhists have a depth of insight into the nature of reality that Christians lack. Thus, if a Buddhist is converted to Christianity and abandons this insight, it serves no purpose at all. This is not what Christian mission should aim for. Cobb writes: "Until we can share that insight and transform our understanding of our own faith through it, we will have little to say that can or should command Buddhist attention."[3] Therefore we need to learn from dialogue and going beyond it, to rethink our belief. This process should be mutually beneficial.

Against the inclusivists who believe that all religions are moving towards Christianity or that each has a part to play in salvation history, Cobb believes that by incorporating Buddhist beliefs, Christianity will be transformed into something very different. In the same way, a Buddhism that has incorporated Christian beliefs would also be very different from what it is now. This will not eliminate differences between the two religions but will provide new basis and impetus for dialogue and transformation.[4] Eventually what divides us will not be as sharp as before.

While Cobb thinks there is a complementary relationship between Buddhism and Christianity, he observes that there is a big difference between Christian teaching on overcoming attachment to worldly things and the Buddhist radical understanding of detachment. For example, Buddhism teaches that we must give up total attachment and this "includes the desire for freedom from suffering, or Nirvana." In other words, if you desire Nirvana, you will not get it. You have to extinguish your noblest desire in order to attain it. This radical teaching is very different from Christianity because "insofar as Christianity teaches that we should cleave to Christ or

1. Ibid., 73-75.
2. Quoted in Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, 81.
3. Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue*, 51.
4. Ibid., 52.

devote ourselves wholly to God, Buddhism sees this teaching as an obstacle to release from suffering."[1] As such, Buddhism does not affirm the presence of a personal deity because this might lead to attachment. In fact, there is a saying "if you meet the Buddha, kill him."[2] Buddha cannot be an object of attachment; that will only hinder our attainment of Nirvana.

In Nirvana, Cobb believes Buddhism has a more sophisticated understanding of the ultimate reality: "the absence of attachment, clinging or craving. That absence gives rise to perfect freedom, perfect presence, perfect wisdom, and perfect compassion."[3]

As a Buddhist goal, Nirvana resembles the Kingdom of God preached by Jesus Christ. But Nirvana, according to Cobb, is "primarily nontemporal."[4] This means that an individual attainment of Nirvana is ultimate, beyond time and change.

Knitter stresses that everything that Jesus says and does is motivated by his commitment to the reign of God on Earth. Following Jon Sobrino, Knitter writes: "Jesus is not ultimate for himself. . . . Jesus did not simply preach God. . . . God is not simply and absolutely Jesus' ultimate pole of reference." The point of reference for Jesus is the Kingdom of God on Earth.[5] This means God in relation to this world and to history.

In the Bible, God is understood as the ultimate reality or the Supreme Being. This can be confusing, Cobb warns. He prefers the Buddhist concept of *sunyata* (emptiness), which can transform the Christian understanding of God. Cobb states: "If God is the one, cosmic, everlasting actualization of ultimate reality on whom all ephemeral actualizations depend, God's non-identity with ultimate reality in no way subordinates God to it, for God is the ultimate *actuality*. God as the ultimate actuality is just as ultimate as is Emptiness as ultimate *reality*. Emptiness is different from God, and there is no God apart from Emptiness."[6] We can also say that there is no emptiness apart from God. As such, our concepts of God are actually a hindrance to experiencing him as a living presence. To think of God as the everlasting Empty One from whom all human emptiness is derived may help us to break out

1. Ibid., 79.
2. Ibid., 80.
3. Ibid., 81.
4. Ibid., 86.
5. Quoted in Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, 89.
6. Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue*, 112.

of the limitations of concepts and categories. In other words, the Buddhist's understanding of emptiness can complement Christian theocentrism and help Christians to experience God in a more profound and enriching manner.

So far we have seen how Buddhism can enhance Christianity in its understanding of God as emptiness. Cobb also believes Christianity can contribute to the fulfillment of Buddhism. For example, Mahāyāna Buddhists can learn to see Jesus as the incarnation of the Lord Amida Buddha, the "decisive incarnation of Amida in the historical Jesus."[1] Cobb believes that Amida, who is incarnate in all Buddhas, and Christ, as the creative and redemptive work of God in the world, are the same. In short, Christ is Amida.

