Religious Pluralism and the Paradigm

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Introduction

This essay explores some ideas and problems related to a current interest among theologians, scholars in religion, and religious educators, namely, religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue.[1] The willingness to engage in this dialogue, which is now characterized by openness, cooperation, and charity, is a stark contrast to dialogues – if they could be named as such – of previous years, which tended to reduce to acrimonious debate, open hostility, sans grace. This is, perhaps, due to a realization that religion is a human phenomenon and as such it struggles with basic human problems, such as meaning and purpose of life, nature of good and evil, human suffering, and injustice. There is, then, no need for diverse religions to confront each other possessed of a siege mentality, ready to battle. These concerns are common to us all, needing concerted efforts to deal with and solve them.

But given the universality of these concerns, there is a diversity and plurality of religious systems representing various ways of faith that provide different answers. This, in itself, is not a problem. Religious diversity is not a new phenomenon. There have always been different religious belief systems, for example, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism, practiced in different parts of the world by various people. Restricted to their original settings and localized in their influence, they were not in touch with each other and so were unfamiliar with each other. The question of which one system is right or wrong, or which one is or which ones are acceptable, on whatever grounds, did not arise. Even when they became known, tolerated, or, perhaps, accepted, the believed assumption, given the dominance of European and Western thinking, is or was that Judeo-Christianity is the superior, if not the only

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[1] "Dialogue" and "interreligious dialogue" are used interchangeably in the essay even as the latter identifies religion as its specific matter of interest.

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true religion. The vigorous missionary efforts of the Christian Church[2] to spread the Gospel and establish educational institutions helped secure the acceptance of this belief.

Now, however, with mass communication and international travels, acquaintance with and knowledge of these various religious faiths have become readily accessible, attracting interest in or acceptance of them. And it is common to find communities where neighbors who are adherents and practitioners of diverse religious beliefs live side by side. This situation affords people with first-hand experience of knowing and seeing how diverse religious beliefs are lived out in peoples' lives, providing insights into the influence and meaningfulness of their faith. Religious diversity is a fact of modern life. For some it could be a threat to cherished beliefs, tempting them to retreat to the security of the absolute certainties of their religion. For others, it could be a challenge either to test their faith or to create new meaningful relationships within the plurality of beliefs, with no one faith pretending to be superior over the others. Recent and current research studies, carried out by some anthropologists, scholars of religion, and theologians, have come to judge the view of the superiority of a religion over others as contestable, even unacceptable, and smacking of arrogance and pride.

If this is so, how then should different religions view each other? If all religions are false, the question of which one to accept does not arise. They could all be relegated to twaddle. But, suppose all religions are true. This creates a problem, for different religions make contradictory claims. For one religion, there is a substance in human beings, called soul, which endures beyond physical death. For another religion, such does not exist. Nothing endures. To say that Jesus Christ is the Son of God evidenced by what Scriptures say may not be satisfying to other religions. Christianity interprets itself and so do Buddhism and all other religions, and so they validate themselves in their own way. If all religions are true, this renders the idea of conversion superfluous. There would be no need for all these religions. One would suffice. If most religions are only partly true and only one is true, the onus is on the latter to show evidentially and argue that this is so. But, the absence of a set of objective criteria acceptable to all that could be employed to judge acceptability or rejectability of religious beliefs creates an enormous difficulty. This is not, however, to insist that in the absence of such criteria we cannot move on in pursuit of the mysteries of our faith. We simply have to soldier on hoping that some clarity will emerge helping us to make rational (hopefully, even reasonable) sense of our lives.

Considering that each religion is a distinct system of thought and, like any language, adequate and capable in itself to meet any need that is deemed important and requiring conceptualization and articulation, in what ways could one religion be said to affect or not affect another? Admitting that a religion, like any language, could be influenced by different religions, and to some extent assimilate some of

[2]The terms "Christian" and "Christianity" refer to both Roman Catholic and Protestant branches. Distinction is made when it is necessary to do so.

their elements, there are still enough constraints in a religion – for example, its distinct sacred tests, historical and religious figures and saints, miraculous events, etc., or in any language, its lexical items, syntax, phonology, etc. – to protect and maintain its identity. "Neither Hinduism and Buddhism, nor Christianity and Judaism are explicable without reference to each others," says Alan Race (1982, p. 83), on influencing one another, but there is no confusing one for the other.

If we seek to find ways in which faiths can coexist, says Alan Wolfe (2006), in his review of Martin Marty's book, *When Faiths Collide*,

> we run the risk of denying precisely what is "religious" about them, for we ask them to rank their faith in God lower in their scheme of things than their willingness to get along with others. But if we respond by concluding that every religion has no obligation other than to its own truths, we ignore the fact that people of different faiths live near each other – and could, if they wish, destroy each other (Wolfe, 2006, p. 346).

How then should religious plurality be viewed and managed by all religions such that it could be satisfactory, more or less, and instructive to everyone?

This essay attempts to contribute some clarifications to these problematic matters. There is no pretense to an exhaustive treatment of them nor to some complete and settled agreements which have evaded centuries of discussion and deliberations among theologians and philosophers. Its task is twofold. First, it presents what is called "The Paradigm," namely, exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism,[3] as a response to religious diversity and plurality. How this response views the current situation will be discussed, and whether or not it has furthered or improved our understanding of it. Second, it points out the usefulness of The Paradigm and at the same time its limitations, thereby suggesting the necessity of a new way of dealing with religious pluralism that gives due regard to all religions, namely, interreligious dialogue.

Responses to Religious Pluralism and Diversity

The onus and obligation in dealing with questions of religious pluralism seems to fall primarily, if not solely, on the Christian religion. Karl Rahner, S.J., suggests why this is so when he said that religious pluralism

> is a greater threat and a reason for greater unrest for Christianity than for any other religion. For no other religion – not even Islam – maintains so absolutely that it is *the* religion, the one and only valid revelation of the one living God, as does the Christian religion. The fact of pluralism of religions, which endures and still from time to time becomes virulent. . .even after a history of 2000 years, must therefore be the greatest scandal and the greatest vexation for Christianity (as cited in Fredericks, 2004, p. 1).

