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CHRISTIANITY AND WORLD RELIGIONS:
PAUL KNITTER'S PLURALISTIC PERSPECTIVE

Joseph J. Smith, S.J.

The fact of the plurality of religions has always been known. In the fifteenth century, it caused Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa to compose a dialogue in which representatives of various religions explain their different positions in an effort to attain common agreement. But only in modern times has the diversity of religions impressed itself so vividly on the consciousness of large numbers of Christians that they hesitate to assign universal and normative value to their own faith. The modern means of communication have already created the beginnings of a global consciousness. It is impossible for Christians to ignore the existence of other flourishing world religions which are the spiritual homes of hundreds of millions of believers.

Though Christianity is larger than any other single religion, it is far from comprising a majority of the world population. Today, after almost two thousand years of missionary labors, Christians number only about one-third of the world population, and because of the rapid population increase in non-Christian parts of the world, the total ratio of Christians is actually decreasing.[1] Not only have

[1]If present demographic trends continue, some experts have predicted that by the year 2000, Christians will number only about one-sixth of the world

centuries of missionary zeal been unable to remove the reality of religious pluralism, but today, Christians witness the resurgence of missionary dynamism among the other religions. "Hindus, Buddhists and Moslems are claiming that their message, like that of Christianity, bears a 'universal relevance'."[2]

Karl Rahner has conceded that this fact of the persistent pluralism of religions which endures after a two thousand year history of Christian mission "must be the greatest scandal and the greatest vexation for Christianity," for today, Christians experience the world religions—no longer theoretically but existentially and in the concrete—as realities which place the absolute claim of their own Christian faith in question. "Hence the question about the understanding of and the continuing existence of religious pluralism as a factor of our immediate Christian existence is an urgent one."[3]

Christian theologians have proposed many different explanations of the relation between Christianity and the world religions:

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population. Cf. Walbert Bühlmann, *The Coming of the Third Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1977), 143. David Barrett, in his *World Christian Encyclopedia* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), is much more optimistic. He estimates the Christian percentage of the world population in 1980 to be 32.8 percent. He claims that during the twentieth century, "Christianity has surged ahead in the world's less developed countries from 83 million in 1900 to 643 million by 1980." Barrett contends that this surge will continue and predicts that by the year 2000, Christians will make up 32.3 percent of the world population (3-4). However, he does admit the "gradual numerical decline (of the number of Christians) when expressed as percentages of the world population" (5): from 34.4 percent in 1900 to 32.8 percent in 1980 to 32.3 percent in 2000.

[2]Paul Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985), 4 (hereafter cited as *No Other Name?*).

[3]Karl Rahner, "Christianity and Non-Christian Religions," in Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* V (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), 116-117 (hereafter cited as "Christianity and Non-Christian Religions").

EXTREME EXCLUSIVISM

At one end of the spectrum lies the most negative view, still found in some types of sectarian Protestantism. This extreme Exclusivism regards all non-Christian religions as "false, diabolical and idolatrous." In this view, "there is no truth, no genuine relation to God to be found outside of the Christian faith" and explicit personal knowledge of and commitment to Jesus as the Christ.[4]

MODERATE EXCLUSIVISM: A PROTESTANT VERSION

A more moderate form of Exclusivism, characteristic of mainline Protestantism, is based on the idea of a dialectic between a general or universal divine revelation and human sin.[5] In this explanation, God reveals himself universally in the created world and in man created in God's image but man immediately distorts this revelation into human illusion by his sin. Man, therefore, knows enough about God from the revelation in creation to make him guilty and responsible for his sin. But because it is a knowledge corrupted by sin, it cannot become a true knowledge of God, nor can it save man from his sin.[6]

All empirical religion, then, is the product of revelation and sin closely interwoven in a dialectical unity. Emil Brunner concludes that in all religion there is

> a recollection of the divine truth which has been lost ... a longing for the divine Light and the divine Love; but in all religion also there yawns

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[4]Respectively, Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 60 (hereafter cited as *Catholicity*); John Macquarrie, "Commitment and Openness: Christianity's Relation to Other Faiths," *Theology Digest* 27 (1979), 349.

[5]This approach finds its classic expression in Emil Brunner.

[6]Joseph J. Smith, *Emil Brunner's Theology of Revelation* (Manila: Loyola House of Studies, 1967), 28-31.

> an abyss of demonic distortion of the truth and of man's effort to escape from God.... Even in his worship of God, man seeks himself, his own salvation; even in his surrender to the Deity, he wants to find his own security.[7]

The attitude toward other religions which follows from this interpretation is a dialectical Yes-No. The Christian can say Yes to the "impressive," "sublime" and "divinely true" elements in religions which originate in the general revelation. But the Christian must also say No to the "terrible," "repellent" and "demoniacally false" elements that result from sin.[8] The revelation in Jesus Christ is "both the fulfillment of all religion and the judgement of all religion." He is the fulfillment of the truth religions see dimly and seek in vain.

> From the standpoint of Jesus Christ the non-Christian religions seem like stammering words from some half-forgotten saying; none of them is without a breath of the Holy, and none of them is without its impressive truth and yet none of them is the truth; for their truth is Jesus Christ.[9]

He is also the judgement on their sinful distortions and attempts at self-redemption. "Viewed in his light all religious systems appear untrue, unbelieving and indeed godless."[10] "For 'religion' is the product of man's sinful blindness."[11] Through Jesus Christ, Christianity alone has *saving* revelation, "the self-communication of the holy and merciful God."[12]

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[7]Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason* (London: SCM Press, 1947), 265-266.

[8]Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, 265-266.

[9]Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, 270.

[10]Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, 270.

[11]Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, 265.

[12]Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, 271. This dialectical exclusivist interpretation has been developed and deepened by Hendrik Kraemer in his *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1938) and *Religion and the Christian Faith* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1956). Cf. Gavin D'Costa,

MODERATE EXCLUSIVISM: A CATHOLIC VERSION

"A central position, favored by many contemporary Catholics, is that these religions are human creations, admirable in their own way, but reaching out in vain towards a transcendence they cannot achieve."[13] "In this perspective religions are a movement of man toward God,"[14] the expression of man's groping quest for God, "creations of human genius," which mingle elements of truth and elements of error,[15] "human efforts to attain the divine through an ecstatic leap that never, in fact, achieves its objective."[16]

In their quest for God, the religions attain seeds of truth. "They are touching and often very beautiful attempts rising very high in their search for God."[17] "They are not so much false as essentially incomplete, unfinished" and awaiting fulfillment.[18] Henri de Lubac affirms that "esteem and admiration are not ruled out for the efforts to search and create made by the natural religions and spiritualities we read about." He refers to the loftiness of the Buddhist ideal; the concern of the hearers to detach themselves from the passions and the perishable

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Theology and Religious Pluralism (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 52-79 (hereafter cited as *Theology and Religious Pluralism*).

[13]Dulles, *Catholicity*, 60.

[14]Jean Danielou, "Christianity and non-Christian Religions," in *The Word in History*, ed. Thomas P. Burke (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1966), 91 (hereafter cited as "Christianity").

[15]Jean Danielou, *Mythes païens, mystère chrétien* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1966), 72 (author's own translation); cf. 8-9, 22, 33.

[16]Dulles, *Catholicity*, 63, referring to Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Pneuma und Institution* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1974), 83-87.

[17]Jean Danielou, *The Salvation of the Nations* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1949), 8.

[18]Jean Danielou, *Advent* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1951), 16.

world. He quotes approvingly Pope Paul VI's Easter Message of 1964: "Each religion bears traces of light which must not be disdained or quenched; every religion raises us towards the transcendence of the Being without which there is no reason for existence, for thinking, for responsible work, for hope without illusion. Every religion is a dawning of faith and we await the full daybreak."[19]

But though in the religions humanity can be raised to certain spiritual heights, "the topmost summit is never reached." A critical examination of the objective forms of non-Christian religions "shows that there is some essential factor missing from every religious 'invention' that is not a following of Christ.... Outside Christianity nothing attains its end toward which unknowingly, all human desires, all human endeavors are in movement: the embrace of God in Christ."[20] Accordingly, the seeds of truth contained in other religions remain "distorted until integrated into the fullness of Christ."[21]

According to the Fathers, the Church of Christ is called by her faith in Christ "to integrate [by converting] all the religious efforts of mankind." This integration involves two interdependent elements: on the one hand, "an element of purification, battle even, and elimination, since everything is at first mixed with error or evil to a greater or lesser degree; on the other hand, an element of assumption, assimilation and transfiguration."[22] In Christianity, the descent of God in Christ and the Spirit makes present "an absolutely new and different reality which

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[19]Henri de Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery* (New York: Alba House, 1969), 92 (hereafter cited as *The Church*).

[20]Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism* (London: Burns, Oates & Washburn, 1950), 111-112.

[21]Dulles, *Catholicity*, 63, summarizing Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Katholizität der Kirche," in *Absolutheit des Christentums*, ed. Walter Kasper (Freiburg: Herder, 1977), 152-153.

[22]Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxe et Mystère de L'Eglise* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1967), 130 (author's own translation). Cf. Danielou, "Christianity," 92-96.

only consummates and completes the efforts of man because it first of all submits them to a transformation."[23]

According to this interpretation, Christianity is the only way of salvation constituted by God. The other religions are not ways of salvation "divinely legitimated *in themselves* and *as such.*"[24] There is one redemption and one revelation and their communication has been entrusted to the Church. Of course, the grace of Christ is active outside the visible Church and non-Christians can respond in faith to the hidden inspiration of the Spirit of Christ. De Lubac concedes that such men are "anonymous Christians" insofar as they have unknowingly accepted the grace of Christ. But there is no "anonymous Christianity" or "Church unaware of itself" in the self-created religions of humanity. This would suppose "that there is in practice no difference between religions, that they may all equally play the role of 'means' or 'ways of salvation'."[25]

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[23]Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Trois signes du christianisme," appendix to *Theologie de l'histoire* (Paris: Desclee de Brouwer, 1955), 167 (author's own translation), quoted in Henri de Lubac, *The Church*, 81.

[24]Yves Congar, "Non Christian Religions and Christianity," in *Service and Salvation: Nagpur Theological Conference on Evangelization*, ed. Joseph Pathrapankal (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1973), 175.

[25]Henri de Lubac, *The Church*, 86-88. H. Urs von Balthasar applauds the distinction made by H. de Lubac between "anonymous Christians" and "anonymous Christianity." "This enlightening distinction seems to me to satisfy all the present needs; the certainty, on the one hand, that the Christian preacher does not enter a domain devoid of grace—since Christ died for everyone—and the urgent need, on the other, to testify by his whole existence to the unique grace that God bestowed on us in His Son" (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cordula ou l'épreuve décisive* [Paris: Beauchesne, 1968], 122 [author's own translation]). Y. Congar concedes the reality intended by the term "anonymous Christians," i.e., "the condition of men not evangelized and yet justified by the grace of Christ." But he claims that the expression "anonymous *Christians*" is not a happy one, "for 'Christian' implies the profession of the faith proclaimed and received, followed by baptism" (Congar, "Non Christian Religions and Christianity," 168).

The viewpoint of this third position was adopted by Pope Paul VI in the Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelization in the Modern World (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975). Non-Christian religions are said "to carry within them the echo of thousands of years of searching for God, a quest which is incomplete, but often made with great sincerity and righteousness of heart." They contain "natural religious expressions most worthy of esteem" but it is "the religion of Jesus" which "places man in relation with the plan of God, with his living presence and action" and "causes an encounter with the mystery of divine paternity that bends over toward humanity. In other words, our religion effectively establishes with God an authentic living relationship which the other religions do not succeed in doing, even though they have, as it were, their arms stretched out towards heaven."[26]

INCLUSIVISM: CHRIST WITHIN RELIGIONS

"A more optimistic position, held by many progressive theologians, is that these religions come from an authentic supernatural experience and that they are ordinary means for salvation for those who do not know Christ."[27] This inclusivist approach affirms the salvific presence of God in non-Christian religions while still maintaining that Christ is the definitive and normative revelation of God as well as the one saviour and constitutive cause of salvation. Since Vatican II, a large number of Catholic theologians have adopted this inclusivist position.

Vatican Council II set the framework for the current discussion within Roman Catholic theology by affirming two general principles which stand in tension with one another. First, on the ground that non-Christian religions "often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens

[26]Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Pasay City: St. Paul Publications, 1978), no. 53, 39-40. Cf. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 68 (1976), no. 53, 41-42.

[27]Dulles, *Catholicity*, 60.

all men," the Council stated that "the Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions" (*Nostra Aetate*, art. 2). But secondly, it affirms that the Church must always proclaim Christ as the one in whom the fullness of religious life is found, and in whom God has reconciled all things (ibid.). "The council left open the question whether the non-Christian religions contain revelation and are, in themselves, salvific."[28]

It has been rightly affirmed that if "Vatican II is a watershed in Christian attitudes towards other religions, Karl Rahner is its chief engineer" and that "the major architect of the post-conciliar Catholic contribution to the subject is undoubtedly Karl Rahner."[29] For Rahner, the foundation of the theological understanding of other religions within Christian faith is the following thesis: "Christianity understands itself as the absolute religion, intended for all men, which cannot recognize any other religion alongside itself as of equal right."[30] This follows from the faith-conviction that it was founded by God himself for all through his saving self-communication and definitive, normative revelation in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of the Word of God in Jesus Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ is the constitutive (final) cause of salvation and the definitive, normative revelation of God in the world. The Church is the community of believers effected by the revelatory event of Jesus Christ in which the self-revelation of God in Christ remains permanently present in the world and for the world.