The other thing that Buddhism can learn from Christianity is Christian social and ethical teachings, which are more clearly and systematically laid out. It is not that Buddhists lack virtue or goodness but "what is lacking is a trans-social norm by virtue of which society is judged."[2] Buddhist ethical teaching is not thematically developed. Besides, Buddhism does not encourage its followers to criticize social and political structures or movements. Buddhists' focus on emptiness or "trans-social reality" does not encourage them to move towards the frontline of social or political protests.

Finally, in Cobb's opinion, Christianity can become a universal religion only through creative transformation: learning from world religions and offering its insights to them so they can do the same. In addition, to have a global vision of faith, one needs to be liberated from the limitation of our own concepts and categories of beliefs so that we are free to learn from others. In other words, "a Buddhized Christianity and a Christianized Buddhism may continue to enrich each other and human culture generally through their differences."[3]

As far as Christianity is concerned, it needs to move beyond Greco-Roman philosophical thoughts such as substantialism and dualism and allow itself to be transformed by other religious teachings, such as Buddhism. In an interconnected and interdependent world, learning from each other in matters of ultimate significance is crucial for our survival, particularly when we are faced with the threat of factionalism and communalism. For some people, this involves living their religious life interreligiously.

1. Ibid., 121.
2. Ibid., 133.
3. Ibid., 142.

Being Religious Interreligiously

According to Edward Schillebeeckx, the many religions in this world are not an evil to be eradicated; rather they reflect the abundance and generosity of God. There is more religious truth in all religions than in one.[1] This suggests to Knitter that plurality holds the potential for greater unity. The many are called to be one, but not in a way that annihilates the many; the many become one by remaining the many, and each of the many makes distinct contributions to the others and thus to the greater whole. Looking at pluralism in this sense, Knitter concludes that "whereas individualization is weakened, personalization is intensified; the individual finds its true self as part of other selves. So there is a movement not toward absolute or monistic oneness but toward what might be called 'unitive pluralism': plurality constituting unity."[2]

Unitive pluralism, therefore, is a movement toward a dialogical community in which members live and interact with one another. As the various religious traditions encounter each other, they experience a new sense of identity and are awakened to a more dynamic and dialogical way of understanding themselves. As such, adherents of different religions are challenged to develop their identities within a broader community of other beliefs. In such a situation, Knitter believes that one must be "religious interreligiously."

Another reason to live our religious lives interreligiously is that the truth we see is conditioned by our cultural-religious lens; it is not only limiting but also dangerous when we think of this as the whole truth and applicable to all people. Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx have warned us that we need to be suspicious of our truth claims when they become ideologies. This is particularly so when one group holds up its truth as the absolute truth for all in order to take advantage of and oppress others. Truth then becomes a political tool used to maintain power over others – "truth-claims easily become power-claims."[3] To prevent this and to know the real truth we must be involved in talking and listening to people who are very different from us. But not all Christians are equally disposed towards other religious beliefs. In the next section we will discuss the various attitudes that Christians adopt towards other religions.

1. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990), 166-167.
2. Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 10.
3. Ibid., 11.

Theologies of Religions

The Christian relationship with other faiths is categorically elucidated by the theology of religions. This theology of religions, Knitter insists, must be worked out on the basis of what we can conclude about other religions from the teachings of Jesus and gospel values. In the context of religious pluralism, Christian theology must render an account of other religions and also an account of its own beliefs in the light of others.

In his book, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (2002), Knitter elaborates the threefold typology of pluralism, inclusivism, and exclusivism developed by Alan Race. He presents the trio as "models" for Christian reflection on other religions by naming them the replacement model (exclusivism), fulfillment model (inclusivism), mutuality model (pluralism), and acceptance model. This last one, the acceptance model, has no equivalent in the old categories – it simply accepts the fact that there are many true religions, embraces religious plurality, and makes no assumptions about other traditions. A more recent category, congruent to Race's, has been developed for this model: particularism. In the acceptance model, there is no common ground among different religions, and no overlap in the languages that we use to describe them. We just learn to be good neighbors, as it were. This acceptance model is meant to reflect the epistemological situation of our post-modern age.

