In order to appreciate the role of interfaith dialogue in recent theology, we must first identify current shifts in theologies of religions. Paul Knitter has recently proposed four theological models for articulating Christian approaches to the religious other – namely replacement, fulfillment, mutuality and acceptance. Wayne Teasdale is happier with the more classical description.

of three basic positions on other religious traditions – exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Either way, these should be seen as pedagogical tools rather than expressions of an exact science. Nonetheless, they provide us with a template in which diverse warrants for interfaith dialogue can be articulated. Given that current, mainstream Catholic theology can be generally situated within Knitter’s fulfillment and (to a lesser extent) mutuality models – and with Teasdale’s inclusivist and (to a lesser extent) pluralist position – the greater part of this discussion is given to warrants for dialogue within these frameworks as articulated by (mainly Catholic) theologians and in official Catholic Church teachings. Along the way, there will be some critique of Knitter’s placement of theological voices within particular models.

Theological Approaches

1. Exclusivism / Replacement Model: “Only one true religion”

Substantially, this approach was adopted by all Christian churches in the post-Reformation era and is epitomized in Cyprian’s famous axiom extra ecclesiam nulla salus. More typical among evangelical churches and theologies today, the approach may well allow for the possibility of revelation in other traditions. Nonetheless, it either denies or severely minimizes the possibility

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3 The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) solemnly repeated this formula giving it an extra degree of exclusivity by adding the Latin word omnino: “Outside the church, no salvation at all”; Boniface VIII (Unum Sanctam 1302) added to this the notion that to belong to the church one had to accept papal authority; and the Council of Florence (1442) specified that “no persons, whatever almsgiving they practised, even if they have shed their blood for Christ, can be saved, unless they have remained in the bosom and unity of the Catholic Church”. Denzinger, 802, 870-72, 1351. Cited in Knitter, 66.
of other traditions being able to mediate salvation. In the dialectical theology of Karl Barth – with its sharp distinction between religion and faith – all religion, including Christianity, is radically corrupted by sin: only existential faith in Jesus Christ can ‘save’. In regard to dialogue, the replacement model is not necessarily superior or chauvinistic, but it does not really allow for “mutual enrichment”. Proponents of this position usually encourage practical cooperation with and moral tolerance of the religious other along the lines of dialogues of life and action. In practical terms, this approach has a tendency to use or manipulate dialogue as an instrument for conversion.

2. Fulfillment Model: “The one fulfils the many”

While upholding the primacy of salvation through Christ, the fulfillment model (sometimes called the inclusivist paradigm) acknowledges the possibility of salvation without explicit expression of Christian faith. In its most famous expression, people who live their lives according to the dictates of their consciences and in response to the divine mystery at work in the world may be “anonymous Christians”. Indeed, other religions may contain “seeds of the Word” and be illuminated by “rays of Truth” which orient them towards their fulfillment in Christ and the church. Twentieth century Catholic theology is accredited with developing this type of “fulfillment theology” which has various expressions.

4 See Michael Allen, Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics (Bloomsbury, London, 2012) for an overview of Karl Barth’s monumental 31 Volume work.

5 Gavin D’Costa defines the inclusivist paradigm as stating that it “affirms the salvific presence of God in non-Christian religious, while maintaining that Christ is the definitive and authoritative revelation of God”. Theology and Religious Pluralism (Blackwell, New York, 1986), 80.

6 LG, 16. Note: Full titles of all Magisterial Documents used in this article appear in the Appendix with their abbreviations.
More conservative approaches, represented by Jean Danielou, Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs van Balthazar, maintain a sharper distinction between the natural and supernatural orders as between cosmic and historical covenants. Religions are not considered evil or demonic; to the contrary, they are part of the “pre-history” of salvation and represent the human search for the divine. They are specifically linked to the divine through the cosmic covenant God has established with the natural world. But their “supernatural fulfillment” is through the historical covenant God has established through Jesus. Other religions are “a preparation for the Gospel”. Paul VI articulates this theology when he distinguishes between “natural religions” and the “religion of Jesus”. More specifically, he states that Christianity alone “effectively establishes with God an authentic and living relationship which other religions do not succeed in doing”. This same type of theology is also evident in Dominus Iesus’ insistence that we firmly hold the distinction between the “theological faith” of Christians and “belief” which is found in “other religions” . . . whose followers are in “a gravely deficient situation in comparison with (Christians) who . . . have the fullness of the means of salvation”.