The response of Christianity to religious pluralism and to the soteriological question "Who will be saved?" has been drawn from what has come to be labeled as

[3]For an instructive discussion on these positions see Race (1982).

"The Paradigm," namely, exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. It serves as a background to show the need for engaging in interreligious dialogue.

Exclusivism

"To believe that one and only one basic (religious) perspective offers an accurate description of reality" (Basinger, 2002, p. 4), is exclusivism. Broadened, it could read, "one religion is mostly right and all the other religions go seriously wrong or that only one world religion is correct and all others are mistaken" (p. 4). Others add the terms "exclusively true" and "absolute and unique," thus exclusivism is "the view that one's religion is exclusively or uniquely true and other religions are false" (Hobson & Edwards, 1999, p. 48). There is something that separates religions from each other which makes them distinct and unique, for example, its particular history, sacred texts, rites, practices, and beliefs. So "Christ is the presence of God on earth for Christians; the Qur'an is the presence of God on earth for Muslims. The Dharma is apparently God's earthly presence for the Buddhists" (Fredericks, 2004, pp. 10, 12). These are not problematic in themselves. Uniqueness, however, raises some questions "when similar or sometimes conflicting claims to uniqueness are made by other religions" (D'Costa, 1990b, pp. viii–xxii). Or, when consequences from such claims are perceived to create or be responsible for questionable attitudes toward other religions, for example, the definiteness and normativeness of the full revelation of God in Christ, as illustrated in the following quotation:

> (The) Christian faith claims for itself that it is the only form of faith for (humankind); by its own claim to truth it casts the shadow of falsehood, or at least of imperfect truth, on every other system. . .. But we must not suppose that this claim to universal validity is something that can be quietly removed from the Gospel without changing it into something entirely different from what it is. . .. (Christ's) life, his methods and his message do not make sense, unless they are interpreted in the light of his own conviction that he was in fact *the final and decisive word of God to (humankind)* (Neill, 1979, p. 16).[4]

This uniqueness exclusive to a religion is then associated with what is true. If my religion is true, it follows that all others are false or incorrect. This is a logical consequence of exclusivism. It cannot be avoided and not to recognize it has been called the "fallacy of tolerance" (Gardner, 1988, p. 93). Since all religions claim to represent the whole truth or to consist only of significant salvific truths exclusively possessed by them, they can be judged exclusivistic in its general sense, that is, they believe their perspective on a given religious issue is alone true or is at least closer to the truth than any other perspective. Indeed, if I believe in my religious beliefs, it follows that I believe them to be true. It is odd to believe in something if one does not also believe that it is true or know it to be true. To say "I believe x to be false" is to say that it is true that x is false. I believe not in the falsity of x, but in the truth of its falsity. I believe that which is true. Of course, I could be shown to be mistaken

[4]Emphasis added.

in my beliefs and if this is so, then I cease in believing in or about it. Each religious belief system insists on its being true, suggesting an exclusivistic streak in all of them. However, in Diana L. Eck's judgment,

> the exclusivist position has been most extensively developed by the monotheistic Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions. . ..and they have been uncompromising in their emphases on the Oneness of God, the Oneness of truth, and the exclusivity of the way to truth and the community of truth (Eck, 1993, p. 173).[5]

Exclusivism, therefore, raises an uncomfortable question, "Who will be saved?" For one thing, exclusivism suggests exclusion, a refusal to admit someone who is not in, keeping someone out, shutting out others by means of a barrier, for example, qualifications, authority, beliefs, etc. An exclusivist could be one who excludes herself from those who are excluded from her group. A sense of separatedness and isolation is evident. An isolated group adheres to one construction of reality to which its members subscribe, and knows and believes it to be true. In knowing and believing in this one and only construction of reality, to the exclusion of other constructions, its members would have difficulty in dealing with or taking seriously other constructions of reality. Those who do not know and believe the truths that they know, could be judged ignorant or blighted – in darkness. When these isolated groups come in contact with each other, fear or hostility, due to ignorance or suspicion of each other, could be a possible consequence.[6] "Exclusivism," says Eck, "could be the ideological foundation for isolationism" (1993, p. 174).

In itself, however, exclusivism does not seem to raise devastating concerns, especially when it could suggest a sense of accommodation, saying: "Leave religious groups alone, they are doing no harm to others. Allow them the freedom to do what they want to do." Religious believers, as exclusivists, could also be commended for developing deep convictions and loyal commitment to their beliefs, unlike the Laodiceans. What is worrisome and causes some concern is not about the claim of transformative power of the particular vision one has, since this is true of all religions, but over the claim of the "finality and absolute priority of one's beliefs over competing views" (Eck, 1993, p. 178) which could mean or be taken to mean that exclusivism "is coupled with a highly negative attitude toward other traditions" (p. 178). Exclusivism is not merely a matter of "how we hold our own convictions, but also with how we regard the convictions of our neighbour" (p. 178).

Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus

Exclusivism associated with Christianity goes by the expression "no salvation outside the Church (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*)." This suggests that most, if not all,

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[5]I have drawn freely some ideas from Eck's work on The Paradigm and employed them in this essay. I acknowledge my indebtedness to her.

[6]For a discussion on different kinds of ideology, example, ideology of isolation, ideology of hostility, etc., see Lochhead (1988, pp. 5–30).

non-believers (non-Christians) are destined to eternal perdition. But, is this the correct and only interpretation of this axiom and, therefore, in agreement with a suggestion that exclusivism "carries with it the obvious danger of intolerance, hybris and contempt for others?" (Panikkar, 1978, p. xv).