But Christianity had a temporal beginning. In its historically tangible ecclesial-sociological form as the permanent presence of

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[28]Dulles, *Catholicity*, 61; also cf. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* XVIII (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 289-291. This is a more accurate interpretation of the Council than that which holds that the conciliar statements "affirm implicitly but clearly that the religions are ways of salvation" (Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 130).

[29]Respectively, Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 125; Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1982), 45.

[30]Rahner, "Christianity and Non-Christian Religions," 118.

God's saving revelation in Christ, "it has not always and everywhere been *the* way of salvation for men." Even after it has been constituted in history as the absolute religion intended in principle for all men, Christianity only makes an existentially real demand on human persons when it has become "a real historical factor in the individual history and culture—a real historical moment in a particular culture."[31] How then was salvation made possible for those who lived before Christ and for those who lived after Christ but who through no fault of their own have not yet been reached by the Christian message in a way which is directly binding on them?

Rahner's answer develops along the following lines: God has a universal salvific will which is sincere and effective.[32] The universal salvific will of God objectifies itself in the self-communication of God which is called grace and which, at least as offer, is given to every person's freedom in all ages and places in history.[33] This universal offer of grace does not occur in a purely interior, mystical fashion but is bestowed

[31]Rahner, "Christianity and Non-Christian Religions," 119.

[32]Karl Rahner, "The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation," in Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* XVI (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), 202-203; idem, "Church, Churches and Religions," in Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* X (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), 33 (hereafter cited as "Church, Churches and Religions"); idem, "Jesus Christ in the Non-Christian Religions," in Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* XVII (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 40 (hereafter cited as "Jesus Christ in the Non-Christian Religions").

[33]Karl Rahner, "Observations on the Problem of the 'Anonymous Christian'," in Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* XIV (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976), 288 (hereafter cited as "Observations on the Problem"). "Not withstanding its supernaturality and unmeritedness, it [this grace] can certainly be seen as a permanent existential of man, of mankind and its history, always and everywhere present, as permanently present possibility of a salvific relationship of freedom to God, as innermost entelechy of the history of the individual and of mankind as a whole, in which the unmerited, gracious self-communication of God to the world is the ultimate finality and dynamism of the world and world history, whether the human freedom of any particular individual accepts this innermost entelechy or closes itself up against it" (Karl Rahner, "On the Importance of the Non-Christian Religions for Salvation," in Rahner, *Theological*

and experienced in and through the concrete historical situations of man's existence in society. Jesus Christ in his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection is the final cause of this universal self-communication of God (at least as offer) to all humanity in the whole of human history. That means that this transcendental self-communication of God in the grace of the Spirit is given precisely in view of the Christ-event which is the goal of salvation history.[34]

This offer of grace to the open spirit of man penetrates to the innermost depths of a person, radically reorientating him toward the immediate presence of God and communicating an inner, conscious non-objective ordination to the God who saves and beatifies, an immediate but non-objective transcendental experience of the nearness of the silent mystery. Rahner calls this transcendental revelation, for "if God's self-communication is free and if it is consciously grasped by a person, even if this occurs without thematic reflection—then the two conditions for supernatural revelation are realized in the strict sense of the term."[35]

Faith, as the acceptance of God's revelation, occurs whenever a person accepts his existence graced by the radical nearness of the absolute mystery and the a-priori awareness this involves.[36] This is a rudimentary, implicit faith in comparison with explicit Christian faith, yet it possesses

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Investigations XVIII, 291 [hereafter cited as "On the Importance of the Non-Christian Religions"]).

[34]Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 317 (hereafter cited as *Foundations*); idem, "Church, Churches and Religions," 37-38, 39; Joseph Wong, *Logos-Symbol in the Christology of Karl Rahner* (Rome: Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 1984), 154.

[35]Karl Rahner, "Anonymous and Explicit Faith," in Rahner, *Theological Investigations* XVI, 57. Cf. idem, "Church, Churches and Religions," 34-35; Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, "Revelation," in *Concise Theological Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (London: Burns & Oates, 1983), 446-447.

[36]Karl Rahner, "Anonymous Christians," in Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* VI (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1969), 394. Cf. idem, "Observation on the Problem," 290.

the inherent dynamism "to develop into that faith which is objectified and articulated through the Gospel."[37]

When accepted in faith, God's self-revelation in the depths of the spiritual person automatically tends to objectify and express itself categorically in the concrete history of man, in his words and actions. It will influence the concrete forms of his philosophy and morality—all the dimensions of his thought and action. In its highest form, the transcendental revelation will try to objectify itself in the concrete forms of religion: in religious associations and practices, in liturgical rites, in explicit religious statements, in religious writings, in expressions of morality, in prophetic protests against false interpretations of this grace-filled experience.[38]

Rahner underlines the special role of "prophets" in this interpretation and explicitation of the transcendental revelation. By "prophets" he simply means those persons who played a special role in the origin and development of a religion, whether founders of religions or their reformers or persons who made a special contribution through word and deed, for in the providence of God, the experience of God's self-communication will be more intense in some than in others. Persons who are more open to God and with special presuppositions and gifts of the natural order (e.g., a superior religious sense and powers of expression) will be able to explicitate their experience (under God's providence) in words, rites and symbols and communicate religious truth to other men.

In this way in man's religions there are individual moments of successful categorical mediation of what man perceives by the inner light of faith in fidelity to his inner orientation to God of salvation.

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[37]Rahner, "Observations on the Problem," 291.

[38]Karl Rahner, "History of the World and Salvation History," in Rahner, *Theological Investigations* V, 105. Cf. Rahner, *Foundations*, 173: "The attempt is made in every religion, at least on man's part, to mediate the original, unreflexive and non-objective revelation historically, to make it reflexive and to interpret it in propositions."

Through these means, "God creates for man the possibility of salvation also in the dimension of his ... concrete historicity."[39] Grace must incarnate itself in a social-historical "body" in order to be really available. "For even in his most personal history man always remains a social being, whose innermost decisions are mediated through the specific form of his social and historical life."[40]

Rahner concludes that as a result of their supernatural elements, "the actual religions of 'pre-Christian' humanity" can by all means have a positive meaning in the saving providence of God; they can be "legitimate" religions, though in varying ways and degrees. By "legitimate" religion Rahner means "an institutional religion whose 'use' by man at a certain period can be regarded on the whole as a positive means of gaining the right relationship to God and thus for the attaining of salvation, a means which is, therefore, positively included in God's plan of salvation."[41]

This does not deny the elements of error and depravity contained in the religions, for sin has its distorting effect on all human social productions, including the interpretation of transcendental revelation. "It is only partially successful and is mixed with error, sinful delusions and their objectifications."[42] Consequently, the non-Christian religions are not guaranteed as pure expressions of the mystery (as is the special revelation history in Jesus Christ) but are man's faltering attempts at explicitation—though influenced by the saving providence of God. Nevertheless, "non-Christian religions, even though incomplete, rudimentary and partially debased, can be realities *within* a *positive* history of salvation and revelation." To them "a positive salvific function cannot be *a priori* and entirely denied."[43] Rahner illustrates this with the

[39]Rahner, *Foundations*, 173.

[40]Rahner, "Jesus Christ in the Non-Christian Religions," 42.

[41]Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," 125.

[42]Rahner, *Foundations*, 173.

[43]Rahner, "On the Importance of the Non-Christian Religions," 294-295.

case of the Old Testament covenant which contained both elements willed by God *and* many elements which were false and corrupt.[44]

If, then, non-Christian religions can be legitimate or lawful religions with a positive salvific function in God's plan of salvation, "Christianity does not simply confront the members of an extra Christian religion as a mere non-Christian but as someone who can and must already be regarded in this or that respect as an anonymous Christian,"[45] for he lives by the grace of God mediated through his religion and all grace in the present order is the grace of Christ. He thus "possesses (even if only in a hidden way) that which essentially constitutes a Christian, namely, the grace of God which is accepted in faith."[46]

So, the anonymous Christian in Rahner's understanding of the term is "the pagan after the beginning of the Christian mission, who lives in the state of Christ's grace through faith, hope and love, yet who has no explicit knowledge of the fact that his life is orientated in grace-given salvation to Jesus Christ."[47] He has accepted "what is essential in what Christianity wants to mediate to him: his salvation in that grace which objectively is the grace of Jesus Christ."[48] In that respect, he is Christian. But because he is not a Christian in the sense of having made a conscious and willed confession of faith, he is an anonymous Christian, that is, "not identifiable as such either in his own eyes or in those of the Church and of Christians."[49]

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[44]Rahner, "On the Importance of the Non-Christian Religions," 292-293; cf. idem, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," 125-127.

[45]Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," 131.

[46]Rahner, "Observations on the Problem," 292.

[47]Rahner, "Observations on the Problem," 283.

[48]Rahner, *Foundations*, 176.

[49]Bernard Sesboue, "Karl Rahner et les 'chretiens anonymes'," *Etudes* 361 (1984), 527 (author's own translation). In response to H. de Lubac's denial of "anonymous Christianity" or "Church unaware of itself," Rahner points out that "Christianity" can have two meanings. Beside the meaning "Christendom," i.e.,

However, the presence of anonymous Christianity does not make the mission of the Church superfluous. Grace of its very nature has an incarnational dynamism which presses toward its full realization and reflexive self-awareness in explicit Christianity.[50]

All this has consequences for the Church's understanding of itself. The Church is not the privileged community of those who are saved surrounded by the *massa damnata* of non-Christian humanity. It is the "historically tangible vanguard and the historically and socially constituted explicit expression of what the Christian hopes is present as a hidden reality even outside the visible Church,"[51] for the Church is the sacrament of salvation for the world. It is the concrete historical manifestation and effective sacramental sign of the saving grace of Jesus Christ "which takes effect far beyond the confines of the 'visible' Church as sociologically definable."[52] But this grace of Christ and the anonymous Christianity it effects possess an objective and existential tendency to "seek historical and social embodiment in membership in the Church and thus orientate men to the Church so that the salvific

"the sum total of Christians, and so for practical purpose the Church," it can also mean the "being Christian" of the individual Christian. Rahner contends that in this latter sense, it is permitted to speak of anonymous Christianity, if, like de Lubac, one is willing to speak of anonymous Christians (Rahner, "Observations on the Problem," 281). In Rahner's understanding, then, "anonymous Christianity" is "the condition of a man who lives on the one hand in a state of grace and justification, and yet on the other hand has not come into contact with the explicit preaching of the Gospel and is consequently not in a position to call himself a 'Christian'" (Karl Rahner, "Atheism and Implicit Christianity," in Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* IX [London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972], 145).

[50]Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church," in Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* XII (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), 171-177.

[51]Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," 133.

[52]Karl Rahner, "The New Image of the Church," in Rahner, *Theological Investigations* X, 16, cf. 12-24.

significance of the Church remains preserved also for them (*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*)."[53]

"In the final analysis, then, the religions are incomplete," but they are a preparation for the gospel and find their fulfillment in Christ and in his Church. "The missionary mandate remains intact and is reinforced."[54]

Rahner's theology of religions embodies the mainline Roman Catholic view and its basic elements are endorsed by theologians such as J. Heislbetz, H. Schlette, G. Thils, E. Schillebeeckx, A. Dulles, E. Hillman, R. McBrien, P. Rossano (although they may not use the terms anonymous Christian and anonymous Christianity).[55] In a statement in his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, which a Protestant missiological authority has called "the single most significant doctrinal statement of the Catholic Church for mission theology since Vatican Council II,"[56] Pope John Paul II also reflects the influence of Rahner's theory of "anonymous Christians": "The human person—every person without exception—has been redeemed by Christ; because Christ is in a way

[53]Karl Rahner, "Kirchengliedschaft (Kirchenzugehörigkeit)," in Karl Rahner, *Sacramentum Mundi* II (Freiburg: Herder, 1968), 1214 (author's own translation).

[54]Paul Knitter, "Roman Catholic Approaches to Other Religions: Developments and Tensions," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 8 (1984), 51.

[55]Josef Heislbetz, *Theologische Gründe der nichtchristlichen Religionen* (Freiburg: Herder, 1967); Heinz Schlette, *Towards a Theology of Religions* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1966); Gustave Thils, *Propos et problèmes de la théologie des religions non-chrétiennes* (Paris: Casterman, 1966); Edward Schillebeeckx, "The Church and Mankind," *Concilium* 1 (1965), 69-100; Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (New York: Doubleday, 1983); Eugene Hillman, *The Wider Ecumenism* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968); Richard McBrien, *Catholicism* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1961), 245-277; Pietro Rossano, "Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism in Roman Catholic Perspective," in *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, ed. Gerald Anderson and Thomas Stransky (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981), 96-110.