Replacement Model

Knitter offers a relatively objective description and analysis of the various models, deliberately letting the adherents of each model speak for themselves, and then carefully evaluates their strengths and weaknesses. But he seems critical of Christian Evangelicals who adopt the replacement model, which looks upon other religious beliefs as so deficient that eventually Christianity will take them over. There are also advocates of a partial replacement model who are certain that God speaks to members of other religions and that this general revelation can make other believers aware of a loving personal God. The voice of God in other religious traditions can make their members aware of the need for redemption. According to this evangelical model, other religions are willed by God to carry out his plan. However, theologians of this model, while they believe that God reveals the truth in other religions, do not think that these religions

can bring salvation for their members: revelation, yes, but salvation, no! The New Testament makes this clear: salvation is brought about only by Jesus Christ; it is made known only by Jesus.

Evangelical Christians do speak about dialogue with other religions, but eventually this dialogue is going to face the real difference between Christianity and other religions. It is precisely the conflicting positions and truth-claims of religions that have to become the subject of dialogue, according to Wolfhart Pannenberg. This is where dialogue becomes interreligious: people talk about their truth-claims. It becomes a competition in which each religion tries to prove that it is superior in showing people the true path to God, "superior in answering the innermost questions and needs of the human heart and the needs of our messed-up, selfish, violent world."[1]

Supporters of this model insist that dialogical competition must be carried with care and respect for the freedom of the others; such dialogue should evangelize (persuade) and not proselytize (force). Nonetheless, Evangelicals believe that the name of Jesus would win in this holy competition. As a result, according to the partial displacement model, religions are not means of salvation in themselves, but God can use them to point beyond themselves and toward future redemption in the risen Lord; God can make use of other religions, so they are not totally rejected, but they must face their own crisis.

Evangelicals believe that suffering humanity needs not many truths but one truth that will unite people with a common vision. And thus the Christian message about the one revelation and the one salvation offered in Jesus Christ may be just the solution that people need. They make this claim humbly and dialogically, that in Jesus we find God's answer to all human questioning and searching. According to Miroslav Volf, Christians must assert that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, not with "absolute knowledge," but with "provisional certitude." He says that if we understand our belief as "provisionally true," we can accept the beliefs of others as "possibly true."[2] In this perspective, Evangelicals hope to show to other Christians that it is possible to proclaim that Jesus is the only savior and at the same time engage in friendly dialogue with other religions.

Knitter does not seem to be convinced by the above model, much as he tries to be fair, and reiterates "the Protestant Principle" which warns of the danger of religion. There is a "worm" or "demonic element" in all religions when they try to domesticate God and

1. Ibid., 41.
2. Ibid., 54.

confine him to their own knowledge. Thus all religions need to be reformed constantly, because there is a tendency for religious traditions to see their creeds, codes, and cults as more important than divine revelation; they therefore can become "crutches" or "opium" for their adherents.[1] Knitter suggests that we need to apply this "Protestant Principle" to our religious beliefs – are we actually listening or speaking out of an openness to the divine when we enter into dialogue with members of other religions? Or are we just trying to hang on to the power and security of our religious beliefs and institutions? Religion can get in the way and prevent God from speaking to us in revelation, as Barth warns us.

Besides this insight offered by the replacement model, there are also questions put forward by Knitter: is the Evangelical understanding of salvation through Jesus Christ perhaps *not the only* way to understand how the divine transforms us? Perhaps they are just imposing on others one particular way of experiencing God; there are other ways, like the Prophet Mohammed's teaching on the submission to the will of Allah, Buddha's message of enlightenment, Hindus' sense of *moksha* and the Chinese sense of living in the harmony of *ying-yang*.[2] Thus if there are other ways for the divine to save humankind, dialogue should not be marked by competition, but rather by co-operation, in which the participants, by listening to each other, learn more about how God works.