In his summary of the main points of this axiom, Gavin D'Costa discusses its interpretation and employment throughout its development, namely: (1) the axiom affirms that all grace, and thereby salvation, is related to Christ and thereby to His church; (2) the axiom bears no explicit relationship to the status of non-Christians or their religions; it is not addressed to them; (3) the axiom often acknowledged without contradictions that some non-Christians before Christ were saved; and (4) acknowledgement of salvific grace operative outside the explicit boundaries of Christianity, the phenomenon of religious pluralism need not be negatively evaluated by (Christian) theologians. On point (2), he showed that the axiom was applied to "heretical or schismatic societies of Christians," for example, the Manichaeans, Donatists, and Pelagians, or to "cases of those perceived to be responsible for schism, revolt or betrayal" but not to the "great religions of mankind." In short, the axiom applied to groups that tended to encourage disunity within the church, but not to those outside of the church. Indeed, there was much discussion on topics such as the position of the just who lived before Christ, grace outside of the Church, etc. D'Costa mentions Kelly, who says that for Augustine ". . . even those who are heretics or schismatics, or lead disordered lives, or even are unconverted pagans, may be predestined to the fullness of grace . . ."[7] The primary value that undergirds exclusivism is faithfulness and loyalty to one's religious traditions. The problem of the other is left largely as his or her problem. D'Costa showed that John Hick and others misunderstood the axiom and hence were led to conclude wrongly that it necessarily implied that those outside the boundaries of the visible Church are unredeemed. The axiom read rightly, says D'Costa, could be ". . . an important starting-point for Christian reflection on the existence of religious pluralism and the question of salvation outside the church" (D'Costa, 1990a, pp. 130–147).

Given D'Costa's interpretation, an important point that could be drawn from it is that exclusivism's main interest is in identifying certain doctrines of a religious group, for example, Christianity, that single out its distinctiveness. Admitting that such doctrines, summarized as "no salvation outside of the church," could be misused or abused, still it is shown that its interest is not in other religions, but in distinguishing one religion from another by its distinctiveness or exclusiveness. In short, its main concern is to protect the integrity and unity of the doctrines.

Exclusivism, associated with Christianity, therefore, cannot be judged to be primarily (even solely) interested in figuring out whom to exclude, whom to include, and whom to send to eternal damnation. On the contrary, given its insistence that Christianity consists of the one and only true set of beliefs which have to do with

[7]In the dying moments of his life, one of the criminals who hung on the cross alongside Christ cried out to Him: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom." And Jesus Christ replied: ". . .today you will be with me in paradise." Luke 23: 42–43.

one's salvation from sin and eternal destiny with God, then it must be proclaimed and declared to all. Exclusivism is universal in its aim to spread the Word to all corners of the world, to extend it to all humanity and invite all to come to the Kingdom of God. It does not simply want to exclude but truly desires, above all, to include everyone in God's kingdom even as God Himself desires this to be so. In his letter to Timothy, Paul exhorts him to pray for kings and all who are in authority saying: "This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all (human beings) to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth" (I Tim 2: 1–4).[8]

Admittedly, the Christian church and her various missions and other activities have not always and in all ways been admirable in their consequences. There is no need to rehearse them here. But, consider exclusivism again. If exclusivism is characteristic of the Christian Church, and if all her activities are motivated primarily and solely by God's unconditional love (agape) for humankind, how could exclusivism be judged so negatively as eager and ready to condemn those outside the boundaries of the visible church to eternal separation from God? If God's love, an expression of His grace, is a gift bestowed upon all believers, and which love they do not merit or cannot earn, how could such a love be used as an expression of superiority, looking down upon other religions with contempt? Nowhere does Christianity encourage a negative or judgmental (i.e., condemnatory) disposition toward other religions. It admonishes believers to leave judgments of individuals' relationship with God to God alone. What is encouraged is respect for others for they are also centers of consciousness and possess reasons, convictions, and feelings, and are human beings, bearers of *Imago Dei*. That there could be religious disagreements does not mean that the teachings and beliefs of others are not serious and could be taken lightly. Of human beings as persons, a seriousness of reflection, a competency on their part in forming their own beliefs must be assumed. To show compassion and love for everyone and an eagerness for reconciliation are frequent admonitions of Christ. The "danger of intolerance, hybris, and contempt for others," which Panikkar (1978, p. xv) asserts, is not a logical derivation from the axiom. Indeed, he says that even "when asserting your religion as 'absolute religion,' this does not imply an outright condemnation of the beliefs of all other human beings who have not received the 'grace' of your calling" (p. xv). The danger of intolerance is not, therefore, in the doctrines of Christianity, but could be possible indicators of believers' understanding of their beliefs. But, the validity and respectability of a religious system of beliefs does not depend upon the kind of lives that believers lead or upon their practices or their thinking about it.

A person can remain an exclusivist and not necessarily be close-minded, dogmatic, or contented. There is nothing in the term that suggests that these terms are reducible one to the other. A pluralist could also be close-minded and dogmatic

[8]Per the quotation, it appears that Paul is endorsing a kind of universalism. However, he goes on to specify saying: "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all men . . ." I. Timothy 2:1–4. So, knowledge of the truth is Jesus Christ.

about his being so. One can remain a contented religious exclusivist without violating rationality (Gellman, 2000; Plantinga, 2000). However, if we agree with the proposition that the religious domain, like other serious human endeavors, partakes of a common goal, the goal of knowing and reaching the truth, and if diversity of religious beliefs, which are often incompatible if not contradictory with each other, raises the question of which one to accept as a system of true beliefs and which ones to reject, then it appears that to enter into a critical assessment of one's religious beliefs, in order to be assured that in the face of epistemic conflict, there are good reasons for their continued acceptance, could be a prima facie obligation. Additionally, this concern is necessitated by the fact that colleagues and friends who are equally rational, sincere, and honest as I am in their manner of acquiring religious beliefs and faced with the same matters of fact, do come to hold diverse beliefs. Even if it is commonly believed (I think wrongly) that the realm of religious beliefs is an individual, private matter, it appears that there is a need to be responsible to members of our community for our beliefs. In this way, religious beliefs are like moral responsibilities grounded in our social obligations to others, especially because religious beliefs tend to issue in actions.