[56]Gerald Anderson in Anderson and Stransky, *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, 111.

united to the human person—every person without exception—even if the individual may not realize this fact."[57]

CHRIST ABOVE RELIGIONS

In recent years, however, some Catholic theologians have felt the need to move beyond Rahner's form of inclusivism[58] and his constitutive Christocentrism. "Just as Rahner no longer tied universal saving grace to the Church," they "no longer tie it to Christ,"[59] and no longer understand Christ as constitutive cause of saving grace.[60] This corresponds to a move to recognize other traditions as parallel and independent ways of salvation which are not necessarily oriented toward or a preparation for Christian revelation.[61]

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[57]John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 14, quoted in Anderson and Stransky, *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, 111.

[58]In a contribution toward a critical ecumenical theology of religions, Hans Küng brands Rahner's inclusivist position ("all religious people are anonymous Christians") as inadequate because from the outset, this raises Christianity "to the status of a super system" and relegates the other religions "to a lower and partial knowledge of the truth" (Hans Küng, "Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Religions: Some Theses for Clarification," *Concilium* 183 [1986], 120 [hereafter cited as "Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Religions"]).

[59]Knitter, "Roman Catholic Approaches to Other Religions: Developments and Tensions," 52.

[60]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 33; Paul Knitter, "Catholic Theology of Religions at a Crossroads," *Concilium* 183 (1986), 101 (hereafter cited as "Catholic Theology of Religions"). For example, while H. Küng admits that the death of Jesus on the cross "for all" has universal significance (Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1976], 426), "he does not relate the non-Christians to Jesus Christ in a causal way.... There is no causal link between Jesus Christ and the salvation of men other than a gnoseological one" (Lucien Richard, *What Are They Saying About Christ and World Religions?* [New York: Paulist Press, 1981], 43).

[61]Cf. Ignace Puthiadam, "Christian Faith and Life in a World of Religious Pluralism," *Concilium* 135 (1980), 105-107.

Nevertheless, despite this Christological shift, most theologians who are dissatisfied with the way Rahner prejudges other traditions as provisional, dependent, or "anonymously Christian" continue to affirm that Jesus Christ is God's full, final revelation, normative for all people.[62] "In other words, if Christ is no longer the constitutive cause of grace and therefore no longer needs to be *within* the religions to validate them, he still stands *above* them as the norm by which their validity is judged and in which they find fulfillment."[63]

CHRIST TOGETHER WITH THE RELIGIONS

Recently, a small number of Catholic theologians have begun to question the definitive normativity or finality of Jesus Christ and Christianity. They have joined other Christian theologians in the move beyond both the traditional exclusivist attitude toward other religions (salvation only in the Church or Christ) and the inclusivist attitude (which recognizes "the salvific richness of other faiths but then views this richness as the result of Christ's redemptive work and as having to be fulfilled in Christ") to a pluralist position ("a move away from insistence on the superiority or finality of Christ and Christianity

[62]Hans Küng affirms: "The most fundamental characteristic of Christianity is that it considers this Jesus as ultimately decisive, definitive, *archetypal* (the German word is *massgebend*, better translated as 'normative') for man's relations with God, with his fellow man, with society" (Küng, *On Being a Christian*, 123). "Any theologian who is not prepared to give up this normativity and finality of Christ does so ... because otherwise he or she would be abandoning the central declaration of the Scriptures that go to make up the New Testament" (Küng, "Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Religions," 122).

[63]Knitter, "Catholic Theology of Religions," 102. Knitter claims that in different forms, this view is represented by H. Küng, M. Hellwig, W. Bühlmann, A. Camps, P. Schoonenberg (Knitter, "Catholic Theology of Religions," 102). Cf. Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 130-135 and notes.

toward a recognition of the independent validity of other ways").[64] They suggest that pluralism may be God's will and that other traditions may have their own independent validity and place in God's plan, alongside of Christ and Christianity. "Buddhism or Hinduism may be as important for the history of salvation as is Christianity, or other revealors *[sic]* and saviors may be as important as Jesus of Nazareth."[65] In this pluralist model, Christ is viewed *together with* rather than against, within or above other religions and other religious figures. But it is felt that the relativity of Christ can be admitted without sacrificing his distinctiveness and universal relevance.[66]

Paul Knitter, professor of theology at Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio, exemplifies this pluralist position. His thought appears to have developed in three stages.

Stage I: A Challenge to the Finality of Jesus Christ

Already in 1978-1979, Knitter challenged the view that Christianity binds its adherents to the superiority, normativity and finality of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. He explained that such a view is untenable in the light of a modern hermeneutic of Scripture and a revisionist method in theology. It is also subversive of genuine dialogue with adherents of other faiths.[67] Adopting a consistent consciousness theology of revelation, he argued that revelation and salvation occur when the person is drawn into a world constituted by myth and symbol.

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[64]Paul Knitter, "Preface," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. John Hick and Paul Knitter (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987), viii.

[65]Knitter, "Catholic Theology of Religions," 103.

[66]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 146.

[67]Paul Knitter, "World Religions and the Finality of Christ: A Critique of Hans Küng's *On Being a Christian*," *Horizons* 5 (1978), 151-164.

> Myth-symbols save. Historical facts do not.... It is only when we are grasped by and find ourselves responding with our whole being to a symbol, myth or story that we are encountering the divine, touching and being touched by "the Ground of Being," and experiencing grace.[68]

Knitter maintains that myth and symbol are salvific not because they correspond to some antecedent objective reality, but because they reach into "the person's innermost being ... and (renew) the whole self."[69] This implies that Christians need not understand the symbol of the Incarnation as a statement about an actual occurrence in the past. It is a myth-symbol on the same level with the stories of the wonderful birth and exaltation of the savior figures of Buddhism and Hinduism. "If it is true that it is the myth-symbol that saves, not historical facts as such, then Christianity is placed essentially on the same level with other religions."[70] Knitter is confident that "such insights will open up new avenues in the present day dialogue among world religions."[71]

Avery Dulles protested: "To hold that salvation is given by such a myth (i.e., myth as a product of creative imagination, the doctrine of the Incarnation viewed as a myth which cannot be taken as a cognitive statement about Jesus) rather than by the redemptive action of God in his incarnate Son, radically shifts the center of Christian faith."[72] Along with many contemporary theologians, he denies that such a transposition is called for by sound developments in hermeneutics or theological method. Dulles affirms that Charles Davis had good reason to write some years ago: "Frankly I do not myself see how the universality and finality of Christ can be denied without emptying the

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[68]Paul Knitter, "Jesus-Buddha-Krishna: Still Present?" *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 16 (1979), 657, cf. 651-664.

[69]Knitter, "Jesus-Buddha-Krishna: Still Present?", 657, cf. 651-664.

[70]Knitter, "Jesus-Buddha-Krishna: Still Present?", 664, cf. 664-670.

[71]Knitter, "Jesus-Buddha-Krishna: Still Present?", 664, cf. 664-670.

[72]Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), 189-190 (hereafter cited as *Models of Revelation*).

Christian tradition of meaning."[73] What Davis affirms does not deny "that Christ is a symbol or that the Christ story is in some sense a myth." However, it does imply that "the myth or symbol is disclosive of the meaning inherent in the Christ-event itself."[74]

Stage II: Theocentrism

The second stage of Knitter's theology of religions is found in the book *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (1985). After an excellent survey of Christian attitudes toward the World Religions, Knitter concludes that from the early part of this century an evolution has been taking place within Christian theology of religions, an evolution from ecclesiocentrism (Christ/Church against the religions) to christocentrism (Christ within or above) to theocentrism. Theocentrism means that the center of salvation history and the starting point for interreligious dialogue is no longer the Church (as necessary for salvation) nor Christ (as normative for salvation) but God, the divine Mystery. It is God, and not the Church and Christ, "towards whom all religions move, and from whom they gain their salvific efficacy."[75] At this time, Knitter felt that the theocentric model for a theology of religions "holds the greatest promise for the future of interreligious dialogue and for the continued evolution of the meaning of Jesus Christ for the world."[76]

He was aware, however, that many would argue that theocentrism contradicts the understanding of Christ affirmed by the New Testament and by tradition, that it weakens both personal commitment to Jesus

[73]Charles Davis, *Christ and the World Religions* (London: Hodder & Staughton, 1970), 127.

[74]Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 190.

[75]Gavin D'Costa, "The Pluralist Paradigm in the Christian Theology of Religions," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 39 (1986), 212.

[76]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 166-167.

Christ and a distinctly Christian contribution to the needs of the world.[77] Knitter responds that this is not the case—that the christology of the theocentric model is a valid interpretation of Christian tradition and experience (Ch. 9) and that a theocentric method has validity for interreligious dialogue (Ch. 10). This analysis will concentrate on his defense of theocentric christology.

Knitter seeks to establish a universal relevance of Christ which does not insist on his definitive and normative relevance.[78] He rejects the relativism of Ernst Troeltsch which denies any uniqueness to Jesus and reduces him to one of the many revelations appropriate to a particular culture and epoch. On the other hand, he objects to the traditional Catholic models which insist on either exclusive or inclusive uniqueness for Jesus. "All these traditional Christian claims are insufficiently sensitive to the way they contradict contemporary awareness of historical relativity and the way they impede authentic dialogue with believers of other faiths."[79] He proposes a non-normative, theocentric christology in which Jesus possesses a "relational" or "complementary" uniqueness "defined by its ability to relate to—that is to include and be included by—other unique religious figures."[80] Jesus remains unique and decisive for his followers, but he also possesses universal relevance for other religions. His uniqueness is essentially related to other religious figures. Here Jesus is viewed not as exclusive or absolutely normative but "as

[77]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 167.

[78]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 142.

[79]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 171.

[80]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 171-172. In speaking of "non-normative Christology," Knitter is "not questioning norms *simpliciter*, but absolute or one-and-only norms—norms that have to be exclusive or at least inclusive of all others. In my proposed model, Jesus remains universally normative, but I am asking whether Christians can recognize that other revelations or revealers might also be universally normative" (Paul Knitter, "Review Symposium: Author's Response," *Horizons* 13 [1986], 131).

theocentric, as a universally relevant manifestation (sacrament, incarnation) of divine revelation and salvation."[81]

Knitter argues that non-normative, theocentric christology does not contradict the New Testament proclamation of Jesus and is a valid interpretation of that proclamation. It is a new christology and a new interpretation occasioned by a new *kairos*[82] in history—the situation of a deepened historical consciousness, a new awareness of religious pluralism and a new vision of religious unity—the unitive pluralism of religions.[83] This situation forms a new horizon of human experience within which the text and context of the New Testament must be understood and interpreted if we are to hear what it really means today. This implies that the tradition must meet new questions and face possibly radical re-interpretation.[84]

Knitter intends to show that in the light 1) of New Testament christology, 2) of the psychological, cultural and historical background of the New Testament exclusivist language, 3) of the implications of contemporary transcendental, process and liberation Christologies and 4) of the nature of resurrection faith, it is possible to respond to the *kairos* of today and endorse a theocentric theology of religions, based on a theocentric non-normative reinterpretation of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

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[81]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 172.

[82]A *kairos* is a special moment in history "when, because of the particular constellation of events and personalities, genuinely new possibilities and advances are latent" (Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 18).

[83]"Unitive pluralism is a unity in which each religion, although losing some of its individualism (its separate ego) will intensify its personality (its self-awareness through relationship). Each religion will retain its uniqueness, but this uniqueness will develop and take on new depths by relating to other religions in mutual dependence" (Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 9).

[84]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 172-173, 18-19.

1. Uniqueness and New Testament Christology

What can we learn from the evolution of New Testament christology? Knitter emphasizes first of all that Jesus' preaching was theocentric, centered on the "kingdom of God," that he most likely understood himself as the eschatological prophet, anointed by God's Spirit "who was to complete the mission of the earlier prophets by announcing and enacting the good news of God's final rule." He understood his personal relationship with God on the basis of an "original Abba-experience" as one "of special intimacy with God, a special sonship." This awareness of God as his Father "does not automatically imply exclusivity" but it does "indicate specialness, uniqueness." However, we are reminded that "in his awareness of himself as the eschatological prophet ... Jesus remained profoundly theocentric."[85]

On the basis of a saving and revelatory experience of Jesus, and in dialogue with images and categories of various cultural contexts of the early Church, the early communities expressed the meaning of Jesus "in various trajectories or creedal perspectives ... which developed simultaneously and with intermingling influence." Knitter adopts the dubious classification of the four creedal perspectives suggested by E. Schillebeeckx: 1) the *maranatha* or *parousia* christology, 2) the divine man christology, 3) the wisdom and logos christologies, and 4) the paschal or easter christology. The New Testament is "the end result and merger of different trajectories and images of Jesus, each having a specific context, presupposition and implication."[86] With J. A. T. Dunn, Knitter recognizes that from the beginning "the significance of Christ could only be apprehended by a diversity of formulations which, though not always compatible with each other were not regarded as rendering each other invalid."[87] He insists that

[85]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 173-175.

[86]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 175-177.

[87]James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (London: SCM Press, 1980), 265-267; quoted by Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 178.

this diversity must be preserved, in particular when evaluating the importance of the incarnational model which represents the final stage of New Testament christology.