Knitter admits that Evangelicals recognize that people of other religions can be happy, committed, loving, and find meaning in life – they look "saved." Thus they try to balance the "particularist" texts of the Bible that say that Jesus is the only savior with the universal teaching of the gospel that God wills all people to be saved. However, Knitter adds that some of the solutions the Evangelicals gave seem more like the "fruit of theological imagination than biblical vision."[3] Such unflattering remarks reveal that Knitter has serious questions about Evangelical moves to get "heathens" who have not heard about Jesus into heaven.

Fulfillment Model

The fulfillment model offers a theology that seeks to give equal weight to two fundamental Christian tenets: that God's love is universal and that only Jesus saves. Knitter says this model

1. Ibid., 55.
2. Ibid., 59.
3. Ibid., 60.

represents something entirely new in the history of Christianity, pioneered by Karl Rahner, who teaches that God offers the gift of himself in and through other religious beliefs and traditions. Rahner believes that grace is embodied and therefore that God's presence takes on a material shape, including the various religions in the world. It is in the religions of the world that the Spirit lives. If Christians need sacraments to encounter God, so do members of other religions and thus, their beliefs can also be "ways of salvation." For example, a Buddhist can be saved not *in spite* of his Buddhism, but *because* of his Buddhist belief. Rahner is only speaking about the *possibility* or *probability* and not the *reality* of divine presence in other religions.[1]

Rahner's theology of religion calls for a different kind of relationship between Christianity and other beliefs than the replacement model: Christians can learn a lot from members of other religions and vice versa. In Rahner's teaching, other religions, with all their positive qualities, serve only in the role of John the Baptist, preparing the way for their members to be Christians and to realize the riches that they already possessed. And before Jesus, all religions fulfil their validity.[2]

Knitter laments that Vatican II did not adopt Rahner's teaching about other religions as possible and probable ways of salvation, the channels by which God draws people to himself. The theological quality of other religions remains essentially "undefined."[3] The Council Fathers neither affirmed nor denied that non-Christian religions may be channels through which the Spirit flows into the lives of the people beyond the church. After all, Vatican II was a pastoral and not a doctrinal council. It seems that Vatican II built a bridge towards other religions, but the church did not cross it.

Knitter, however, speaks of John Paul II as a great promoter of dialogue with other religions because of the late pontiff's stress on the Spirit that is "alive and active, before Christ and after him, within the religious searchings and findings of humankind."[4] There are many religions, but there is only one Spirit that blows where it wills. Knitter asserts that Vatican II has opened up the church for dialogue with other faiths in the following ways: it acknowledges that other religions can be means of salvation; and it stresses that the church should be dialogical and that it is in the service of God's reign. This

1. Ibid., 71.
2. Ibid., 75.
3. Ibid., 77.
4. Ibid., 81.

is Knitter's personal interpretation of the council documents and of subsequent Vatican statements. He also drew these assertions from *Dialogue and Proclamation* and *Redemptoris Missio.*

Mutuality Model

In the mutuality model, Knitter speaks of three complementary bridges that can lead Christians into the practice of the model:

i. *The philosophical-historical bridge:* the divine reality behind all religions;

ii. *The religious-mystical bridge:* the mystical experiences shared by many religions;

iii. *The ethical-practical bridge:* the shared concern of all religions for the sufferings of humanity and the Earth.[1]

It focuses on the common problems world religions face: poverty, victimization, violence, and patriarchy. Concerns about poverty and justice have become the topic of interreligious dialogue as all religions are keen to improve the welfare of people in general. Besides human suffering, there is also a concern for the environment, the destruction of our planet and all the creatures in it.

Post-modern thinking may doubt the reality of common faith or common mystical experience, but it cannot deny the reality of human suffering and the destruction of the environment due to industrialization and relentless consumption. According to this mutuality model, if a religion has nothing to say about the reality of suffering in the world, it has lost its relevance. This means that we need a global ethic, one that will "embody a consensus of ethical values about the dignity of the individual, the integrity of the earth, the community and responsibility that unite us all, and the need for justice and compassion."[2] To formulate a global ethic would require the co-operation of all major religions in the world, and this was recognized at the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1993 and 1999.