Pushing the parameters of a fulfillment theology are such voices as Karl Rahner, Yves Congar and Edward Schillebeeckx who positively affirm the

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8 LG, 16.

9 EN, 53.

10 DI, 7, 22.
multiple and diverse ways in which the divine mystery is revealed. Although Karl Rahner considers Christianity the “absolute religion”, the transcendental orientation of all people towards God is expressed in the general history of salvation. Grace is available everywhere and specifically in the religions of the world. For Schillebeeckx, too, we can speak of “a special history of salvation” through Israel and Jesus only in the context of “universal salvation history”. Schillebeeckx’ catch-phrase is not extra ecclesiam nulla salus but extra mundum nulla salus (‘no salvation outside of the world’): “The world of creation . . . is the sphere of God’s saving action in and through human mediation”. These theologians are attuned to the notion of the absolute unity in the divine economy of salvation: human history within the context of creation is a manifestation of the divine self-communication. Other religions do not merely prepare the ground for the Gospel; they may actually mediate saving grace to humanity. These theologians work out of what David Tracy calls the “analogical imagination” which is profoundly sacramental: the Church is the universal sacrament of the saving encounter with God in Jesus Christ and the Spirit; yet that saving encounter is not and cannot be limited to Christianity given that divine grace is universal.

In recent Catholic theology of religions, the Holy Spirit has emerged as the key theological principle of the inclusivist paradigm. In his very first


encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, **John Paul II** refers to the “one Spirit of truth” uniting all religions;¹⁴ in *Dominum et Vivificantem* he reflects on the Spirit’s activity in the world beyond the confines of the church;¹⁵ and in *Redemptoris Missio*, he explicitly states that “the Spirit’s presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions”.¹⁶ Two Catholic theologians who emphasize the power of the Spirit infusing other religions are **Gavin D’Costa** and **Jacques Dupuis**.¹⁷ They both stress the Trinitarian basis of Christian faith which, they suggest, has been inadequately developed in Christian theology. D’Costa asserts that Christians should be attentive to the voice of the Spirit in other religions in order to be faithful to their own Christian calling. Dupuis insists that the divine self-communication may be experienced in other traditions in ways that Christians do not, perhaps cannot, receive. This is possible, he argues, because divine wisdom and grace occur not only through Jesus and the tradition he founded but also through the non-incarnate *Logos* and the unbounded action of the Spirit.

It may be asked, then, if these theologians are appropriately identified with the fulfillment theology and the inclusivist paradigm? To this, the answer is a mitigated yes. Although the disclosure of the Spirit cannot be foreclosed (**D’Costa**) and the action of the Spirit is unbounded (**Dupuis**), pneumatology must be developed in relationship with – not in opposition to – christology. D’Costa insists that “Jesus is the normative criterion of God” such that “the

¹⁴ RH, 6.
¹⁵ DV, 53-54.
¹⁶ RM, 28.
riches of the mystery of God . . . disclosed by the Spirit . . . are measured and discerned by their conformity to and in their illumination of Christ”\textsuperscript{18}. Dupuis is equally explicit in maintaining that other religions "anticipate God's fuller disclosure and decisive self-gift in Jesus Christ"\textsuperscript{19}. These are classic statements of a Christocentric fulfillment theology. Nonetheless, they extend the traditional fulfillment model by stressing a genuine two-way relationship between Christianity and other religions. As D’Costa states, “fulfillment, historically, does not work in only one direction”\textsuperscript{20}. For Jacques Dupuis, there is a space for “mutual enrichment and transformation” in interfaith encounter\textsuperscript{21}. If we are to speak then of a fulfillment theology, this is not a one-sided process but a relationship that admits of some degree of “complementarity” (Dupuis) or “mutual fulfillment” (Knitter)\textsuperscript{22}.