This christology with its diversity can only be understood as a process of gradual unfolding, a process which was, Knitter emphasizes, not a "development" which made explicit what was implicit from the beginning,[88] but a "genuine evolution of understanding" in which "new species of symbols and images were employed" which were "genuinely different from what was earlier understood." To portray the process as a development from implicit to explicit understanding would not only "blur the picture of what really happened" but also "blunt the contemporary significance of that picture."[89]

As a clear example of this process of evolution, Knitter proposes "the way the early Churches came to recognize Jesus as divine, as the incarnate Son of God." There was an evolution from "a predominantly functional, eschatological understanding of Jesus as Son of God to an incarnational, even ontological proclamation of his divinity" in John's Gospel.[90] This incarnational christology became the dominant christology of the second and third centuries.

Knitter affirms that this general picture of the evolution of New Testament christology provides guidelines for the task of interpreting Jesus' uniqueness with a view to interreligious dialogue:

a) "The christological trajectories and titles are not definitions but interpretations" in mythic-symbolic language "of who Jesus was for his early followers." These mythic models or symbolic images should not be taken literally, but should be taken seriously "by entering into the interpretative process ... by feeling [their] symbolic power ... by

[88]As proposed by Charles F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977), 3-4, 135 (hereafter cited as *The Origin of Christology*).

[89]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 179.

[90]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 179-180. A rather incoherent spelling out of this progression is given in these pages.

understanding them in their own historical context, by judging and interpreting their meaning in our own situations."[91]

b) The diversity of New Testament christology is to be preserved. "No single New Testament trajectory or image of Jesus should be absolutized and allowed to absorb the others." Not all were then and are now equally relevant, but all possess a certain validity, and they complement each other. "As historical contexts change, some models might have to be toned down and others played up." Knitter explains that this is what John Hick is doing in dialogue with other religions when he warns against understanding Jesus only or primarily according to a literal interpretation of the Incarnation.[92]

c) The New Testament witness about Jesus must not be absolutized. "All the New Testament images of Jesus *taken together*" do not exhaust the meaning of Jesus for Christians and for the world. "The evolutionary process of interpretation" mirrored in the New Testament "must continue today in the same manner in which it took place then: in continuity with what went before ... faithful to the past without being limited by it, preserving the past by renewing it with new symbols."[93]

d) This continuing evolutionary process of interpretation of christology "will need to make use of one of the main forces that moved it forward in the New Testament period: dialogue with other cultures and other religions."[94]

e) The effort to continue the evolution of christology requires "a renewal or return to the theocentrism that marked Jesus' understanding of his mission and ... of himself." This theocentric basis is needed to

[91]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 180.

[92]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 181.

[93]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 181.

[94]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 181.

be true to the origins and to promote the effort "to understand, value and dialogue with other religions."[95]

Critique of (1) Uniqueness and New Testament Christology

Knitter is undoubtedly correct when he affirms the unanimous consensus of New Testament scholars that "the focus and core content of Jesus' original message was the 'kingdom of God'," and therefore theocentric.[96] However, his affirmation only expresses half the truth, for it does justice neither to the special character of this messenger and his message nor to the indissoluble linking of the preaching to the person of the preacher. In Jesus' message, the kingdom of God is inextricably bound up with the person of Jesus. "It is the person of Jesus whose activities effect the inbreaking of the eschatological rule of God and who therefore stands at the center of his eschatological message."[97] The synoptic tradition contains "uncontroverted sayings which in a direct manner bring to expression the function of Jesus as eschatological mediator of salvation": Lk. 11:20 par.; Mk. 3:27 par.; Lk. 10:23f. par.[98] H. Schürman concurs that in his original *Basileia*-preaching, Jesus directly co-thematized himself (e.g., Lk. 10:23f. par.). "He does not do this in an explicit manner (titularly) but in a 'self-forgetfulness' which emphasized the 'coming of God'. But these are implicit yet direct christological statements of Jesus about himself as the mediator of the Basileia."[99]

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[95]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 181-182.

[96]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 173.

[97]Werner G. Kümmel, *Promise and Fulfillment* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 108.

[98]Anton Vögtle, "Der verkündigende und der verkündigte Jesus 'Christus'," in *Wer ist Jesus Christus?*, ed. Joseph Sauer (Freiburg: Herder, 1977), 43-44 (hereafter cited as "Jesus 'Christus'"), all translations from this source are the author's own.

[99]Heinz Schürmann, *Gottes Reich—Jesu Geschick* (Freiburg: Herder, 1983), 43-44 (author's own translation).

Jesus' kingdom message, then, is centered about God certainly, but also about himself. His claim to inaugurate the end-time salvific action of God as the final revealer implies as its basis an immediacy to God which alone is able to explain this unheard-of claim. Jesus objectified and verbalized his unique relationship to God by means of his proclamation of the presence of the Rule of God through his activity and person.[100] The resurrection-exaltation revealed that the still outstanding coming of the consummated kingdom of God was connected with his person, as the prayer of the Aramaic-speaking primitive community proves: *Maranatha* (Our Lord, come).

It was this immediacy to God revealed in Jesus' lifetime and confirmed by the resurrection that the New Testament communities explicitated by means of multiple titles and images culminating in the pre-existence and incarnation christologies.[101] C. F. D. Moule is correct in seeing here a "development" of "what was already there from the beginning." The various interpretations of Jesus found in the New Testament "are not successive additions of something new, but only the drawing out and articulating of what is there. They represent various stages in the development of perception."[102] Of course, Knitter is correct in claiming the employment of "new species of symbols and images," but they are used to unfold and make explicit something already implicit. The resulting christologies do not represent completely new growths, new species in a process of evolution. Both the functional, eschatological understanding of Jesus as Son of God and the incarnational proclamation of his divinity were explicitations of the perception of Jesus' immediacy to God present from the beginning. They are expressions of "the transcendental quality which from the beginning seems to have attached to Christ."[103]

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[100]Rahner, *Foundations*, 249-252.

[101]Vögtle, "Jesus 'Christus'," 91.

[102]Moule, *The Origin of Christology*, 3.

[103]Moule, *The Origin of Christology*, 141. In connection with Rom. 1:3-4, M. Hengel affirms: "For to talk of Jesus as Son of God is at the same time to make

The conclusions to be drawn are that an exclusive theocentrism is not to be found in Jesus' message of the Kingdom and that the New Testament communities developed a christology which possessed transcendent implications from the beginning. A theocentrism faithful to the New Testament includes a christocentrism. Neither is exclusive of the other.

In the light of his previous writings, questions arise when Knitter describes the christological trajectories and titles as interpretations in mythic symbolic language "of who Jesus was for his followers," and when he writes that the mythic models or symbolic images should not be taken literally but should be taken seriously. Does this imply that the symbolic language is expressive but non-indicative, i.e., not disclosive of ontological reality? Does the myth-symbol of incarnation describe no objective occurrence involving Jesus of Nazareth? Or has Knitter modified the position he held in Stage I? The following sections may throw light on these questions.

2. *Uniqueness and Exclusiveness*

New Testament christology is not only diverse, evolutionary and dialogical. Much of it "is also *exclusive*, or at least *normative*" (cf. 1 Tim. 2:5; Acts 4:12; Jn. 1:14, 14:6; 1 Cor. 15:21-22; Heb. 9:12). Knitter admits that when the early Christians proclaimed that Jesus was "one and only," the "final" prophet providing the normative, final word, they meant it. But he claims that such "one and only" and "final" language belongs "more to the *medium* used by the New Testament than to its core *message*."[104]

He argues that to attain the core message of the New Testament, we must free its expression from three limitations of the culture-limited environment of that period: 1) from the "classicist culture" for which

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a statement about the 'transcendent' being of the risen Christ with God in his glory, into which he has been 'transformed'" (Martin Hengel, *The Son of God* [London: SCM Press, 1976], 60).

[104]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 182.

truth was one, unchanging, normative, 2) from the first Christians' Jewish eschatological-apocalyptic mentality, which led them to interpret their experience of God in Jesus as final and unsurpassable, 3) from the survival language of a community with a minority status which formulated its beliefs in the absolute and exclusive terms necessary to project a clear identity and to evoke total commitment.

"Understood from such a sociological perspective, the absolute and exclusive quality of New Testament christology tells us more about the social situation of the early Church than about the ontological nature of Jesus. This language was more moral than metaphysical." Knitter affirms, however, that this does not imply that there is no truth-content, no ontology at all, within early christology. "The early Christians were proposing a world view that included a definite view of Jesus."[105] But he is confident that if we understand the absolute, one-and-only descriptions of Jesus as insuring the survival of the community rather than as offering a once-and-for-all definition of Jesus, we can today still adhere to the basic world view of early Christianity without insisting on its absolute, exclusive adjectives. "In fact, in our present pluralistic situation, this seems to be what Christians are called to do."[106]

This sociological function of christological language reveals, claims Knitter, the basic nature of the exclusivist language used in the New Testament. The "one and only" language belongs not to the language of philosophy and dogmatics but rather to the language of confession and love. A husband's profession that his wife is "the most beautiful woman in the world" is readily understood at its proper level of meaning and is not transposed into an historically exclusive claim. The confession that Jesus is the one and only Savior should be interpreted analogously. It defines identity and membership within the community, personal relationship and commitment rather than the person of Jesus for all time. In other words, the language of

[105]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 184.

[106]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 183-184.

the heart is not the language of the head and their differences must be respected.[107]

Most recently, Knitter has modified his terminology under the influence of liberation theology. He affirms that in order to distinguish New Testament talk about Jesus from philosophical language, "it would be more accurate and pastorally effective to call the New Testament claims about Jesus 'action language'," rather than "survival" and "love" language. The New Testament writer used "one and only" language in order to promote "the action or practice of total commitment to his vision and way," not *primarily* to give definite theologico-philosophical statements which exclude others. "If Christians today can continue with that same action ... without the traditional 'one and only' language, then they are still holding to the core content of the original message."[108]

Critique of (2) Uniqueness and Exclusiveness

Knitter's attempt to separate the "one and only" and "final" language from the core message of the New Testament is particularly unconvincing. The "one and only" and "final" language brought to expression what the disciples experienced in Jesus' life and death and in the resurrection appearances. Right from the beginning, the revelation concerning Jesus Christ was communicated in confessional formulas, e.g., "Jesus is Lord" (Rom. 10:9). "The confession (*homologia*) represented the agreement or consensus, in which the Christian community was united; that core of essential conviction and belief to which Christians subscribed and openly testified."[109] According to J. D. G. Dunn, "Jesus is Lord" (Rom. 10:9) is the

[107]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 184-186.

[108]Paul Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," in Hick and Knitter, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, 196.

[109]Vernon Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (Leiden: Brill, 1963), 20.

principal confession of faith for Paul and his churches.[110] "Lord" was the title given to Jesus as a consequence of his resurrection-exaltation. The confession "Jesus is Lord" explicitated the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus and illuminated the function and nature of the risen Jesus. By his resurrection-exaltation, he now shares the authority and ruling power of God. Sharing in the divine glory, he now possesses a divine condition. The risen one possesses "glory," "dominion" and will come in judgement. In other words, the whole gamut of prerogatives and attributes hitherto reserved to Yahweh were his. As a means of expressing this royal and transcendent status, the Palestinian Jewish Christians borrowed the title "Lord," which the Semitic and Greek speaking Jews of Palestine applied to God, and used it of Jesus. "The title would suggest an equation of Jesus with Yahweh, a setting of him on a par with Yahweh, but not an identification—because he is not *Abba.*"[111]

This is corroborated by the Aramaic prayer *marana-tha* ("Our Lord, come") by which the primitive Aramaic-speaking community implored the speedy coming of the risen Lord from heaven as the mediator of definitive salvation. This prayer attributes to the risen Lord a function which is without analogy in the Jewish world of ideas.[112] "That the petition for the coming of salvation is directed not to God himself, but to a bearer of salvation different from God was from the standpoint of every Jewish expectation of salvation something absolutely unheard of."[113] Jesus is here placed on the side of God as a figure of "one and only," "final" and even divine significance.[114]

What the *marana-tha* prayer presupposed has been explicitated in

[110]James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 50.

[111]Joseph Fitzmyer, *To Advance the Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 223.

[112]Leonhard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament* II (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 25.

[113]Vögtle, "Jesus 'Christus'," 74.

[114]Hans Kessler, *Sucht den Lebenden nicht bei den Toten* (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag,

the pre-Pauline hymn to Christ quoted in Phil. 2:6-11 ("God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every other name" [v. 9]). This means that God has given the exalted one his own name. "For the expression 'the name above every name' is to be understood as a paraphrase of the most holy name of God, i.e., as a rendering of the tetragram" (YHWH) which is expressed by the title *Kyrios* (Lord).[115] But this means that he was given "the name of God himself denoting the divine being."[116] "The name received by Jesus is not a simple 'title'; it designates the dignity and manner of being that the title *Kyrios* supposes."[117]

Because the exalted Jesus shares the manner of being proper to God, v. 10 applies to him what Is. 45:23 said of Yahweh: "To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear." Isaiah was thinking of the universal worship of Yahweh by all the nations of the earth. The hymn extends this worship "to include all sentient beings throughout the entire cosmos and applies it to Christ."[118] He receives the cosmic adoration appropriate to God and all creation is subject to him as *Kyrios*. These verses express "the conviction that henceforth Christ is the Lord of all life and holds the reins of cosmic and human destiny in His hands."[119]

These examples indicate that the confession "Jesus is Lord" expressed faith in Jesus' divinity. "'Lord' does not just mean 'a lord'

1985), 114 (hereafter cited as *Sucht den Lebenden*), all translations from this source are the author's own.