The desirability of openness of mind, that is, to listen and to hear what others have to say, even as one at the same time remains loyal and faithful to one's religious commitments, is in accord with the acknowledgement that to claim that it is possible to fully and completely know and understand correctly on earth all there is to know and understand about God is sheer arrogance. Who can predict, in the wideness of God's mercy, His mysterious workings in the lives of people of various faiths? For exclusivism, per Christianity, the borders of one's religion are wide open, attracting others to come in.

Inclusivism

Consider exclusivism again. Defined by Griffiths (2001) as the view that one's religion is exclusively or uniquely true and other religions are false also "commits anyone who holds it to the claim that no alien religious teaching is identical with any teaching of the home community. For if there were any such instance of identity, it would immediately follow that if the relevant teaching of the home community is true, that of the alien religion must also be true" (Griffiths, 2001, p. 54). He goes on to point out such identities: "unrestricted violence is unacceptable;" "sensual indulgence is not the highest human good" (p. 56); selflessness and love for others; etc. There are overlaps between and among different religious beliefs. In other words, there could be some elements of truth that are or could be shared by some religions. This leads to an inclusivist view that suggests the possibility of truths in other religions while endorsing one religious account.

However, the truths that are possessed by these religions, per Christianity, are incomplete, hence, needing fulfillment. The case of Cornelius, the Roman centurion from Caesarea (Acts 10:1–46), illustrates this point. Described variously as "a just man," "a devout man and one who fears God," has "a good reputation among all the

nation of the Jews," "who gave alms generously to the people and prayed to God always," Cornelius was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon Peter who was vacationing in Joppa. When Peter came, Cornelius told him of his vision of a man who said "Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms are remembered in the sight of God. Send therefore to Joppa and call Simon here . . . he will speak to you." Peter responded: "In truth, I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him." Peter then goes on to specify who this God is that Cornelius worships, citing Jesus of Nazareth, the good works that He did, His crucifixion, His death, and resurrection and concludes: ". . . He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead, to Him all prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins." The calling of the Holy Spirit upon those who heard ensued and their baptism took place. Cornelius' religious practices were all acceptable to God, but they needed to be completed. The God he worships must be specified in the name of Jesus Christ, "preaching peace through Jesus Christ." Cornelius' acts of righteousness finds fulfillment in the remission of his sins through Jesus Christ. In short, the elements of truth in his religious practices served as preparations for Cornelius' acceptance of God's final, decisive, full, and complete revelation of Himself through Jesus Christ. Inclusivism attests to the universal grace of God and at the same time retains the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

All religions tend to be inclusivistic in that the proclamation of their faith is intended for all. Says Eck: "Many a Hindu thinks of a Vendanta as the culmination and crown, not only of Christianity, but of all religious paths" (Eck, 1993, p. 180). A Muslim says, "To be a good Muslim, you first have to be a good Jew and a good Christian. Islam includes everything that is there in Judaism and Christianity" (p. 180). Inclusivism, more open than exclusivism, tends to widen its notion of truth even as it restricts acceptance of it by reference to the truths of a particular religion. It is obviously tolerant and seems to display a sense of magnanimity. It does not view diversity and plurality of religions as threats to one's religious beliefs. They serve as an impetus and motivation for finding out what they teach, if they fit into one's own faith or if something may be learned from them (Griffiths, 2001, p. 60).

Still questions are raised regarding the assimilative tendencies of inclusivism. Teachings of other religions are domesticated to fit into the scheme of an accepted religion. This suggests a lack of respect for these beliefs in that they are not fully recognized on their own terms. A Buddhist monk's talk, for example, of the dynamic interaction of meditation and compassionate action in his tradition could be interpreted by a Christian as the linking of these two activities by God the Holy Spirit. In this way, the Buddhist view becomes acceptable to her Christian tradition. But, the Buddhist teaching is not accepted or explained on its own terms. It is accepted on the basis of a view which is external or alien to it. Nothing is learned about Buddhist meditation and compassionate action (Fredericks, 2004). Or, when a Christian commends some Theravada Buddhists by saying that God is manifesting Himself in their lives, the statement is not meaningful to them because they do not believe in a deity. But, the good that they do is now shown or validated in the case of a Christian

explanation. Christians, in short, answer their questions about other religions, not by allowing them to speak of their own practices and answering questions in their own voices, but by explaining them in such a way that they could be accommodated as instances of a Christian view. The Christian tradition, in thinking in this way, remains in tact and shielded from the challenges of religious diversity. Instead of welcoming religious differences as opportunities for learning and enrichment, inclusivism tends to interpret them from a particular religious perspective, thereby, domesticating them. Not much is learned from different religious traditions on their own terms.[9]

However, Christianity, considered exclusivistic/inclusivistic, cannot be judged to be hesitant in entering into and engaging other religions in dialog. Beginning with Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), a move to view other religions in an inclusive way has become evident. The document titled "The Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions" commonly known as *Nostra Aetate*, affirms that "all (human beings) form but one community . . . all stem from the one stock which God created to people the entire earth (Acts 17:26) . . . all share a common destiny, namely, God. His providence, evident goodness, and saving designs extend to all (human beings) (Acts 14:17; Romans 2:6–7; I Timothy 2:4)" (as cited in Gioia, 1997, p. 37).

To share the same nature and the same rationality with all human beings, as God's creation, forming one community, suggests that we ought to treat all as partners in achieving one common goal, the searching and reaching for the truth. Hence, the document appreciates Hinduism's emphasis on "the limitless riches of myth and the accurately defined insights of philosophy" in its attempts to be released from "the trials of the present life by ascetical practices, profound meditation and recourse to God in confidence and love" (as cited in Gioia, 1997, p. 38). On Buddhism, the document notes that it "proposes a way of life by which (human beings) can, with confidence and trust, attain a state of perfect liberation and reach supreme illumination." Both are human efforts to respond to the universal love of God.