Knitter states that a shared ethical dialogue will open doors and lead to effective sharing of religious experiences, and "so talking

1. Ibid., 112-113. See also Ambrose Ih-Ren Mong, "Crossing the Ethical-Practical Bridge: Paul's Knitter's Regnocentrism in Asian Perspective," *The Ecumenical Review* 63, no. 2 (July 2011), 186-199.
2. Ibid., 138-139.

after acting makes for better talking."[1] This ethical approach also helps in avoiding the danger of relativism as it decides whether a particular religious practice is able to bring about greater justice and peace to the people. In this kind of dialogue, the cries of the poor and victims of injustice are a "privileged voice" that can inform religious leaders about the realities of our broken world. Michael Amaladoss says such an approach can lead its adherents to share perspectives of faith with a view to seeking convergence.[2]

The best description of Christ in this ethical approach to interreligious dialogue, according to Knitter, is that he was "Kingdom-centred;" everything else in Jesus's preaching was oriented toward the reign of God in which his will would be done.[3] And if Jesus was Kingdom-centered, so must a Christian theology of religions be focused on fostering the reign of God on Earth. Thus the first thing on the agenda for dialogue should be for Christians to ask where and how other religious communities can help to bring about this reign of God in the way of alleviating human suffering and inequality in societies. Crossing this ethical-practical bridge, Knitter assures us that Christians can look on the adherents of other religions as co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord.

Proponents of the mutuality model believe that Jesus would be better understood "as a *sacrament* of God's love than as a *satisfaction* for God's justice."[4] This means that Jesus's saving act is perceived more "as a *representative cause* rather than as a *constitutive cause*."[5] If we think of Jesus as one who has paid the price of our salvation (satisfaction), we will understand salvation as a one-time event. But if we understand Jesus as a manifestation of God's saving love (representative), we can be open to the possibility of many other manifestations of love in different religious figures or saviors.

With a Spirit Christology, Knitter argues, Christians can understand better how Christ was both divine and human because the Spirit does not replace the human person of Jesus; it empowers, guides, and enlightens him. This Spirit is present throughout the world, inside and outside of Christianity, seeking to empower humankind. Christians understand Jesus as the embodiment of this Spirit in a distinctive manner because he was completely open and attuned to it.

1. Ibid., 139.
2. Ibid., 140.
3. Ibid., 145.
4. Ibid., 152.
5. Ibid., 153.

According to Roger Haight, "A Spirit Christology, by recognizing that the Spirit is operative outside the Christian sphere, is open to other mediations of God. . . . [I]t is not necessary to think that God as Spirit can be incarnated only once in history."[1] In other words, the Spirit is not limited to the Spirit of Christ; it can go beyond Jesus and be operative in other religions. A Spirit Christology enables Christians to proclaim Jesus as the norm for our salvation and at the same time it enables them to recognize other saving figures as universally normative too. Christians can possess the fullness of God in Christ only by relating this to the fullness of other religions.

Acceptance Model

This model for interreligious dialogue believes that it is better able to balance the universal message of salvation and the particular role of Jesus Christ by accepting the real differences in all religions: "[T]he religious traditions of the world are really different, and we have to *accept* those differences."[2] Knitter gives three different expressions of this model:

i. postliberal foundations

ii. many religions = many salvations

iii. comparative theology

The acceptance model is positive about the diversity of religions because "diversity doesn't dominate; it invites and exhilarates."[3] Its theology stresses that the religions of the world are different and distinct in their own right, so dialogue must be based on acceptance of these differences, for there is really no common ground.

Regarding the above point, Mark Heim argues that the final destination might be different in different religions, just as Christians believe that God is not just one. He writes: "Christians can consistently recognize that some traditions encompass religious ends which are real states of human transformation, distinct from what Christians seek. There are paths in varying religious traditions which if consistently followed proved effective in bringing adherents to alternative fulfillments. The crucial question among the faiths

1. Roger Haight, *Jesus the Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 456. Quoted in Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 155.
2. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 173.
3. Ibid., 177-178.

is not 'which one saves?' but 'what counts as salvation?'"[1] Thus it makes sense to speak of salvation in the plural because the ends of various religious traditions are varied.