Theologies situated within the inclusivist paradigm stress, to varying degrees, both the unity of the divine plan of salvation and the trinitarian reality of the divine mystery. Where priority is given to the former, more theological importance is attached to Christianity as the privileged place of divine grace and truth – without thereby denying the possibility of other forms of mediation which find their completion or fulfillment in the religion of Jesus. Where priority is given to the triune nature of God and the role of the Spirit, there is more theological openness to the diverse ways in which grace and salvation may be


\textsuperscript{19} Dupuis, 325. Emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{20} Cit. Knitter, 88.

\textsuperscript{21} Dupuis, 326.

\textsuperscript{22} Dupuis, 326; Knitter, 88.
mediated to humanity – without thereby denying a central place to the Christian interpretation of this reality.

While either priority exhibits an openness to dialogue with the religious other, it is the second which enters the dialogue with a greater degree of enthusiasm because of explicit awareness that one has something to learn as well as to teach about the mystery of God’s ongoing dialogue with humanity. Some suggest that the fulfillment model presents an image of “dialogue between the elephant and the mouse”.23 Such an image seems to me disingenuous especially if applied to those approaches that most emphasize the presence of the Spirit and divine mediation in other religious traditions. Beyond dialogues of life and action, these approaches most lend themselves to authentic dialogues of theological exchange and spiritual experience. This is especially the case in regard to those theologies where the dynamic aspect of existential faith – requiring constant exploration and discovery – has priority over belief. Nonetheless, the inclusivist theologian will always interpret this reality according to his or her awareness that grace and salvation are both Christological and pneumatological realities. Only an approach that thinks dialogue can or should be carried out by people without any form of belief will expect the Christian dialogue partner to do less. As Raimon Panikkar has always stressed, interreligious dialogue is a meeting of believing persons, not disincarnated minds!24

3. **Mutuality Model: “Many true religions called to dialogue”**

The mutuality model – sometimes called the pluralist paradigm – was spearheaded by Protestant theologians such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith and

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23 Knitter, 104, quoting Henri Maurier.

John Hick. Hick specifically calls for a “Copernican revolution” in Christian approaches to other religions. For Hick, the inclusivist paradigm is incapable of creating the kind of radical equality among religions necessary for authentic dialogue because it continues to absolutize Christ and Christianity. So, moving beyond all talk of fulfillment models, anonymous Christians and implicit faith, we should recognize that all religions seek to make contact with the single, ultimate transcendent reality many traditions call God. Hick calls this “the Real” and understands religions as historical and cultural responses to this ultimate, divine, transcendent reality. Despite apparent radical differences, it is the same spiritual reality which lies at the heart of every religion. The approach is theocentric rather than Christocentric. Although it is open to the charge of relativism, Hick attempts to provide ethical criteria to judge authenticity in diverse religious paths.

One of the strongest critics of Hick’s form of pluralism is Raimon Panikkar who sees in Hick’s proposal yet another case of the European academic wanting to place all reality under the canopy of western rationality. Panikkar’s approach is not only theocentric but also distinctly trinitarian – which is why scholars such as Elizabeth Johnson suggests his writings are “an exceptionally clear example of the inclusivist position”. Panikkar opposes the idea that there is or can be a single, overarching, common denominator uniting all the world’s religions. Reality itself is radically pluralistic, trinitarian or, as he now likes to say, ‘cosmotheandric’. Different religions express their uniqueness in incomparable and incommensurable ways, reflecting diverse aspects of the divine-human-cosmic mystery. The Christian Trinity expresses