[115]Ulrich B. Müller, "Der Christushymnus Phil 2:6-11," *Zeitschrift fiir die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 79 (1988), 38 (author's own translation).

[116]Reginald Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York: Charles Scribners & Sons, 1965), 248.

[117]Jacques Dupont, "Nom de Jesus," in *Supplement au Dictionnaire de la Bible* VI, eds. Henri Cazelles and André Feuillet (Paris: Letouzey et Ane, 1960), 518 (author's own translation).

[118]Ralph P. Martin, *Carmen Christi* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 255.

[119]Martin, *Carmen Christi*, xxxiii.

who can stand alongside competing gods and saviors. 'Lord' carries the authority of the one God of all humanity."[120] "One and only" and "final" language, therefore, cannot be separated from the core message of the New Testament concerning the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and its meaning. This language expresses what the central confession that Jesus is Lord and the original faith that God raised him from the dead really mean: "God was in Christ reconciling *the world* to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). Through the original Easter experience occurring in the revelatory encounter with the risen Jesus it was definitively revealed:

> God himself has acted eschatologically *in Jesus* (and nowhere else); and *Jesus* was and is the eschatological (surpassing all that went before and unsurpassable by all still to come) messenger and mediator of salvation, the Messiah, God's Word and Son himself; *his* life and cross and he himself are placed in force and validity as universally significant for salvation. First from there can it be said that Jesus' whole humanity was the definitive and full self-expression of God in history, therefore, the incarnation of the Word or Son of God (Jn. 1:14).[121]

3. Uniqueness and Contemporary Understanding of Incarnation

Knitter attempts to strengthen his case by showing that a non-normative christology is implicit in the transcendental theology of Karl Rahner and the process theology of John Cobb and Norman Pittenger, "even if they do not realize it or are reluctant to follow the momentum of their own thought."[122]

Since Rahner affirms that the incarnation of God in Jesus is "the realization of the highest possibility of man's being (a reality absolutely open upwards) ... the unique *supreme* case of the total actualization

[120]Pheme Perkins, "Christianity and World Religions," *Interpretation* 40 (1986), 371.

[121]Kessler, *Sucht den Lebenden*, 319-320.

[122]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 186.

of human reality,"[123] and since Knitter thinks Rahner states "that the divine self communication constituting the hypostatic union in Jesus is 'intended for everyone',"[124] Knitter claims that he "finds it difficult to get a firm grasp of [the] reasons why" Rahner still insists that the Incarnation (the culmination and fulfillment of what human nature is meant to be) "has taken place and can take place only once."[125] He maintains that in one context, "Rahner seems to argue that the eternal word has been and can be identified with only one human being."[126] He finds that elsewhere Rahner affirms that to claim that incarnation "has to take place in the case of every man" would be to reduce it "to the level of nature, to the level of what is given always and everywhere.

[123]Rahner, *Theological Investigations* I, 183; Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* IV (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 110; quoted in Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 188.

[124]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 188, quoting Rahner, *Foundations*, 201. Rahner actually states: "The assumption of the human and the 'union' (in the hypostatic union) has the character of a self-communication of God. In this self-communication a human reality is assumed so that the reality of God is communicated to what is assumed, to the humanity, and in the first instance that of Christ. But this very communication which is the purpose of the assumption is a communication in and through what we call grace and glory, and this is what is intended for everyone" (Rahner, *Foundations*, 201). Previously, Rahner had explained: "The intrinsic effect of the hypostatic union for the assumed humanity of the Logos consists precisely and in a real sense *only* in the very thing which is ascribed to all men as their goal and their fulfillment, namely, the immediate vision of God which the created human soul of Christ enjoys" (Rahner, *Foundations*, 200).

[125]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 188.

[126]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 188, quoting Rahner, *Foundations*, 224: "For 'what' he [Jesus] is as the self-expression of the Logos and 'what' we are is the same. We call it 'human nature'. But the Unbridgeable difference is constituted by the fact that this 'what' in him is spoken as his self-expression, and this is not the case with us." Knitter explains: "This means that Jesus is 'the offer for us' of God's divinizing grace; we are 'the recipients of God's offer to us'." Cf. Rahner, *Foundations*, 202.

The truth of a divine humanity would be mythologized if it were simply a datum of every person always and everywhere."[127]

Knitter claims that in both arguments, Rahner seems to believe that to allow incarnation, as it took place in Jesus, to possibly happen elsewhere would be to jeopardize what did take place in Jesus. "To make the incarnation into a myth applicable to all humanity would be to undermine its historicity."[128]

These answers do not satisfy Knitter. He claims that Rahner (and the Process theologians) rightly respects and treats belief in the Incarnation as a true *myth*, a meaningful model, for expressing what Christians have experienced Jesus to be. He takes "the myth seriously but not literally."[129] He claims further that in taking the myth seriously and reappropriating its truth, Rahner (and the Process theologians) interprets the myth of God's incarnation in Jesus as an expression of the non-dualistic unity between divinity and humanity. "He endorses a given, at least potential at-one-ment between God and humanity which can be realized and lived by all."[130]

Knitter holds that this is what Troeltsch, Toynbee, Jung, the Catholic model with the notion of the supernatural existential, and Panikkar with his cosmotheandric principle all assert: that "incarnation is not a one-time-event. Rather it is an ideal for all, an ideal rooted in the ancient christian belief in the one, universal logos or wisdom of God."[131] He affirms (wrongly) that all this is what Rahner *says* in order

[127]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 188, quoting Rahner, *Foundations*, 218; Rahner, *Theological Investigations* IV, 112.

[128]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 188.

[129]Knitter explains that this means: "they avoid the incredible (for many) and exclusivistic understanding of Jesus as a preexistent divine being who comes down from heaven, takes on a human nature (without a human personality) does his work of redeeming and then goes back to heaven" (Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 191).

[130]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 191.

[131]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 191.

to show how belief in the Incarnation resonates with human experience. But he laments that he "hold(s) back from facing what seems to me to be the clear implications" of what he is saying: "that there can be *other incarnations*, other individuals who achieved (or were granted) the same fullness of God-man unity realized in Jesus."[132]

Knitter believes that Rahner has never "squarely faced the question why the eternal Word cannot be fully incarnated in more than one person." On purely theoretical grounds, Knitter does not see why the Incarnation must of necessity be unique in history, and he holds that the affirmation that Jesus is the only incarnation of God should not be "dogmatically mediated"—that is, made only on the basis of Christian experience and doctrine. It has to be "'critically mediated'—that is, open to examination and verification through concrete dialogue with other religions."[133]

Critique of (3) Uniqueness and Contemporary Understanding of Incarnation

Knitter is correct in stressing that Rahner considers the Incarnation as the highest actuation of man's essence: "The incarnation of God is ... the unique *supreme* case of the actuation of the essence of human reality."[134] But Rahner and the notion of the supernatural existential do not say, as Knitter claims, that "incarnation is not a one-time-event,"[135] for Rahner explains that the fulfillment of man's essence in the Incarnation remains a potential and hypothetical fulfillment "as long as it is not proved that (man's) transcendence would lose all meaning if it did not find precisely this fulfillment." Rather, the fulfillment of the transcendence of man by way of incarnation is dependent on the

[132]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 191.

[133]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 191-192.

[134]Rahner, *Theological Investigations* IV, 110 (translation modified in the light of the original German, *Schriften zur Theologie* IV [Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1962], 142). Also cf. Rahner, *Foundations*, 218.

[135]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 191.

freedom of God and cannot be known "independently of the revelation of its *de facto* existence."[136] Secondly, concludes Rahner, "it follows that the potentiality need not be realized in every man," and the existential fact of sin and alienation "shows us when our situation is brought to light in the word of God, that the possibility has not in fact been actualized in us."[137]

But the question remains: granted that there is no need for a universal incarnation, on the level of theoretical possibility could not the eternal Word be fully incarnated in more than one person? Could there not be more than one incarnation? To my knowledge, Rahner never explicitly discussed this question on the purely theoretical level. In recent theological discussion, it is a disputed question.[138]

However, we must also ask the question of fact. On the level of fact, the suggestion that the Word of God became incarnate in more than one human person is excluded by the revelation of the mystery of God's plan of salvation for all in Jesus Christ. "For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:9-10). "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:19-20), or more briefly: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19).

Rahner accepts the idea of incarnation that informs the Christian

[136]Rahner, *Theological Investigations* IV, 110.

[137]Rahner, *Theological Investigations* IV, 110.

[138]For an affirmative answer, cf. Richard Viladesau, *Answering For Faith* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 236-244. For a negative answer, cf. Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Incarnation* (Cambridge: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 23, 166-169 (hereafter cited as *Incarnation*). Anselm Min, "Christology and Theology of Religions: John Hick and Karl Rahner," *Louvain Studies* 11 (1986), 12. The validity of an affirmative answer is not as clear-cut as Knitter believes.

tradition according to which God the Son's coming amongst us as one of us is necessarily particular and unique because the whole history of the world from start to finish is seen as pivoted upon the eternal Son's personal union with and self-expression in the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth. "Right from its very inception God's plan and God's execution of this plan in the implementation of his will to save all men has proceeded from the God-man as its starting point and to him as its goal."[139] Jesus Christ, the God-man, is then the goal "towards whom all history was leading, the climax in relation to whom all subsequent history takes its meaning, and in whom all things will in the end be summed up in God."[140] In this final state, Jesus Christ will be "the symbolic reality which conveys to us the immediacy of God,"[141] "the human face of God for all men and women for all eternity. As such, the incarnate Son can of course only be thought of as one."[142]

Rahner's transcendental christology, then, does not imply "that there can be other incarnations, other individuals who achieved (or were granted) the same fullness of God-human unity realized in Jesus."[143] Rahner accepts that the plan of salvation revealed in Jesus Christ implies that the incarnation of the eternal Word in Jesus of Nazareth is unique, and he sees no evidence that this has occurred in anyone else. He asks: "Where else is there a man in the clear tangible light of history who has ever made any claim" which implies "that this event has taken place in him.... Where apart from Jesus could I find the courage for such a belief?"[144]

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[139]Rahner, *Theological Investigations* X, 39.

[140]Hebblethwaite, *Incarnation*, 166.

[141]Rahner, *Theological Investigations* IV, 244; Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* III, 44-45.

[142]Hebblethwaite, *Incarnation*, 166.

[143]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 191.

[144]Rahner, *Theological Investigations* V, 13. For Rahner's view of Jesus' claim, cf. Rahner, *Foundations*, 245-255.

In this second stage of his theology of religions, Knitter never explicitly explains his understanding of incarnation. In the previous section (2), Knitter conceded that though the language of the early Church "was more moral than metaphysical" and though "its purpose was more to define identity and membership within the community than to define the person of Jesus for all time," this does not mean "that there is no truth-content, no ontology at all within early Christianity."[145] Gavin D'Costa concludes from this that "unlike Hick," Knitter is "clear about the ontological claims of Christianity."[146] But apart from the ambiguous qualification added by Knitter to the above affirmation,[147] certain statements concerning Karl Rahner's (and the Process theologians') theology of incarnation raise questions concerning Knitter's understanding of incarnation. For example, he claims that Rahner treats belief in the Incarnation as a true *myth*, a meaningful model, for expressing what Christians have experienced Jesus to be, that he takes "the myth seriously but not literally."[148]

First of all, it must be pointed out that Rahner criticizes mythological understandings of the Incarnation.[149] For Rahner, the classical dogma of the Incarnation is not mythology and "the classical Christology of

[145]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 184.

[146]D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, 36.

[147]"The early Christians were proposing a world view that included a definite view of Jesus. Yet if we understand the absolute one-and-only descriptions of Jesus as insuring the survival of the community rather than as offering a once-and-for-all definition of Jesus, we can still adhere to the basic world view of early Christianity without insisting on its absolute, exclusive adjectives" (Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 184). But would we still have to adhere to the "definite (ontological?) view of Jesus"?

[148]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 191.

[149]Rahner, *Theological Investigations* I, 164, 179-180; idem, *Theological Investigations* IV, 117-118; idem, *Foundations*, 226-227.

the dogma is in no need of demythologization."[150] The dogma of the Incarnation is to be taken literally: the eternal Word of the Father became man.

Secondly, if the dogma of the Incarnation is to be taken literally, it is not a "myth" or a "model" in the sense of a representational picture or statement "for expressing what Christians have experienced Jesus to be." Rather, it is a literal, though mystery-filled, statement of what Christians believe Jesus to be. Certainly there are ways of picturing or representing the Incarnation, e.g., the kenotic model or the model rejected by Knitter.[151] "But the point is that these are precisely models of the Incarnation. Incarnation is not itself one of the models. Rather it is what is being pictured in these various in-adequate ways."[152]

Thirdly, in speaking of the Incarnation as a "myth" or "model" for expressing what Christians have experienced Jesus to be, Knitter arouses the suspicion that he has not changed the view he held in Stage I that Christians need not understand the myth-symbol of the Incarnation as a statement about an actual occurrence in the past, that it is expressive of Christian experience of who Jesus is for them but not disclosive of ontological reality. His vague concession that he does not mean "that there is no truth-content, no ontology at all within early Christology" does not quiet this suspicion.[153]

4. Uniqueness and Liberation Theology

Knitter also finds in liberation christology implicit pointers for the relativizing of the uniqueness of Jesus. Liberation theology insists on the primacy of praxis both for the origin and confirmation of theory and doctrine. The "truth" of dogma and tradition must continually be

[150]Rahner, *Theological Investigations* I, 198.