A method that is embedded in the acceptance model is comparative theology, an approach that cherishes differences in all religions while upholding the distinctiveness of Christianity. It is a means to the end of developing a theology of religions based on the outcome of dialogue with other religions. It would be developed from scripture and church teaching, but not only from them. It is also an attempt to understand the meaning of the Christian faith by comparing it with other beliefs and thus the real goal is to gain a better understanding of *self* through a better understanding of *others*.[2] Comparative theologians challenge Christians to understand themselves differently in relation to non-Christians – to understand their own tradition in the light of others'.

According to Francis Clooney, "theology is a conversation" between the texts of his religion and the texts of Hinduism. Clooney's understanding of Christianity was transformed through his conversation with Hinduism. James Fredericks also admits that the insights of non-Christian traditions he has acquired have enabled him to cherish his own Christian faith in new and deeper ways.[3] Both Clooney and Fredericks insist that comparative theology is not a form of religious study but a theology that seeks the truth for integration into one's own life; it is not just a matter of understanding but of living and committing.

Comparative theologians experience "vulnerability" and "loyalty," a tension that is life-giving and fruit-bearing; it is both a happy and discomforting experience to explore the texts, symbols, and stories of another religious tradition. This tension is fundamental because "to be *loyal* to Christ, one must be *vulnerable* to others."[4] Comparative theologians are Christians urging their fellow Christians to accept other religious traditions. Knitter correctly comments that this is one-sided as comparative theologians tend to give more credence to other religions.

Fredericks tells us that doing comparative theology leads Christians to be familiar with other religious texts and to develop friendships, which he characterized as *philia*, a preferential love,

1. S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Differences in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 160.
2. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 205.
3. See Ibid., 206.
4. Ibid., 209.

with other believers.[1] However, Fredericks insists that Christians must proclaim Jesus as the unique incarnation of God in history – an essential part of Christian identity. It will be difficult to carry out a Christian dialogue if we dilute and deform this basic Christian belief. This means that we can only have a sincere and open dialogue if we are firm in our own convictions. For Fredericks, remaining committed to Jesus as the unique savior does not reduce our vulnerability.

Clooney insists that his Christian faith is always shaped by the biblical view, and for the Hindus, by the Vedic view; he is not going to adopt the other viewpoint, not because it is not allowed, but because it is not possible. We are all deeply held and limited by our own religion, culture, and language. Clooney also asserts that "Theological truths occur only through their textual forms, and there is no other path of access to them."[2] This means truth is embedded in the text and the truth of any religion can only be understood and assessed within its own cultural system. If any tension exists between two claims, for example Christianity (Christ) and Hinduism (Brahman), the best policy in Clooney's view is "the patient deferral of issues of truth" which allows for further study and conversation.[3]

Knitter says that the acceptance model implies that we are all *inclusivists*, no matter how much we try to understand other religions. This means that we access the truth of other beliefs according to where we come from, our own criteria and understanding. Knitter says: "[W]e're always *including* the other in what we hold to be true and valuable, in what we already are."[4] The important thing for him is to be aware that we are all *inclusivists*; if we are not aware of this fact, we become *imperialists*.[5] The danger is that we will not allow others to reveal their *otherness* for we have included them in our own system. There is really nothing much we can do but to admit our *inclusivistic* tendency, try to go beyond it, and wait and see what happens.

Referring to the injustice, violence, and ecological disasters that affect our world today, the realities and crises that threaten our very existence, Knitter strongly believes that it might be helpful for religions to look *beyond* themselves to discover what they may have

1. Ibid., 210.
2. Ibid., 213.
3. Ibid., 214.
4. Ibid., 217.
5. Ibid., 218.

in common. Religions may not have common ground, but they all have a common problem: suffering. Here Knitter goes back to the mutuality model, which calls for "a globally responsible dialogue that tries to work out a global ethic."[1] He believes that all Christians can agree that the reign of God was the central message of Jesus and this empowers us to care for each other and the Earth as well. Hence Knitter calls for an "action-oriented dialogue," which means a theology based on liberative praxis.