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26 E. Johnson, Consider Jesus (Crossroad, New York, 1990), 136.
this “radical relativity” at the heart of religious and especially mystical experience. In fact, only by turning to the Trinity will Christians be able to overcome their tendency to make Jesus into a “tribal God”. These days, Panikkar speaks of the need to develop an “authentically universal Christology (or) a Christophany which allows Christians to see the work of Christ everywhere”. While this approach does not want to minimize the central Christian affirmation of the Lordship of Jesus, it also affirms neglected aspects of the Christ-mystery which can go by many names. In other words, Christians do not have the monopoly on Christ nor on the experience of grace and salvation – even though their experience is sui generis. Panikkar’s trinitarian approach also opens up for Christians new experiences of the Spirit in other religions – such as the Vedanta Hindu experience of non-duality (advaita) through which Christians are enabled to deepen their own “spirituality of the Spirit”.  

A less theoretical and mystical expression of Knitter’s mutuality model is what he calls the “ethical-practical bridge”. The common ground uniting religions and peoples is not to be found in the religions themselves, but in the global problems that confront us – issues such as poverty, justice, ecology, human rights, war and peace. Knitter himself is an advocate of this “ethical or globally responsible dialogue” of religions that seeks to contribute to the salvation and well-being of suffering humanity and the earth. Liberation theologians provide warrants with their emphasis on Jesus Christ liberator and prophet of the reign of God. Asian theologians such as Indian

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27 Panikkar, The Invisible Harmony, 122. Panikkar’s notion of “Christophany” is most fully developed in his Christophany: The Fullness of Man (Orbis, Maryknoll NY, 2004).  


29 Knitter, 246.
Jesuit Michael Amaladoss and Sri Lankan Jesuit Alois Pieris develop this model in the context of religious and cultural diversity and the challenge of massive poverty. The approach also finds significant support among practical theologians who give priority to sociological analysis as a basis for theological reflection and the call to Gospel action. Moving beyond Schillebeeckx’s “no salvation outside the world”, Pieris provides the more poignant theological image of “no salvation outside God’s covenant with the poor”. Although the approach may leave significant theological questions unanswered – such as the adequacy of its theology of Christ and salvation – it highlights the importance of dialogue in action as an integral and practical expression of Christian discipleship.

Each of these pluralist models seeks to approach interfaith dialogue from the perspective of the radical equality of the participants. John Hick is quite explicit on this point. For him, without commitment to the radical equality of religions, we cannot speak of authentic dialogue. Panikkar’s mystical approach also arises from the conviction that each religious tradition has its own unique gifts to share with others in dialogue. However, Panikkar rejects Hick’s notion of a single theology of religions because it inevitably imposes one particular view of reality on all traditions. Panikkar focuses on the multiplicity of religious experiences which, in the context of intra- and inter-religious dialogue, express diverse aspects of the cosmotheandric mystery. Of course, religious pluralists always have the sneaking suspicion that Panikkar himself

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imposes a Christian trinitarian vision on other religions – a charge which he denies in view of his conviction that all religions and cultures exhibit a triadic structure. The ethical-practical basis for interfaith dialogue respects a foundational equality of religions not through assuming there is a basic common denominator underlying all traditions, nor in the possibility of shared mystical experience across diverse traditions, but through mutual commitment to our shared human and planetary future. Nonetheless, where practical dialogue is successful, it inevitably raises issues of the claims of the respective religious traditions that cannot be settled on purely ethical-practical grounds.

4. **Acceptance Model: “Many religions: so be it!”**

The acceptance model is presented as the postmodern alternative to the meeting of religions because it purports to respect the religious ‘other’ more profoundly than other pluralist positions. It has links to the former paradigm in the manner it emphasizes that religious traditions are unique, incomparable, incommensurable (religious-mystical bridge) and because it focuses on external and practical criteria for cooperation among the traditions (ethical-practical bridge). However, it understands itself as going beyond these models in emphasizing that differences are to be celebrated rather than dissolved and that each religion has the right to claim it is the ultimate, best, absolute path to salvation. If this latter claim sounds like the exclusivist position, it differs in regard to notions of truth and revelation. Any one religion’s claim to absolute truth has to fully respect and dialogue with similar claims within other traditions. Such respect and dialogue do not assume the ultimate convergence of religions either in this world or the next. **Mark Heim’s** work, “Salvations”, underlines this reality: religions do not simply represent diverse paths to the Ultimate; their goals – *nirvana* and communion with God, for example – are also...
radically different and unique. Religions are not only on different journeys; they are heading to different destinations.