Being one community means we have responsibilities to others for our beliefs that they, indeed, are in accord with our common goal. And even as we share with others our faith and way of life, believing that this is in accord with God, we must still respect, perhaps, even encourage the spiritual and moral truths found in other religions. Who knows if there could be glimpses of truth in them, inchoate in form may be, but possibly reflecting God's glory, believing that God is at work among His creation? The inclusivist attitude is summed up in the document in this way:

> The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in (other) religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflects a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. Yet she proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). In Him, in whom God reconcile all things to himself (Corinthians 5:18–19) men find the fullness of their religious life (as cited in Gioia, 1997).

[9]For a discussion on assimilative tendencies of inclusivism, see Fredericks (2004, pp. 11–21).

The move to inclusivism articulated by the Catholic Church could be appreciated, even considered historic. Nonetheless, it is judged as failing to consider other religions in their own right, in their own terms. The truths in them are accepted not because they are true, but because their origin which is reflected by them can be traced back to truth as proclaimed by a particular religion, in this case, Christianity. Inclusivism is non-judgmental, accommodating and at the same time remaining loyal to particular religious beliefs. An inclusivist, therefore, continues to consider its religious beliefs as the norm to which every other religious belief must conform.

The discussion shows that in its response to religious pluralism, Christianity (and other religions as well) did not simply retreat to the certainties of her faith and to seek refuge in it no matter what the facts are. Rather, it took it as a challenge to take seriously its implications for the Church's exclusive claim that in Jesus Christ is the full revelation of God, final and complete. It is an opportunity to inquire, once again, into her doctrines to see if they are correctly understood in all their complexities and whether the implications drawn from them for action and practice are logically acceptable and consistent with the total teachings of the Church. To examine one's religious beliefs, says Alvin Plantinga (2000), could "bring about a reappraisal of them, a reawakening, a new or renewed or deepened grasp and apprehension of (them). . . .It could serve as an occasion for a renewed and more powerful working of the belief-producing processes by which we come to apprehend (our) religious beliefs" (p. 190). Or, as Panikkar (1975) suggests, reflection on one's beliefs could imply "the critical awareness that my belief – which for me may be ultimate and even intentionally exhaustive does not preclude a free interval or an intellectual perspective (a step back, one may say) from which my own belief may be seen, judged, and even criticized" (p. 408). It is not to give up one's faith, but to dig deeper into its truths and mysteries and be enriched in trying to understand ourselves as we truly are. It is, in the words of Anselm, "faith seeking understanding."[10] It is possible to be mistaken or to misunderstand beliefs that are closest to peoples' lives because they define who they are. And so, they can be applied wrongly on other beliefs.

Our religious beliefs are exploratory in the sense that the results of our reflection and meditation on them have a provisional and a mixed character, knowledge from God and from other human beings. They need to be continually evaluated and assessed in the light of God's truths (for the Christian, the Bible and the teachings of the Church). This means that our reflection on them is never finished and cannot become a completed system of thought,[11] but it is an on-going intellectual, moral, and spiritual activity as long as one is on earth and short of seeing all things wholly

[10]This means that it is perfectly reasonable to start with one's faith beliefs and then understand them using reason. One seeks to deepen one's beliefs, seeks grounds for one's beliefs, and expands and develops them. This is opposed to the view that understanding (reason or arguments) must precede faith which is the enlightenment view which tends to place optimal premium on reason before everything else when dealing with significant matters. (Prof. Kelly James Clark, Dept. of Philosophy, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, personal communication, July 28, 2006).

[11]While a religion's belief system could be organized logically observing consistency and coherence, a believer's experiences in life may not exactly fit the systematized set of beliefs in

as Jesus Christ saw them. This is not a sign of failure, but an admission of the finiteness of human beings, of minds that know specific or fragments of truths. Also, our religious beliefs are relativistic in the sense that it is relative to the quality of the spiritual state of the person reflecting on her beliefs. In a word, it is pluralistic: "We explore and reflect on our beliefs at different points and by different parts and with different concerns and backgrounds" (Holmes, 1975, pp. 59–60), hence, requiring an openness of mind regarding our disagreements on them. Admittedly, our limited knowledge of God is due, in part, to (1) an inadequate experience of/with God, and (2) confused conceptualization. The first requires our deepening personal encounter and experience with God, the business of the devout; the second is the task of philosophers of religion and philosophically minded theologians and believers "trying to shed light upon that mystery (which is God)" (Hudson, 1979, p. 210).

Inclusivism does not necessarily weaken the confidence of a believer in her beliefs nor does she give up her commitment to them. What could be done is to look for possibilities or openings for connections with other religions, and understanding their spiritual aspirations and longing in hopes that one can learn something from the other and vice versa. This means that different religious traditions must be allowed to speak on their own terms and to speak for themselves, and for others to listen and hear what is actually being said, assuming, rightly or wrongly, equal validity of all religions. This discussion shows the benefits that each religion experiences when it acknowledges the reality of religious pluralism in modern life. Now, to turn to pluralism.

Pluralism

Religious pluralism views all religions to be equally effective salvifically in the lives of their believers. All religions are equally valid in its own way by their internal self-determination and conditioned in their responses to the Divine/God/Reality, etc. by such factors as accidents of birth, cultural traditions, and historical facts.[12] Each religion is equally effective in its transforming power, for example, "by giving one's self to God in Christ for the Christian, living in accordance with the Torah or with the Qur'anic revelations that Jews and Muslims, respectively, find a transforming peace with God," says John Hick (1988b, pp. 366, 376). So, "is Christianity really a religion destined for all people?" asks Roger Haight. No. Jesus Christ is the normative revelation from God for the Christians. But, He is only one Saviour among others and he is not the only way to salvation. God is also normatively revealed in

abstraction. The bafflement of Job had to do with his acceptance of God's righteousness and justice, formulated in the abstract, but did not fit with his suffering which he judged to be an unjust act of God. Job's experiences could not be tidied up and fixed to fit the logical system of his religious beliefs.