[151]Cf. note 128.

[152]Hebblethwaite, *Incarnation*, 7.

[153]Cf. notes 144 and 146.

exposed to the "ultimate arbiter" of truth which is "the transformative response of Christian praxis."[154] Applied to christology, this means:

> We cannot begin to know who this Jesus of Nazareth is unless we are following him, no matter what that demands. That is the starting point. Furthermore, everything we know or say about him must be repossessed and reclarified in the praxis of following him through the changing contexts of history. That is a never-ending process.[155]

As L. Boff tells us: "No title conferred on Christ can be absolutized."[156]

Besides warning against the "danger that Christology may assimilate the biblical titles of Christ *uncritically*, without an awareness of their historical relativity," liberation theologians are acutely aware of the danger of "ideologizing the titles of Christ," using them as a christological "justification" for "social and religious status." Therefore, there is a need to examine each of them under the lens of praxis. They emphasize that what is most important is not to proclaim "Lord, Lord" or "only Saviour, only Savior" but to work for the liberation of the kingdom (Mt. 7:21-23).[157]

Knitter lists four implications that such praxis-based christology contains for the question concerning the uniqueness of Jesus:

a) "Liberation christology clarifies what are the conditions of the possibility of claiming any kind of exclusive or inclusive uniqueness

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[154]Matthew Lamb, "Dogma, Experience, and Political Theology," *Concilium* 113 (1979), 87, quoted in Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 194. M. Lamb actually wrote: "The objectivity of the truth of dogmas is conditioned by the transformative response of Christian praxis." He cautions against overlooking "the imperatives to change which they (dogmas) express."

[155]This is Knitter's summary of the ideas of J. Sobrino, L. Boff and R. Ruether in Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 195.

[156]Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978), 229-231.

[157]Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 229-231, 156-157.

of Jesus."[158] Knitter claims that what Sobrino affirms about the universality of Jesus is equally valid for uniqueness or finality:

> His universality cannot be demonstrated or proved on the basis of formulas or symbols that are universal in themselves: e.g., dogmatic formulas, the kerygma as event, the resurrection as universal symbol of hope and so forth. The real universality of Jesus shows up only in its concrete embodiment.[159]

Applied to Jesus' uniqueness or finality, Knitter interprets this to mean that Christian conviction and proclamation that Jesus is God's final or normative revelation cannot rest on traditional doctrine or on personal experience but can only be known and affirmed in the praxis of historical involvement.[160]

b) The method of liberation christology shows why normative claims for Jesus are not possible at present. An examination of the concrete data of the praxis of Jesus and the Church reveals that the data is not sufficient to establish the normativity or finality of Jesus. Christians have neither actively learned from nor worked with other religions sufficiently to "know, with certainty, that there is no other like Jesus" or "to make the universal claim that Jesus' revelation surpasses and is therefore normative for these other faiths."[161]

c) The method of liberation christology also shows why normative claims for Jesus are not necessary. In the perspective of liberation theology, "the one thing necessary to be a Christian and to carry on the job of theology is commitment to the kingdom vision of liberating, redemptive action." At present, "on the basis of their praxis, Christians *do* know that the vision and power of Jesus of Nazareth *is* a means for liberation from injustice and oppression"

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[158]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 195.

[159]Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978), 9-10.

[160]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 195-196.

[161]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 196.

and for promoting the kingdom of God. Uncertainty whether Jesus is normative for all others "does not interfere with commitment to the praxis of following him."[162]

d) "Liberation christology allows, even requires, that Christians recognize the possibility of other liberators or saviors, other incarnations." If liberating praxis is the "ultimate arbiter" of truth and authentic divine revelation, "Christians must be open to the possibility that in their dialogue with other believers they may encounter religious figures whose vision offers a liberating praxis and promise of the kingdom equal to that of Jesus."[163]

Critique of (4) Uniqueness and Liberation Theology

Clodovis Boff, liberation theologian and brother of Leonardo Boff, has written a remarkable work on the epistemological presuppositions for a theology of liberation.[164] The theology of liberation understands itself to be a "new way of doing theology," a new style of "thinking the faith." "This style finds expression in a series of principles, in the form of propositions or theses intended to inform and orientate theological practice." But in its initial phase, liberation theology did not explicitate its method. The simple statement of its theses or postulates took the place of a methodology. "The liberation theologians were content to do theology 'differently' without concerning themselves with the rational justification of the original intuitions and attitudes supporting their theoretical practice."[165] This was inevitable and completely understandable. The history of any discipline reveals the priority of hesitant, error-plagued beginnings to theoretical reflection on methodology. Boff's book resulted from the realization that the

[162]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 196.

[163]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 196-197.

[164]Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987), hereafter cited as *Theology and Praxis.*

[165]Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, xxii.

moment had arrived to go "beyond the first phase, which ignored its own methodology, and launch a basic reflection having as its goal, before all else, to supply a critical basis for ... (liberation theology's) postulates ... and then to articulate the findings in such a way as to lead toward the systematization of a method."[166]

In the specific case of praxis, Boff asks: "What does it mean when one says that praxis is the 'criterion of truth' for theological theory?"[167] He cautions that the roots of this postulate's theoretical claims may be found in pragmatism in which the validity of an idea is judged by its concrete, external results. He points out the affinity between the situation of liberation theology and that of the young Marx who insisted so much on praxis as opposed to theory. Just as the young Marx was loosening his ties to the young Hegelians, especially Feuerbach, when he wrote the theses on Feuerbach, expressed "in a language that cries out to be transcended," so political theology today "seems not quite sure of what it confusedly sees in the dark." This is the reason for "its strident demanding manifestos in behalf of praxis. It exalts the 'epistemological destiny' of praxis to the point of threatening the autonomy of theoretical practice—to the detriment of praxis itself." It "goes so far as to ... dismember the living movement of the dialectic of theory and praxis."[168]

Boff stresses that the thesis that "praxis is the criterion of truth" has to be correctly posited since its unelaborated formulation is ambiguous and erroneous. "The assertion that praxis is the criterion of (theological) truth entails the basic, persistent ambiguity that I have been denouncing all through this study and that I am making an effort to dispel.... It consists in the identification, indeed the confusion of the real with the knowledge of the real, of agapic practice with theological practice, of pistic practice with its educated discourse."

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[166]Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, xxi-xxii.

[167]Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 197.

[168]Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 197-198.

Boff explains that each of the two orders mentioned—the theoretical and the practical—possesses criteria of truth corresponding to itself (respectively, theoretical and practical). It is necessary, therefore, to distinguish "theological criteriology" from "pistic criteriology." "The former is of an *epistemological* order and concerned with the rules of the *theoretical* practice of the *theologian*; the latter is of an *existential* order, and springs from principles that orientate the *concrete* practice of the *believer*."[169] Only the introduction of a mistaken or distorted relationship between these different levels leads to the disqualification of orthodoxy in favor of orthopraxy. As in the case with other disciplines, "theology is exempt from any wholly external criterion of truth, any jurisdictional 'tribunal' having the right to pronounce from without on the validity of its propositions."[170]

Praxis, then, "is not an immediate norm for theology." The *norma normans* is the foundational message which is the *norma normans* both of faith and of theology. "Theology does not intend a given empirical reality, but the historical reality of revelation, 'deposited' in the code of its founding interpretation."[171] The living practice of the faith by the Christian community can only be considered an *indirect* norm for theology since it has to pass by way of the mediation of the normative foundational message. Boff points out further that praxis is not, as such, *what explains*, but, on the contrary, is *what is to be explained* in terms of theology. "Praxis prepares the agenda, the repertory of questions, that theology is to address. Practices in general are not proofs of 'theological truths'."[172]

This epistemological critique of the principle that praxis is the criterion of truth invalidates as well its application to Christology and the implications which Knitter draws from a praxis-based christology

[169]Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 199.

[170]Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 199.

[171]Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 200, 325, note 26.

[172]Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 200.

for the question concerning the uniqueness of Jesus. 1) The truth of the Christian conviction that Jesus is God's final or normative revelation has as its criterion the foundational revelation attested in Scripture and interpreted in the tradition of the Church, not "the praxis of historical involvement."[173] 2) The method of liberation christology does *not* show why normative claims for Jesus are not possible at present. These claims are made on the basis of the historical reality of Christian revelation "deposited in the code of its founding interpretation."[174] This *is* sufficient to establish the normativity or finality of Jesus for Catholic theology. 3) and 4) A liberation christology which would be uncertain whether Jesus is normative would not be true to the *norma normans* of the foundational message which includes the confession that "Jesus is Lord," "which does not mean 'a lord' who can stand alongside competing gods and saviors. 'Lord' carries the authority of the one God of all humanity."[175]

5. Uniqueness and the Resurrection

Finally, Knitter argues that Jesus' resurrection from the dead does not imply the exclusive uniqueness of Jesus. On the basis of an interpretation of the disciples' original experience of the risen Jesus inspired mainly by E. Schillebeeckx, he argues that the experience may not be limited to the disciples of Jesus but is "essentially what countless men and women have felt in their experience of other archetypal religious leaders after the deaths of these leaders.[176]

The Easter experience of the original disciples of Jesus was a "revelation" or "conversion" experience. It was effected by the objective reality of grace mediated through "psychological realities and human experiences" in which "the productive remembrance of Jesus'

[173]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 196.

[174]Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 325, note 26.

[175]Pheme Perkins, "Christianity and World Religions," 371, cf. above 33-35.

[176]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 200.

basic message" and the previous faith in Jesus as the eschatological prophet played an important role. "The early disciples found themselves amazingly reconverted and enabled to renew their faith in Jesus; he was still among them in a new, a transformed presence."[177] Though detailed suggestions by theologians like Schillebeeckx, D. Lane, H. Küng and J. Mackey concerning how this conversion experience occurred in the concrete differ, Knitter claims that "it is clear from these descriptions that such encounters were not essentially different from what Christians can and should experience today ... as they break bread, recall his story, live his message." In this interpretation, the accounts of the appearances in the gospels are viewed "as attempts to express and give more tangible form to these conversion experiences."[178]

Here again, concludes Knitter, is "a contemporary christological interpretation that makes room for the non-normative christology proposed by the theocentric model,"[179] for this conversion model of the resurrection leads to the further question: Must the experience behind the Easter stories be limited to an experience of Jesus? Or have the followers of other religious leaders had essentially the same conversion or faith-experience after their leader's deaths?[180]

Knitter gives Gautama, the Buddha, as an example and asks: "Did not his disciples undergo a further, a continued 'vocation received in faith', a personal transformation after his death? Have they not continued to sense his spirit, his real presence, in their midst?" He concedes that Buddhists did not speak of the resurrected Buddha. But that was because the interpretative model of resurrection from the dead was not available in their culture. Furthermore, the fact that the followers of other religious leaders "do not interpret their founders in terms of resurrection ... does not mean that nothing happened to these

[177]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 198.

[178]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 198-199.

[179]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 199.

[180]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 200.

founders after their death as must have happened to Jesus." They too "continue to live on in a transformed spiritual but real way."[181] Knitter's conclusion is that "the resurrection of Jesus ... does not necessarily imply 'one and only'."[182]

Critique of (5) Uniqueness and the Resurrection

In dependence on E. Schillebeeckx, Knitter interprets the disciples' experience of the risen Jesus as primarily a revelatory conversion experience. He conjectures that this would correspond to what the followers of other archetypal religious leaders experienced after their leaders' death.

It has been shown elsewhere that Schillebeeckx's interpretation is not supported by the New Testament texts, does not do justice to the tradition history and is untenable.[183] The very old catechetical summary of the heart of the gospel in 1 Cor. 15:3-5 and Paul's witness to his own experience show that this experience was a unique revelatory experience of, and encounter with, the risen and exalted Jesus as the beginning of the end-time saving presence of God.[184]

Furthermore, it is clear that for Paul the appearance of the risen Jesus was a unique event. "In 1 Cor. 9:1 Paul did not expect that those he addressed had made or could make in the future the same experience. Therefore his encounter with the risen one may not be exchanged with the coming to faith as every Christian can experience it."[185] Nor can it be said that the revelation-encounters with the risen

[181]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 200.

[182]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 200.

[183]Joseph J. Smith, "The Resurrection Appearances and the Origin of the Easter Faith," *Landas* 2 (1988), 204-237, esp. 220-232.

[184]Smith, "The Resurrection Appearances and the Origin of the Easter Faith," 216, cf. 208-220.