While questions of final religious truth may be irresolvable within this paradigm, the commitment to dialogue is given the highest priority. Difficulties associated with such dialogue cannot be underestimated in view of the fact we inhabit unique linguistic, cultural and religious landscapes. Dialogue requires deep knowledge of these other landscapes through years of study, conversation and openness to question one’s own theological and religious perspectives. Perhaps, through the painstaking task of dialogue, elements of a common ground may be created among the participants – even if the notion of common ground among religions themselves remains more questionable. Acceptance theologians stress that any theological position can only be understood and evaluated within the particularity of its own religious culture. From the viewpoint of Christian orthodoxy, this model may act as a corrective for naïve conceptions of religious dialogue, but its relativization of religious truth remains theologically problematic.

**The Church’s Call to Dialogue**

While the Catholic Church’s call to dialogue since Vatican II can be situated within the fulfillment model, we have already seen there is significant theological diversity within that paradigm. Two documents issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith – *Some Aspects of Christian Meditation* and *Dominus Iesus* – represent the more cautious and conservative end of the spectrum. They speak of the dangers of syncretism

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33 Francis Clooney, for example, advocates “the patient deferral of truth” in *Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (State University of New York Press, Albany NY, 1993), 187-193.

34 OF.
and relativism. Such warnings have their place even if critics suggest the kind of rhetoric they employ is unfortunate, unnecessary and an obstacle to genuine dialogue.  

What has been less predictable and more remarkable is the Church’s generally positive endorsement of dialogue as an imperative of Christian mission. This endorsement is evident in the time of Vatican II and is given more pastoral and theological prominence in the ensuing decades.

In his encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, **Paul VI** proclaims that dialogue – within the Church, with other Christians, other religions and the entire world – is at the heart of the Church's program of renewal. *Nostra Aetate* specifically calls on Christians to "enter with prudence and charity into dialogues (colloquia) and collaboration with members of other religions".  

Reasons given for this call to dialogue are pastoral and ethical: to overcome divisions, foster friendly relations, achieve mutual understanding and to work creatively for peace, liberty, social justice and moral values.  

*Ad Gentes* states that Christian missionaries should dialogue with those among whom they live so that they might "learn of the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations".  

Genuine two-way dialogue, built on respect for God’s presence within the religious other, is now at the heart of the Church’s evangelizing mission. We have moved beyond anthropological to theological grounds for dialogue.

In the time of **John Paul II’s** pontificate, the link between evangelization and interreligious dialogue becomes more specific. In *Redemptoris Missio*, the pontiff explicitly states that "interreligious dialogue is

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35 See, for example, Teasdale, 111-113.

36 NA, 2.

37 NA, 2-3.

38 AG, 11.
a part of the Church’s evangelizing mission”.\textsuperscript{39} In an earlier document entitled \textit{Dialogue and Mission}, the Secretariat for Non-Christians placed interreligious dialogue among the basic elements of the Church’s mission together with presence and witness, liturgy and prayer, social action and the proclamation of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{40} That document also articulates theological foundations for dialogue in the Trinity – flowing from the Father, expressed in the Word made flesh, and made present through the Holy Spirit. It adds that the true goal of religious dialogue is biblical conversion – “turning to God”.\textsuperscript{41} \textbf{John Paul II} also specifies that interfaith dialogue is a participation in God’s ongoing dialogue with humanity:

> Interreligious dialogue at its deepest level is always a \textit{dialogue of salvation}, because it seeks to discover, clarify and understand better the signs of the age-long dialogue which God maintains with mankind.\textsuperscript{42}

In \textit{Dialogue and Proclamation}, this age-long dialogue is articulated in relation to God’s multiple covenants established with mankind, Noah, Abraham, Moses and the new covenant in Jesus – a perspective which gives priority to Christian dialogue with other Abrahamic traditions.\textsuperscript{43} These understandings of dialogue indicate that, while ethical and practical considerations are important, the primary basis for dialogue is theological, that is, rooted in the dialogical nature

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\textsuperscript{39} RM, 3.