[12]In Keith E. Yandell's (1999) view, "the own conceptual world" regarding religions, which make them inaccessible to assessment by outsiders is "utterly mistaken." For related interests, see Griffiths (1991).

other religions. No one religion is superior over the others. Paul Knitter, a prominent Catholic theologian says:

> Other religions may be just as effective and successful in bringing their followers to truth, and peace, and well-being with God as Christianity has been for Christians.. . .These other religions, again because they are so different from Christianity, may have just as important a message and vision for all peoples as Christianity does (as cited in Fredericks, 2004, p. 9).

Echoing the idea of pluralism, Harold Kasimow (1999) says:

> I am a Jewish pluralist. As such, I am committed to the Jewish path, not because it is superior, but because it is my path. I view the concept of the chosen people as God choosing the Jews to follow the path of the Torah, while at the same time choosing the Hindus to follow the Vedas, the Buddhists to follow the Dharma, the Muslims to follow the Qur'an and the Christians to follow Jesus of Nazareth (p. 4).

If believing in one religion or another is God's choice for one people and not for another, who can disagree with God? Additionally, if it is God's choice, it follows that this or that religion must be in accord with God. God cannot choose a religion for a people that clearly contradicts or is contrary to God's holiness and righteousness. All religions, therefore, are equally acceptable to God and effective salvifically in the lives of believers. The validity of these religions is, obviously, limited to their followers. How then can Knitter suggest that different religions, like Christianity, may have a message and vision for *all* peoples? If all religions are sufficient in guiding the lives and conduct of their believers, where is the need to listen to another message or vision? The same point is expressed by Panikkar about parallelism (a term he uses instead of pluralism). Different creeds, he says, are parallel paths which will meet at the end of our pilgrimage. There is no need to interfere or to convert, but to deepen individual traditions: "Be a better Christian, a better Marxist, a better Hindu . . ." (Panikkar, 1978, p. viii). This assumes self-sufficiency and denies the need for mutual learning. Knitter is, perhaps, suggesting that all religions, although effective salvifically, can still, in Eck's words, "(glimpse) glory as seen by another" (1993, p. 186).

Indeed, the transcendency of God suggests that there is more to God than our idea or knowledge of Him. He cannot be encapsulated in or by any one religious tradition. In Hick's words:

> The ultimate divine reality is infinite and as such transcends the grasp of the human mind. . .he cannot be defined or encompassed by human thought. We cannot draw boundaries round his nature and say that he is this and no more. If we could fully define God, describing His inner being and His outer limits, this would not be God (1988a, p. 139).

It is God's transcendence that "drives us to find out what others have known of God . . . to inquire more deeply into the insights of those Buddhists who do not speak of God at all" (Eck, 1993, p. 186). Pluralism encourages involvement in other faiths and also stresses commitment to one's particular religious tradition. Harold Kasimow, for example, says that his experience with Buddhism has enriched his understanding and appreciation of his Jewish tradition. However, even if he is

immersed in Buddhist meditation during the practice of zazen, he says "this experience is radically different for me than a Yom Kippur service … A distinction remains between my tradition … and other religious traditions" (Kasimow, 1999, p. 4). Whether or not his enriched understanding and appreciation of his own Jewish tradition also means that now his understanding of it is different in some central or peripheral ways is not clear. The fact, however, that he continues to distinguish his tradition from the other suggests that there is no assimilation of one belief to the other, transforming his beliefs to something other than what it was before or transforming him. There is no change in the substantiality of these two traditions. His enriched appreciation of his own tradition is understandable. Where, for example, the rites and rituals and liturgies of a religion are complicated and sophisticated, evoking awareness of all of one's senses, one learns to appreciate the utter simplicity and directness of an approach to God only through the purity of His Word, gripping one's mind as one beholds God's awesome majesty, holiness, righteousness, and love. Differences could highlight aspects of religions which could be missed, but which are central to religious acts and practices. For example, when one notices how a religion encourages its members, and succeeds in its encouragement to them to be dispositionally given to God in prayers and meditations, the difference could be embarrassing when such practices are nowhere cultivated or even appreciated in one's religion. Religions could benefit from each other in this way. But, it appears, that even when one's practice of prayer could be affected, its concept and substance are not necessarily changed so that it now accords with another belief system. Clearly, however, one religion can benefit another in an instrumental way.[13]

Pluralism is not out to make all religions into one uniform system of belief. Indeed, the particularity of one's religious tradition is not dismissed as the above quote shows. But, says Eck, "it takes away our ability to claim the comprehensive, exhaustive universality of our own tradition" (1993, p. 186). It releases one from feeling obligated to be dead-right all the time on all religious issues to a sense of freedom to admire and appreciate others in our differences, and in our differences

[13]Rami Mark Shapiro, Rabbi of Temple Beth Or in Miami, Florida, relates this moving experience in a small gathering in a monastery. "One morning the conversation turned to Jesus, the suffering servant nailed to a cross. While the Jewish prophet Isaiah introduced the concept of the suffering servant, referring to the people of Israel rather than one Jew in particular, I admit to having trouble with Jesus …. And yet here was a man I admired and respected telling me of his love for this martyred messiah. At first, I couldn't hear it …. Then as the passion of my friend's convictions broke through the barriers of my own fear, disbelief, and anger, I began to listen and to hear and to know Jesus through the heart of another. Not Jesus the God; not Jesus the Messiah; but Jesus the man, the crucified servant who died for his belief and his right to speak it freely. I sensed the faith of my friend even though I could not share it. I saw through his eyes what I could not see with my own. I cannot pretend to understand the mystery of faith in Christ crucified and resurrected, but I did open my heart to that of another and found there new insight into the human grappling with suffering and meaning, and a renewed sense of purpose and peace …. I stepped on foreign shores and beheld some of its beauty and grace. And from that brief meeting came a deeper appreciation for Christian faith and a renewed bonding with humanity arising from my having entered the sphere of between" (Shapiro, 1989, pp. 31–40).

find a commonality in our efforts to serve God. They no longer appear to be threatening as potential competitors of God's grace, but as partakers of our limited humanity in need of God.