[185]Jacob Kremer, "Die Auferstehung Jesu Christi," in *Handbuch der Fundamentaltheologie*, Bd. 2: *Traktat Offenbarung*, eds. Walter Kern, Hermann

Jesus experienced by the original witnesses "were not essentially different from what Christians can and should experience today ... as they break bread, recall his story, live his message."[186] The original witnesses witness "to an experience which is strictly *sui generis* and is different from the experiences of religious enthusiasm or mysticism which can be stimulated and repeated."[187] A careful exegetical analysis of the appearance narratives sometimes used to show a similarity between the experiences of the original witnesses and experiences of Christians today (e.g., Lk. 24:13-31) reveals that they do not so much reproduce the experience of the first witnesses who have "seen" the Lord as mirror the experiences of the later Christians "of second hand" (Kierkegaard) of the later situation of the already existing community,[188] hence the similarity with experiences of present-day Christians.

Finally, Knitter betrays an inadequate understanding of the resurrection of Jesus when he suggests that the founders of other religions also "continue to live on in a transformed, spiritual, but real way" and concludes that the resurrection of Jesus does not necessarily imply "one and only."[189] The resurrection of Jesus was not experienced as resulting merely in a transformed spiritual life in the presence of God. It was experienced as exaltation of Jesus to permanent unity with God and a sharing in his transcendent power and functions. He was made Lord of the universe and permanent mediator of universal salvation and of the transforming Spirit.[190] Such an experience of the risen Jesus and the idea of resurrection it involves does necessarily imply "one and only."

Pottmeyer and Max Seckler (Freiburg: Herder, 1985), 184 (author's own translation).

[186]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 198-199.

[187]Rahner, *Foundations*, 277.

[188]Kessler, *Sucht den Lebenden*, 132-133, 251-254.

[189]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 200.

[190]Kessler, *Sucht den Lebenden*, 339-367, cf. below 62-65.

In this second stage of the development of his thought on Christianity and world religions, Paul Knitter has not been successful in his attempt to show that Christians should relinquish their claim to the "finality" or "normativity" of Jesus Christ. Precisely for the sake of honesty, the Christian must not abandon his claim that Christ is universally and definitively normative. To the contention of Knitter that the abandonment of this claim will benefit interreligious dialogue, Avery Dulles responds that, in fact, "for Christians antecedently to surrender their traditional claim might be injurious to the dialogue, since it might prevent them from making what is potentially their most important contribution."[191]

Stage III: A Liberation Theology of Religions

Most recently, Knitter has discovered the need to move beyond theocentrism. He finds that the evolution in Catholic theology from ecclesiocentrism to christocentrism to theocentrism is incomplete. The evolution is pressing on to another stage: from theocentrism to soteriocentrism (or, in biblical symbolism, kingdom-centrism).[192]

The move beyond theocentrism was provoked by valid criticism of theocentrism. Knitter confesses that this move takes seriously the criticisms justifiably made of theocentric theologies to the effect that in urging God as the common basis for dialogue, Christians implicitly but imperialistically impose their notion of Deity on other religions which (like Buddhism) may not even wish to speak of God or Transcendence.[193] G. D'Costa points out that Knitter and other

[191]Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 190.

[192]Knitter, "Catholic Theology of Religions," 105; idem, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 187.

[193]Knitter, "Catholic Theology of Religions," 105; idem, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 184: "Cobb has also leveled some hard-hitting criticisms against John Hick's and my theocentric model for a Christian approach to other faiths showing quite convincingly, I must admit, that by proposing God, instead of the Church or Christ, as the common basis for dialogue, we are implicitly,

pluralists have no basis for claiming that there is "a common ground and goal of all religions" and that "the same God ... [is] animating all religions,"[194] since they deny that the revelation of God in Christ is universal *and normative.* "How can Knitter discern this 'same God' in all religions without normative revelation of God?"[195] In fact, John Hick, whom Knitter rightly called the "most radical" of pluralists, had previously made the shift away from theocentrism in reaction to the criticism "that it was a Christian God at the center of the universe of faiths which failed to accommodate non-theistic religions."[196]

If the need for a move beyond theocentrism was revealed by criticism, the direction of the move to soteriocentrism was influenced by liberation theology. Knitter explains that it is becoming clear how urgently the theology of religions, responding to the problem of religious pluralism, and the theology of liberation, responding to the problem of suffering and injustice, need each other and need to dialogue with each other. For liberation theology, this means that "a cross cultural, interreligious sharing of liberative theory and praxis is called for." Christian theology of liberation cannot remain closed to the "liberative and revolutionary potentials of non-Christian religions."[197]

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unconsciously, but still imperialistically imposing our notions of Deity or the Ultimate on other believers who, like many Buddhists, may not even wish to speak about God or who experience the Ultimate as Sunyata, which has nothing or little to do with what Christians experience and call God." Cf. John Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue: Towards a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 41-44.

[194]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 208-209.

[195]D'Costa, "The Pluralist Paradigm in the Christian Theology of Religions," 216.

[196]D'Costa, "The Pluralist Paradigm in the Christian Theology of Religions." Cf. D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, 37, 39-40, 43-45. For this reason, D'Costa spoke of "Knitter's confusing classification of Hick as 'theocentric'" in Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 147 (D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, 50, note 93).

[197]Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 179-180, quoting Aloysius Pieris, "The Place of Non-Christian Religions and Cultures in the

For the theology of religions, this means that the realization is dawning that dialogue among religions which "does not address, as a primary concern, the poverty and oppression that infest our world" is not authentic religious dialogue.[198]

In an article outlining a liberation theology of religions, Knitter explains how the principles and guidelines of liberation theology can benefit a pluralist theology of religions.[199] They can make two contributions: 1) provide a basis for a pluralistic, non-relativistic dialogue between religions, and 2) enable the theology of religions to develop a pluralist christology without surrendering the content and power of Christian tradition or witness.

1. Basis for a Pluralistic, Non-relativistic Dialogue

There are three ways in which the methodology of liberation theology can promote interreligious dialogue which is genuinely pluralistic, i.e., allow all participants an equally valid voice and equal opportunity to be heard and understood, without reducing it to a relativism which makes evaluative judgements impossible.

a) To interpret and hear the word of God, liberation theologians make use of a "hermeneutics of suspicion." They are suspicious of the ease with which interpretation of scripture and formulations of doctrine become ideology—a means of securing one's own interests at the expense of someone else's. Such ideologized interpretations and formulations need detection and revision if God's word is to be heard without distortion.

Evolution of Third World Theology," in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge* to *Theology*, eds. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983), 113-114. Also cf. Knitter, "Catholic Theology of Religions," 104.

[198]Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 180; idem, "Catholic Theology of Religions," 104.

[199]Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 178-200; idem, "Catholic Theology of Religions," 104-106 provides a brief summary of the main points of the former article.

The adoption of such a hermeneutic would enable theologians of religions to detect "how much traditional theology of religions, especially its christological basis [has] served to cloak or condone an unconscious, ideological desire to maintain superiority, or to dominate and control, or to devalue other traditions culturally or religiously." In this way, it will lead to the revision of traditional models that have, perhaps unconsciously, led to unethical results and will help "clear away ideological obstacles to more effective dialogue."[200]

b) Secondly, Knitter is convinced that liberation theology's preferential option for (or the hermeneutical privilege of) the poor can form the effective presupposition and foundation for interreligious dialogue as the common starting point, common approach or common context. "Instead of searching for 'one God' or 'one ultimate' or a 'common essence' or a 'mystical center' within all religions, we can recognize a *shared locus of religious experience* now available to all religions of the world."[201] This shared locus of religious experience is "their common concern and different efforts to promote the 'salvation' or liberation of all persons, especially those most poor and suffering."[202] This means that the basis or starting point for interreligious dialogue, the condition of possibility for mutual understanding and cooperation, is not how they are related to and conceive God but to what extent they are promoting *Soteria* (salvation)—human welfare. This is what requires the move beyond theocentrism to soteriocentrism.[203]

c) A practical advantage of the soteriocentric approach to dialogue—the preferential option for the poor—is that it provides religions with a starting point for acquiring, through liberative praxis, soteriocentric criteria for grading themselves. Knitter concedes that

[200]Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 182-183.

[201]Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 185-186.

[202]Knitter, "Catholic Theology of Religions," 104.

[203]Knitter, "Catholic Theology of Religions," 104; idem, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 187-188.

each religion or tradition will have its own understanding of what *Soteria* and liberation entail. But in the soteriocentric approach, it is explicitly recognized that "before the mystery of *Soteria*, no mediator or symbol system is absolute." This means that "the perspective on *Soteria* given by any one mediator is always open to clarification, completion, perhaps correction by the viewpoints of other mediators." In other words, what is absolute is the kingdom and its justice. "And although Christians understand and serve that kingdom *through* Christ, it is in seeking first the kingdom and its justice that all else will be added to them, including a clearer, perhaps corrected, understanding of that kingdom *and* of Christ."[204] This leads to the second major contribution of a liberation theology of religions: the clarification of the understanding of Christ.

2. Liberation Theology of Religions and the Uniqueness of Christ

Knitter contends that in the interest of a genuinely pluralistic dialogue which precludes pre-established absolutist positions, Christians must revise or even reject their traditional understanding of Jesus Christ as the final, definitive, normative revelation of God. Can Christians do this and remain Christians? He proposes four ways in which a liberation theology of religions can provide an answer.

a) "Liberation theology insists that *praxis* is both the *origin* and the *confirmation* of theory or *doctrine.* All Christian beliefs and truth claims must grow out of and be reconfirmed in the praxis or lived experience of these truths."[205] Knitter contends that, applied to a theology of religions, this means that Christians can claim that Jesus is God's final and normative revelation for all religions *only* in and through the *praxis of dialogue* with other religions. It is only in such an encounter that the normativity of Christ can be experienced and confirmed. But since

[204]Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 188-190.

[205]Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 191.

such a praxis of interreligious dialogue is only in its initial stages, this experience has not yet been made. Consequently, Christians will have to admit that at present "it is *impossible* to make claims of finality and normativity for Christ or Christianity."[206] The practical consequence is that Christians may participate in dialogue with other religions without making these traditional claims.

b) Knitter asserts that another principle of liberation theology—*the primacy of orthopraxis over orthodoxy*—assures Christians that if claims about the finality of Christ/Christianity are not possible, neither are they *necessary*, for applied in a soteriocentric liberation theology of religions, the principle means that "the primary concern should not be 'right belief' about the uniqueness of Christ, but the 'right-practice', with other religions, of furthering the kingdom and its *Soteria*."[207] Knitter contends that orthodoxy becomes a pressing concern only when it is necessary for orthopraxis—for carrying out the preferential option for the poor and for promoting the kingdom. But he is convinced that Christians do not need orthodox clarity that Jesus is the "only" or the "final" or the "universal" savior in order to experience and fully commit themselves to the liberating truth of his message. "Not those who proclaim 'only Lord, only Lord', but those who *do* the will of the Father, will enter the kingdom (Mt. 7:21-23)."[208]

c) Knitter points out that the possibility, described earlier, of using the preferential option for the poor and liberative praxis as means of acquiring soteriocentric criteria for "grading the religions" has applications to christology. They provide the means to discern "whether and *how much* other religious figures may be genuine liberators and 'saviors'," and the means "to critically examine and possibly revise

[206]Knitter, "Catholic Theology of Religions," 105; cf. idem, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 191-192.

[207]Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 192.

[208]Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 192-193.

the traditional understanding of the uniqueness of Christ."[209] Knitter suggests that through such an ethical hermeneutics, reasons might be found to affirm Christ as a unique, normative liberator—as one who unifies and fulfills all efforts towards a full humanity, or, he concedes, it may be discovered that other religions and religious figures offer a means and vision of liberation equal to that of Jesus. "Jesus would be unique together with other unique liberators—which would be a cause for Christian rejoicing: 'anyone who is not against us is with us' (Mk. 9:40)"[210] But Knitter reminds us that according to a soteriocentric liberation theology of religions, the most important thing is to seek first the kingdom and its justice, not the discernment about uniqueness and finality.[211]

d) Finally, Knitter believes that a liberation theology of religions can help in overcoming another obstacle encountered by those who are exploring possibilities of a non-normative, non-absolutist understanding of Christ. The reception by the faithful remains a decisive criterion for the validity and fittingness of a new understanding of Christ as "one together with others" in a relationship of "complementary uniqueness." It is precisely the perceived conflict between the non-absolutist understanding of Christ and the "sense of the faithful" which motivates theologians like Monika Hellwig, Frans Josef van Beeck, Avery Dulles and Hans Küng from endorsing a pluralist theology of religions.[212]

Knitter suggests that liberation theology can be of service in this situation. First of all, liberation theologians view themselves not only as teachers and learners in the community but, where need be, as prophets who challenge, prod, sharpen, and even transform the sense of the faithful. He has found that, especially in this question of the

[209]Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 193.

[210]Knitter, "Catholic Theology of Religions," 106.

[211]Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 194.