\textsuperscript{40} DM, 2.

\textsuperscript{41} DM, 36-44. See also DP, 64-65.

\textsuperscript{42} Speech to the Pontifical Commission for Interreligious Dialogue, November 13\textsuperscript{th} 1992, cit. Teasdale, 67f.

of God’s own Self. Mission is participation in God’s own divine, dialogical nature and must therefore be lived out in dialogue.44

**Tensions Between Dialogue and Proclamation**

Although commentators speak of tensions between dialogue and mission,45 the more precise tension is between dialogue and proclamation. This issue is addressed in *Redemptoris Missio* and elaborated in *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991). The latter document expresses the relationship as follows:

Interreligious dialogue and proclamation, though not on the same level, are both authentic elements of the Church’s evangelizing mission. Both are legitimate and necessary. They are intimately related, but not interchangeable: true interreligious dialogue on the part of the Christian supposes the desire to make Jesus Christ better known, recognized and loved; proclaiming Jesus Christ is to be carried out in the Gospel spirit of dialogue.46

Elsewhere, the document states that dialogue is “oriented to proclamation”.47 **John Paul II** goes further in stating that proclamation has “permanent priority” over dialogue.48 Consequently, while advocating dialogue for sound theological reasons, the church is careful to safeguard the primary missionary task of proclaiming Jesus Christ and the message of the Gospel. Is dialogue, then, just

45 Teasdale, 99-113.
46 DP, 77.
47 DP, 82.
48 RM, 55.
a matter of softening up the religious other before we get to our real missionary agenda?

Before answering that question, a short reflection on Jesus’ own life and ministry may aid our reflection. Jesus’ own mission can be envisaged as dialogical. He is presented in the Gospels as a person who enters into dialogue with his disciples, recognizes faith in the Roman centurion – he says he has found no such faith in Israel (Mt. 8: 5-13) – converses with foreigners such as the Samaritan and Syro-Phoenician women (both stories are models for dialogue) and responds to the pleas of those who address him (the miracle healing tradition). In the Emmaus story, he is likewise a person of dialogue who first and foremost engages people by listening to their stories and concerns before opening their eyes to his new risen reality. There is no question here of Jesus favouring mission as dialogue over mission as proclamation. Rather, it is a case of Jesus engaging in mission as dialogue and, in so doing, proclaiming divine truth through the dialogic witness of his life. His Abba-experience and prophetic mission are not put to the side, but are the very source of his ability to engage in profound dialogue with people – and to open up new horizons where people will come to "worship in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4:23).

Consequently, we can say that the primary missionary task of the Christian believer is neither dialogue nor proclamation, but witnessing to one’s faith in the God of Jesus and the power of the Spirit. There is no proclamation without authentic witness – and there is no authentic witness without multiple levels of engagement including: dialogue of the head; dialogue of the heart, dialogue of life, dialogue of love, dialogue of the hands, and even the dialogue of play. Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder speak of the

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49 This is developed by Bevans & Schroeder, "We Were Gentle Among You".
50 These various types of dialogue – head, heart, life, love, hands, play – are developed by Teasdale, 28-31.
primary movement in mission theology from “mission as conquest” to “mission as dialogue”. Without undermining the primary missionary task of proclaiming Christ and the Gospel, the manner of that proclamation must respect religious liberty and freedom of conscience. Moreover, according to Dialogue and Proclamation, dialogue has its own integrity and dynamic as a means of deepening religious commitment, purifying faith, overturning prejudices, revising preconceived ideas, purifying cultures of dehumanizing elements, and upholding traditional values of indigenous peoples.