The pluralist perspective could be, in Knitter's view (as cited in Fredericks, 2004), an essential condition for an authentic dialogue to take place. This, perhaps, is too strong a requirement. After all the Vatican, tending toward an exclusivist–inclusivist theology and not to pluralism has initiated on-going interreligious dialogues for some time now. One need not be a pluralist to enter into an interreligious dialogue.

Pluralism encourages sharing, in the sense of imparting pieces of information, of religious beliefs without passing judgment on anyone of them. The participants bracket their core beliefs and in this way they may be judged neutral. The extent to which this could be true could be questioned, but this is not to deny that it can be done. A problem, however, is the extent to which one can trust oneself in saying one's beliefs are suspended or relegated to limbo, so to speak. Why? It is possible that my fundamental religious beliefs, bedrock of my convictions, that which defines who I am and which definition of myself is inside my head, could be influencing my manner of listening to and hearing of others' beliefs. The capacity to bracket one's beliefs depends upon the closeness of one's identification with one's beliefs, such that to assess my beliefs and their credibility is to assess me. How then does one bracket one's self? If this can be done, what else is left for one to say on matters closest to one's heart and mind? A danger of pluralism, noted by Alan Race (1982),

> is that if all religious traditions are made relative (in that each religion is culturally conditioned in their focus of divine reality) it could undermine concern to distinguish good from bad, the spiritually wholesome and profound from the spiritually poor and moribund religion. . ..Stated starkly, it could mean that if all faiths are equally true, then all faiths are equally false (p. 78).

Some of the important points of pluralism are (1) it seeks to understand the other on his own terms and to respect differences and observe commonalities in various religious traditions; (2) it assumes real commitment, but without dogmatism, to one's religious community, and at the same time encourages an open-mindedness; it is an encounter of commitments; (3) it encourages individual distinctiveness, to be who we really are and yet be in relation to one another; it is not syncretism; and (4) it is based on interreligious dialogue (Eck, 1993, pp. 190–199). In sum, pluralism could be described as "a range of options in the reconciliation of a truly Christian charity and perceptivity with doctrinal adequacy" (Race, 1982, p. 69). Pluralism treats all religions on an equal footing, assuming validity of them all (even if all of them may not be clear cases of "doctrinal adequacy").[14] Real and meaningful encounters encouraged by pluralism are not intended to secure agreements, but to develop relationships based on mutual understanding.

[14] What constitutes "doctrinal adequacy" must be explicated and fully argued for.

Responses and Their Limitations

The responses of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism to religious pluralism will not satisfy everyone to the same extent. Difficulties and problems are noted in each of them. Even if they provide a good starting point in identifying central problems pertinent to religious diversity and to focus on them, furthering understanding of them, still it is admitted that the responses, framed within any one of the paradigms, are limited within the boundaries of the paradigm. Answers to religious problems or disagreements are imbedded within the paradigm and in this way answers are always "correct" per the paradigm. The paradigm remains intact even if it fails to satisfy an individual person's particular, existential questions, or, more importantly, even if it fails to address problems of religious pluralism in its social, political, and historical contexts. An observation for this failure advanced by Terry C. Muck (2007) is that the paradigm is stuck in figuring out how to accommodate interests of Christianity, namely, the soteriological question, "Who will be saved?" and the question of the relationship of the One and the many (raised by John Hick), into the understanding of other world faiths. Unfortunately, however, these questions do not necessarily help in understanding or interpreting the reality of other faith traditions because these are not their concerns. The paradigm deals mainly with interests particular to Christianity, but not necessarily or not at all with the question of how to relate to other faiths creatively such that an attractiveness to or curiosity about each other in the spirit of hospitality is generated. The paradigm, in Muck's view, must not only be questioned, but it must be replaced by a radical move to "participant theologizing,"[15] which helps people enter into the religious worldviews of others as full participants. But, his suggestion, however, is not devoid of difficulties. For one thing, it is not easy to bracket one's core religious beliefs if one tries to participate fully in the practices of another religion. And if one could do it, how long could this be done? Is it ever possible to participate fully in another religious worldview without at the same time giving up one's adherence to his/her beliefs? What, in short, does it take to participate fully in another theological/religious worldview, conversion? asks Amos Yong. "I am still learning how to do so after giving my life to Jesus at the age of five. Can I really enter *fully* into the worldview of Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, etc. and if so, how?" (Yong, 2007, p. 30). These questions must be fully argued and fleshed out, resulting in suggested practices and actions, before Muck's suggestions can be considered seriously.

Before dismissing the paradigm altogether, consider it again in order to find out if it has a place in deliberations over matters of religious pluralism. Notice that the boundaries of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism are not closed. They should

[15] Participant theologizing, according to Muck (2007), has four steps, namely: (1) entering into the other's worldview as full participants; (2) learning from it for purposes of our own culture's theology, using compare and contrast critique; (3) using their worldview and structure, religion included, as a platform for telling the story of Jesus; and (4) encouraging them to create their own understanding of the story without giving up on their worldviews, including their religion. For critical comments see Yong (2007, pp. 28–32).