Towards a Liberation Theology of Religions

The theology of religions can find its counterpart in the theology of liberation. In other words, liberation of the people necessitates not just one religion but many. Economic and political liberation require the effort of more than one nation or religion: "A crosscultural, interreligious cooperation in liberative praxis and a sharing of liberative theory is called for."[2] Harvey Cox is convinced that liberation theology can only be effective if it moves out of the Christian ghetto towards embracing indigenous and other venerable religious traditions.[3] For example, for liberation theology to be relevant to Asia, it has to take into account eastern religions, like Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, which are older than Christianity.

A purely Christian theology of liberation suffers from impoverishment because it has only one vision of the Kingdom of God. As such, Knitter maintains that an encounter with Buddhism will reveal to Latin American theologians that their theology has been limited by Marxist ideology as well as the dogmatism of Karl Barth. Lamenting that theologians like Juan Luis Segundo and Jon Sobrino are closed to the liberating powers of eastern religions, Knitter believes that global liberation requires a global interreligious dialogue.[4]

On the other hand, liberation theologians can remind those who participate in interreligious dialogue that the primary concern of religions must be the welfare of the people, especially the poor,

1. Ibid., 232.
2. Paul F. Knitter, "Towards a Liberation Theology of Religions," in John Hick and Paul Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1987), 179.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 180.

oppressed, and exploited. Otherwise the religion will be in danger of losing its relevance. We encounter other religions in dialogue not just to enjoy diversity or for our intellectual satisfaction, but to help in the alleviation of suffering and pain. In other words, we have to work for justice and peace. In fact, Knitter makes the bold claim that justice is more important than pluralism, dialogue, and even charity. The state of our present world reveals the urgent need for the church and other religions to adopt "a preferential option for the poor and the nonperson" – this should be the primary objective of interreligious dialogue.[1]

Knitter made the above assertion in his article published in 1987, but has adjusted such claims in the light of his dialogue with Buddhism. He explained to me:

> In general, I have learned that while Christians must continue to make a preferential option for the oppressed, it must also include and be accompanied by an option for the oppressors. We cannot make an option for one group that would diminish our love for all other groups. That I have learned from the Buddhists. So in preferring the oppressed and turning our attention and action to their benefit, we are at the very same time preferring the oppressors, for we love them just as much as we love the oppressed, and so we intend their liberation as much as we intend that of the oppressed. But our actions towards the oppressed and the oppressors will be very different, even though we seek the well-being of both of them equally.[2]

Be that as it may, Knitter still believes that it is important for religions to come together in a concerted effort to fight against the oppression and exploitation of our people that is threatening our

1. Ibid., 181.
2. Paul Knitter, email correspondence on 28 June 2015. Further Knitter writes: "The necessity of bringing about justice in the face of injustice is an explicit call to action – action that will go beyond compassion and will seek to change the way society or the world works: it is a call for structural change. So if the compassion of the bodhisattva calls for an action addressed to those who are suffering and who are victims of injustice, the concern for justice felt by the disciple of Jesus calls for action addressed to the perpetrators of injustice. To express compassion for the oppressed, one must confront the oppressors." Paul Knitter, "The Question of Salvation/Liberation: A Double-Belonger's Perspective." See also the last chapter of Knitter, *Without Buddha I could not be a Christian*.

social fabric. In this sense, dialogue should have the top priority: "Interreligious dialogue is essential to international liberation."[1]

Suffering and pain is a common human experience to which all religions can respond in order to understand themselves and others. Thus, for Knitter, the ultimate concern of all religions is the concern for the suffering of others. Pope Francis never fails to remind us to reach out to the poor and marginalized. Calling it a "cosmological faith," Knitter claims that it springs from a cosmological responsibility that touches us all. Due to the uncertainties of life, people of all different religions and even those without religion are seeking to build a better world – it is a "growing passion to reconstruct the present order into one more truly humane."[2]

To sum up, dialogue between religions must also contribute to the humanization of our Earth. For Knitter, this common context of human suffering can serve as "a new hermeneutical Kairos" for the meeting of various religions.[3] There are new opportunities and also new responsibilities for the major religions in the world to understand and to judge each other by. Thus dialogue and liberation call out to each other, an important theme that Aloysius Pieris has profoundly and comprehensively explicated, as we will discuss in the next chapter.

1. Knitter, "Towards a Liberation Theology of Religions," 181.
2. Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 57.
3. Ibid., 58.