While, for the Christian, there will always be a tension between the mandate to proclaim the Gospel and the call to dialogue, that tension is significantly reduced in view of the shift in theology that recognizes the at least potential presence of the Spirit in those other traditions. However, it is only in the experience of the dialogue itself that one is able to authenticate this reality. Dialogue is primarily an experience of subjectivity.

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51 Bevans & Schroeder, “We were Gentle Among You”.
52 John Paul II, Sri Lanka, 21st January 1995: “The Church respects the freedom of individuals to seek the truth according to the dictates of conscience. In this light, it firmly rejects proselytism and the use of unethical means to gain conversions”. Cit. Teasdale, 102.
53 DP, 40-46.
54 John Paul II expresses this as follows in his 1995 encyclical Ut Unum Sint: “Dialogue is an indispensable step along the path towards human self-realization, the self-realization both of each individual and of every human community. Although the concept of ‘dialogue’ might appear to give priority to the cognitive dimension (dia-logos), all dialogue implies a global, existential dimension. It involves the human subject in his or her entirety; dialogue between communities involves in a particular way the subjectivity of each” (n. 28).
for interpretation, they do not and cannot speak for the presence of the Word or the Spirit outside of the religious experience and encounter. At this level, ideological tensions and theological divisions subside. Inevitably, dialogue leads to new insights into the way we understand Christian mission. This is nowhere better expressed than in various documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences inspired by Asian theologians such as Alois Pieris and Michael Amaladoss.

**Church as Sacrament and Community of Dialogue**

Asian Christianity finds itself a significant minority in the midst of a teeming mass of people with dehumanizing poverty yet immensely rich in ancient and diverse cultures and religions giving people dignity and freedom. Corresponding to these three contexts of massive poverty, cultural diversity and religious pluralism, there needs to be a “threefold dialogue” with Asia’s poor, their cultures and their religions. These three dialogues – liberation, inculturation, and interreligious dialogue – are intertwined and need to be practiced together since it is often the poor and marginalized who are most religious and most attached to their cultures.

Given the context of Asian Christianity, placing too much emphasis on proclaiming “Jesus Christ the one and only Saviour” becomes counterproductive because it cuts off “dialogue, common living (and) solidarity with other religions”. This is not a matter of questioning the uniqueness and universality of Jesus as Saviour, but the question of how to proclaim this reality

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55 See Peter C. Phan, “Reception of Subversion of Vatican II by the Asian Churches: A New Way of being Church in Asia”, *Australian eJournal of Theology* 6 (February 2006).

of Jesus in the midst of crushing poverty, competing religious systems and cultural diversity.

The relative failure of Christianity to implant itself on Asian soil is seen as a failure of inculturation. Hence, the burning question is: how can Asian Christians present Jesus Christ and the church with an authentic Asian face? Only a dialogical model — “promoting mutual understanding, harmony and collaboration” — can achieve this goal. Moreover, an approach emphasizing creative harmony rather than distinctions is seen to be in keeping with Asian traditions and cultures.

For the church in the Asian context, interfaith dialogue takes on a much more urgent role. There is call for explicit recognition of the salvific value of the great ancient religions of Asia, not as independent from or parallel to Christ, but in relation to him. Rather than emphasize Jesus as the one and only Saviour, the Asian way is to speak of him as teacher of wisdom, healer, liberator and compassionate friend of the poor.\(^57\) The distinctiveness of Jesus, which can be shared in dialogue, is his message and embodiment of self-emptying love and radical service of others. The dialogue may also reveal distinctive qualities in the founders and leaders of other traditions. There is a space for mutual growth in knowledge and wisdom.