not be viewed necessarily and always as either–or considerations or totalistic in orientation. One, for example, could be exclusive about one thing and inclusive about another thing. It depends upon the particular problem that is being dealt with. To illustrate, consider that I believe that the proposition "Jesus Christ is the Son of God" is true. However, my friend believes that it is false. Obviously, both beliefs cannot be true. I also believe that human beings, created in the image of God, are capable of rationality. Investigating the matter rationally (I assume that we did), how did we arrive at two directly contradictory positions? How is it that equally knowledgeable individuals who have thought seriously about this matter, and given the same relevant data and arguments, still differ on what is true? Rationality does not serve (or it minimally serves) us to be in touch with what is true. I am inclusive about rationality and exclusive about truth.[16] But, I desire for both of our claims to be effective soteriologically. What should I do? I believe that God holds people accountable for the amount of light they have and for how they respond to it. So, if someone responds properly to the grace given to her/him, even if she/he does not know God or Christ personally, salvation is secured for them, that is, God, in His mercy applies the work of Christ to her/him and saves her/him. Unfortunately, this applies only to those who have not heard of the claims of Christ. My friend is excluded. My inclusiveness is not inclusive enough to include my friend. Since, however, only God knows who His true believers are, followers to the end, they could come from all sorts of religions. And although my friend and I do not know this now because we cannot predict the workings of the Triune God among people of various faiths, God, in His mercy and grace, could include, at the end of time, people (including my friend) or groups of people who were not inside the visible structures of the Christian Church. There is, as the hymn says, a wideness in God's mercy. I have become a bit of an inclusivist regarding salvific matters and have remained an exclusivist about truth. The value of preserving the unity and purity of doctrinal truths and to bear witness to them to others, which undergirds exclusivism, served in considering religious truths. Inclusivism, which heightens the value of accommodation and dialogue, clarified the question of whether my friend could be in or out of God's saving grace.

Pluralism could be employed when dealing with social projects in which there is common agreement among different religions, for example, working for justice and elimination of racial and religious discrimination, advocating for world peace, enhancing respect for and development of our environment, elimination of poverty, etc. It moves away from doctrinal matters to social practices which when actualized could increase livability in peoples' lives.

The employment of either exclusivism, inclusivism, or pluralism depends upon the kind of problem being dealt with. In this way, specificity is encouraged when talking about the paradigm, hence, one can be exclusive about something and inclusive about something else and pluralistic about other specific problems. There is

[16]This idea is from Linda Zagzebski.

a suggestion of flexibility in the working out of the paradigm and not a rigid application of it in a wholesale manner to the totality of religious matters.

Still, some questions could be raised about this approach. An exclusivist, for example, could interpret justice and peace from her exclusivist religious perspective, while the pluralist, eschewing religious justifications for any of its deliberations and decision, could invoke secular values which may not be congenial to other religious perspectives. The talk could be only on cultural values. This shows that one's attempts to escape the confinement of an accepted paradigm may not always succeed.

Perhaps, it is better to approach religious pluralism and related problems not by way of a fixed system of thought or a so-called perspective which interprets problems within its framework, but fails to take into account the particular context of a person's experience of them. Hence, the interpretation is not accurate and clearly not meaningful to a person undergoing the experience. Believers do not experience and interact with religion in its abstract formulations, but rather in their confrontation with the realities of life, such as suffering, death, separation, betrayal, joy, etc. which could question the reality and meaningfulness of their beliefs. In what ways could one's religion, as it is lived out by her, enable her to understand and make sense of such realities in her life? A particular religious worldview could explain them, sometimes explains them away, so neatly and logically, keeping the purity of the religious doctrines, but leaving the person's heart cold and untouched.

Better to admit that most religious problems and experiences, in their fullness and complexities, cannot be defined by or confined to one perspective or paradigm. Who or what explanation can fully fathom the anguish and heart-wrenching uncertainty of Abraham in coming to a decision whether to obey or disobey God's instruction to sacrifice Isaac, the seed of God's promise? What can fully explain his decision to break conventional wisdom and cultural mores and take a leap of faith, believing that faith is higher than reason? As problems of ultimacy, involving metaphysical beliefs, revelatory experiences, and spiritual intuitions, they transcend the limits of any one academic discipline or paradigm. They require a give and take type of discussion that allows all voices to be heard and eloquent silences encouraged, in an effort to come to an accurate understanding and some mutual agreements about them. Characterized as truth seeking, unlike the paradigms that assume possession of some truths, this discussion is a process in search for truth and to recognize it when it is found. Independent of and free from any paradigm, any questions could be raised and any proposed solutions could be considered. It concentrates on solely knowing and appreciating religious problems as they are and as fully as it is possible to do so, especially in their experiential aspects, discerning and hopefully arriving collectively at some conclusions about them.

In short, the effort and desire is to allow a situation, a problem, or an experience to come forth on its own and define itself in its own terms. The religious life or experience, in other words, has a life of its own and it is this life that generates ideas/interpretations about it. So, their genesis and place are one and the same, namely, the religious experience/problem. Everything, therefore, that is said about the experience is integral to the total religious experience, serving its need. It is

not an interpretation or explanation done by, say, a sociologist or psychologist of religion which interpretation is outside of a religious experience. When it explains a religious phenomenon, its concepts and methodologies tend to transform what was originally a religious experience into a psychological or sociological matter for analysis and investigation. The religious experience as it is, is not explained, but explained away and replaced by either one of them simply because the interest of sociological/psychological investigations is primarily to sharpen their tools and instruments in order to achieve a clearer understanding of their conceptualization of a given problem, for example, religion.

In contrast, the interpretation that is called forth here is one that arises out of a concrete religious experience and reality, an emergent from one's religious experience which may not translate easily into calculable objective measurements. It allows religious problems, experiences, etc. to interpret and explain itself in its own terms, in all of its singularities and peculiarities, even idiosyncrasies. In this way, accuracy of description of them could be secured. Such an exercise is a human activity which could be engaged in by any one who has experienced or experiences religious anxieties, perplexities and doubtful concerns and religious ecstasies, encouraged as he/she is to "tell it as it is." It is a human activity that defines, in part, our limited humanity in need of relationships, thus reaching out to others. It goes by the name of dialogue/interreligious dialogue and is the subject of another chapter in this collection.

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