In regard to dialogue with the poor in the context of massive poverty and systemic oppression of millions of people, the Asian church recognizes it cannot fulfil its evangelizing mission unless if becomes a church of and with the poor. Learning to walk with the poor leads to ecclesial conversion and

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\(^57\) Darmaatmadja, cit. Knitter, 98. The link with South American liberation theologies is clearly evident.
authentic discipleship. Dialogue with the poor includes marginalized people, women, people of colour and lower castes. This dialogue also naturally leads to the ministry of reconciliation among estranged people, castes and cultures. Systemic oppression of entire groups of people is a major challenge within Asia.

A favourite theological metaphor to combine the triple dialogue with Asia’s poor, its religions and cultures, is the church as “sacrament and community of dialogue”. The church’s mission of proclamation, witness, conversion and baptism, building up local churches, forming basic ecclesial communities, catechesis, worship, inculturation, interfaith dialogue, promoting social justice and peace occurs under the overarching modality of dialogue. This does not give dialogue priority over proclamation, but indicates that the entire mission of the church, including its mission of proclamation, must be done in the Gospel spirit of dialogue – which, in the Asian context, focuses on liberation, inculturation and interreligious dialogue. The dialogical model is the new Asian way of being church.

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58 Malaysian theologian Edmund Chia speaks of the Church as the “sacrament of dialogue” in his *Towards a Theology of Dialogue* (Privately published book, Bangkok, Thailand, 2003), 228-229; Jonathan Tan speaks of the Church as the “community of dialogue” in his ‘Missio ad gentes’ in Asia: A Comparative Study of the Missiology of John Paul II and the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (PhD Diss., Catholic University of America, 2002), 133.
Conclusion

This paper has wandered far and wide first introducing various theologies of religions which inform current academic discussion. The church’s own approach to religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue has also undergone significant shifts in recent decades. The primary shift has been from an exclusivist to an inclusivist paradigm – although, as we have seen, there are multiple expressions of inclusivism and so-called fulfillment theologies. There is certainly ambiguity, if not at times contradiction, in the church’s teaching on dialogue emanating from the theological models which inform them. None of these embrace the mutuality or acceptance models represented by the Knitter’s pluralist or relativist paradigms. It is difficult to see that the church would or could move to fully endorse either of these positions although, as indicated, some ideas – such as those represented in the religious-mystical (Panikkar) and ethical-practical (Pieris and Amaladoss) mutuality models of Knitter – may well be developed in an inclusivist context. This is evident, for example, in some Asian theological voices, including teachings of the
Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference. Here, theological pluralism pushes the boundaries of inclusivist theologies.

In some ways, these discrepancies demonstrate the artificiality of Knitter’s models. They do not quite fit. Moreover, some theological positions within the inclusivist paradigm have found themselves in recent times on the wrong side of Roman inquisitions – notably Jacques Dupuis’ Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism. This may represent the fact that perhaps Dupuis comes closest to articulating a coherent theology of religions that is both truly inclusivist and yet genuinely pluralist.⁵⁹ If he has pushed the boundaries with regard to some kind of “mutual fulfillment” of religions, his Trinitarian/Spirit Christology provides a fresh way forward for an ecclesial and academic theology of religions.

If the tension between mission and dialogue is not entirely solved in the Church’s various articulations, the contribution of the Asian theology provides richness and complexity to this debate: not dialogue as a separate and separable aspect of Christian mission; but triple dialogue that must infuse the very manner in which Asian Christians witness to the Gospel, proclaim their faith and perform their mission. Not mission and dialogue; but mission as dialogue. Although our context is different to that of Asia, the promotion of local churches as “sacraments and communities of dialogue”, committed to liberation, inculturation and interfaith dialogue according to principles of subsidiarity, participation, communion and collegiality is a significant and still relevant challenge. Does this also question the way we do theology? I believe so – but the answer to that will have to await another day.

⁵⁹ This argument is developed by Gerard Hall, "Jacques Dupuis' Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism" in Pacifica 15 (February 2002): 37-50.
Magisterial Documents


**Source:** This is a previously unpublished and modified version of a presentation given by Gerard Hall at the Conference of the Australian Catholic Theological Association, Adelaide, 5-8 July 2006. [05/09/2018]