[212]Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 194-195.

uniqueness of Christ, the fears and hesitations of congregations can be overcome—"indeed that many of the faithful are happy someone is finally pushing and challenging them."[213]

But secondly, the basic epistemological principle of liberation theology that orthopraxis holds a primacy over orthodoxy "is also a workable pastoral tool for mediating the non-absolutist christologies to the ecclesia." An understanding of this principle will enable the Christian people to realize that in "receiving" the non-absolute interpretations of Jesus "they are not only remaining faithful to the witness of the New Testament and tradition, but are also being challenged to an even deeper commitment to Christ and his gospel." Knitter suspects that the "sense" of most Christian faithful, who are in touch with their own experience through a liberative praxis of their faith, will resonate with the claim that the right practice of following Jesus and working for his kingdom is more important for Christian identity than is the right knowledge concerning the nature of God or of Jesus himself. He argues further that the psychology of love and commitment "would seem to suggest" that the deeper and more secure one's commitment to a particular path or person is, the more one is open to the beauty or truth of other paths and persons, that others will be more readily convinced by Christians who give simple witness to how much their savior has actually done for them than by Christians who insist that "our savior is bigger than yours."[214]

Thirdly, "recognition of the primacy of orthopraxis over orthodoxy can also be used pastorally to enable Christian believers to understand the nature of New Testament language and what it means to be faithful to that language." Knitter contends that the power and purpose of biblical language is, first of all, to call forth a way of life rather than a body of belief, that the christological language and titles of the New

[213]Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 195, referring to Paul Knitter, "The Impact of World Religions on Academic and Ecclesial Theology," *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* (1985), 160-165.

[214]Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 195-196.

Testament did not have as their primary purpose to offer definitive ontological statements about the person and work of Jesus but to enable men and women to feel the power and attraction of Jesus' vision and then to "go and do likewise." He does not deny that the New Testament communities were trying to say something real about Jesus, that they were making cognitive claims about him. "But these claims were not the primary intent; they were in a sense, means to an end—or better calls to discipleship."[215]

In 1985, Knitter distinguished New Testament talk from philosophical language by calling it "survival" and "love" language.[216] In 1987, he claimed that it is more accurate and pastorally effective to call the New Testament claims about Jesus "action language." This means that "he was called 'one and only' or 'only begotten', not primarily to give us definitive theologico-philosophical statements, and not *primarily* to exclude others, but rather to urge the action or practice of total commitment to his vision and way." Knitter is confident that *if* Christians today can continue to follow Christ and work for the kingdom *without* the traditional "one and only language," then they are still holding to the core content of the original message. "If recognizing the possibility of other saviors or mediators does not impede this praxis, then it is compatible with Christian identity and tradition."[217]

Knitter even claims it is arguable that today, such a recognition of others is necessary for remaining faithful to the original witness about Jesus. "Theologians who are exploring a pluralist theology of religions and a non-absolutist christology are doing so ... because ... they want to be faithful to the original message of the Nazarean—that to which Jesus always subordinated himself: the kingdom of love, unity and justice."[218]

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[215]Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 196.

[216]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 182-186.

[217]Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 196.

[218]Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 196-197.

Critique of Stage III: A Liberation Theology of Religions

Paul Knitter is not alone in calling for dialogue among religions which addresses, "as a primary concern, the poverty and oppression that infest our world."[219] For example, the Theological Advisory Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences has recommended that Christian Churches "come together with other religions to promote and to defend human and spiritual values such as solidarity with the poor, justice and peace."[220]

Furthermore, there is no reason to deny that the valid principles of liberation theology, critically applied, are capable of promoting interreligious dialogue and serving as a basis for dialogue. But there is no valid reason why "Christians must revise or even reject their traditional understanding of Jesus Christ as God's final, definitive, normative voice."[221] The reasons proposed by Knitter in Stage II have proven unconvincing. The reasons he draws from a liberation theology of religions are equally invalid.

1) The praxis of dialogue with other religions is *not* the only way Christians can claim that Jesus is God's final and normative revelation for all. As previously stated,[222] the truth of the Christian conviction that Jesus is God's final or normative revelation has as its criterion the foundational revelation, "'deposited' in the code of its founding interpretation,"[223] and "for the whole of the New Testament—like

[219]Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 180.

[220]"Seven Theses on Interreligious Dialogue: An Essay in Pastoral Theological Reflection," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 13:3 (July 1989), 110.

[221]Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 191.

[222]Cf. above 43-44.

[223]Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 200, 375, note 26.

it or not—Jesus is normative and definitive."[224] As we have already explained, this is precisely the content and meaning of the ancient confession of faith: "Jesus is Lord" (Rom. 10:9).[225]

2) Knitter's argument from another principle of liberation theology—the primacy of orthopraxis over orthodoxy—is also invalid. The unexplained formula is ambiguous. It is imperative not to mix up two levels of thought. On the level of *fides qua*, the subjective, living, experiential side of faith relating to salvation, faith is only authentic to the extent that it leads to action. Believing but failing to act accordingly reveals that one does not really believe. Here the criterion of orthopraxis is essential and internal to faith. Here the text quoted by Knitter finds its true setting: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', shall enter the Kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Mt. 7:21). On this level of *fides qua*, the principle is correct: orthopraxis has the primacy over (mere) orthodoxy.

But on the level of *fides quae* (or the content of faith) relating to theology, the principle would be erroneous. Action cannot in and of itself be the criterion of truth or offer criteria for truth, for it "supposes a value-option and a reading of history. Orthopraxy supposes an intellectual action and can vaunt no superiority over reflection."[226] William J. Hill points out that praxis can provide the motivation and context for Christian thinking that is transformative and emancipatory but he denies that "it can formally determine that critical thinking on the second-order level that seeks meaning and truth."[227] C. Boff

[224]Küng, "Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Religions," 122, cf. 123.

[225]Cf. above 33-35, 45-47.

[226]Jean M. Domenach, "L'histoire n'est pas notre absolu," *Lumière et Vie* 23 (1974), 152 (author's own translation).

[227]William J. Hill, "Theology," in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Joseph

concludes that "it is only when a mistaken or 'warped' relationship is introduced between [the] two levels [of the theoretical and the practical] that orthodoxy is disqualified in favor of orthopraxy."[228]

3) This presupposed, Knitter underestimates the importance of "right belief" about the uniqueness of Christ for the "right practice" of promoting the Kingdom and its salvation. Church doctrines and dogmas are sets of meanings and values informing individual and collective Christian living.[229] The New Testament witnesses to Jesus' constitutive role in the inauguration and consummation of the Kingdom of God and its salvation. Jesus' self-emptying life of obedience to God's will and service of his brothers and sisters in need was the revelation of the historical in-breaking of the Rule of God and its salvation, and the exaltation of the Crucified as Lord of heaven and earth made his self-emptying love into the standard and definition of meaning for all humanity. The witness concerning the enthronement of Jesus as Lord "confronts all of humanity with the claim that in the life-praxis of Jesus for one and all, there is question of the truth and meaning of their own life: only such love ... remains and only what is done from out of such love remains forever (1 Cor. 13:8)."[230] The confession of Jesus as Lord is a summons to discipleship as *imitatio Christi* for the promotion of the Kingdom and for the historical mediation of salvation after the pattern of Jesus' life for God and for others.

Moreover, in the light of this confession, the disciple knows that he is now empowered for such discipleship. "Jesus is Lord" means that the Crucified has been taken up into the mystery of God in such a way that he is universally active in the power of this mystery effecting

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Komonchak, Mary Collins and Dermot Lane (Wilmington: M. Glazier, 1987), 1018. Cf. above 42-44.

[228]Boff, *Theory and Praxis*, 199.

[229]Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), 311-320.

[230]Kessler, *Sucht den Lebenden*, 353.

the salvation of all mankind,[231] and drawing all humanity toward the final transformation in which God will be all in all. Jesus as Lord is revealed as the active source of the Spirit capacitating men and women for the service of the Kingdom by faith working through love after the pattern of Jesus' life for God and for others.

Jesus Christ, the one and only incarnate Son of God, has already revealed the salvation of the Kingdom as the gift of God's self-communication in the Son and in the Spirit, and has revealed as well the response to which it summons and empowers believers. Dialogue with other religions may help clarify how this life for God and for others can be concretized in new circumstances. But there is no reason to think that it will eliminate the normative nature of Jesus Christ's revelation of the Kingdom and its salvation.

4) In the light of Knitter's failure to invalidate the core New Testament witness to Jesus Christ as the final and normative revelation of God and his salvation, his introduction of the *sensus fidelium*,[232] the effect of the sense of faith in the community of the faithful, into the discussion is unfortunate. In its dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Vatican II described the sense of faith as a gift of grace given by the Holy Spirit and listed four effects: "By this sense of faith, God's people accepts ... the very Word of God (cf. 1 Thess. 2:13). It clings without fail to the faith once delivered to the saints (cf. Jude 3), penetrates it more deeply by accurate insights, and applies it more thoroughly to life" (article twelve).[233]

This text gives a central place to the ability to persevere in fidelity to

[231]Wilhelm Thüsing, *Die neutestamentlichen Theologien und Jesus Christus* I (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1981), 130-131.

[232]"The term *sensus fidelium* (sense or mind of the faithful) ... generally has an objective meaning, referring ... to what is believed" (Francis A. Sullivan, *Magisterium* [New York: Paulist Press, 1983], 23).

[233]*The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter Abbott (New York: Herder & Herder, 1966), 29-30.

what is original, recognizing and rejecting false innovations contrary to faith. Consequently, the promotion of "non-absolute views of Christ" at variance with the core message of normative New Testament witness to Christian faith in order to challenge the faithful and transform the sense of the faithful can hardly be the "prophetic" task Knitter would have us believe. Knitter may have found believers who are "happy someone is finally pushing and challenging them" to overcome fears and hesitations in the question of the uniqueness of Christ. But is this reaction of believers due to a sharpening of their sense of faith or to the influence of historical and socio-cultural conditioning and the tendency of fallen human nature to conform to the cultural milieu? "Christians are members of the Church, the body of Christ, but they are also members of secular society. For better or for worse, everyone is affected by the ebb and flow of public opinion." Today, powerful influences are the habit of comparative thinking and the experience of religious pluralism. In the present socio-cultural setting, it has become embarrassing even for Christians to claim that Jesus Christ is "decisive," "unique," "normative," or "final." "Those who fail to criticize the prevailing axioms" and pre-suppositions "in the light of the Gospel are in constant danger of tailoring the Gospel to fit the accepted postulates of their own social group."[234] The working of the supernatural sense of faith must be ascertained by responsible discernment.

Furthermore, the misunderstood principle of the primacy of orthopraxis over orthodoxy cannot be a valid tool for promoting the genuine sense of the faithful concerning Christian identity. The Jesus who on the level of *fides qua* said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', shall enter the Kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father, who is in heaven" (Mt. 7:21) is the same Jesus who on the level of *fides quae* asked, "Who do you say that I am?" (Mk. 8:29), for the revelation of Jesus Christ as divine Lord and Son of God communicates to the Christian a very definite orientation to action. As previously stated, it effectively summons to discipleship as *imitatio Christi*, and

[234]Avery Dulles, "Sensus Fidelium," *America* 155:12 (November 1, 1986), 242.

because he confesses that the Son "reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature" (Heb. 1:3), the disciple knows from Jesus' life and death that "God is love" (1 Jn. 4:8.16) who by nature promotes the good and opposes all evil, that therefore the believer must be an imitator of God (Eph. 5:1) and strive to promote the good and oppose evil, injustice and suffering in all its forms. "This conception of God, which is not given to us as the result of a universal concept of God as found in the history of religions ... appears from and in Jesus Christ"[235] "who as the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father ... has made him known" (Jn. 1:18). The Christian commitment flows from this knowledge of who Jesus is and what he has done and draws from this knowledge its inspiration and dynamism.

CONCLUSION

Neither in stage I, nor in stage II, nor in stage III of his development has Paul Knitter given convincing reason why "Christians must ... revamp or even reject their traditional understanding of Jesus Christ as God's final, definitive, normative voice."[236] Hans Küng protests that what is proclaimed today as "brand new" teaching often proves to be the old teaching from the liberal Protestant stable. He points out that theologians who have abandoned Jesus' normativity and finality (conclusiveness) and have placed him on the level of other prophets alongside others (Christ together with other religions or other revealers, saviors, Christs) have also lost all criteria for the discernment of spirits. He affirms that the protest of Karl Barth and "dialectical theology" (Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich) against such liberalism was a necessary corrective. "To go back in this direction is no progress."[237]

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[235]Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 778-779.

[236]Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 191.

[237]Küng, "Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Religions," 121-122.

Of course, the absoluteness of the Christian revelation in Jesus Christ, in the sense of its unsurpassability and definitiveness, is a truth of faith. It is not an objective, universally valid truth of reason perceptible to all. However, "holding fast to this two thousand years old conviction of truth—without anguish or apologetic concern, but on good ground, in the way that Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists do to theirs—is in no way identical with some theological 'imperialism' and 'neo-colonialism', which denies other religions their truth and rejects other prophets and seers."[238]

Hans Küng contends that for a nuanced answer to the question of the truth of religions, one must distinguish the view from without and the view from within. Viewed from outside or from the perspective of comparative religion, "there are various *true religions*" which, despite their ambivalence, conform to certain "basically defined general (ethical and religious) criteria." They represent "different ways of salvation (with different ways of representing salvation) to the one goal." They partially overlap and "can ... enrich one another." Küng affirms that the dialogue between these religions by no means demands the giving up of the standpoint of faith.[239]

Viewed from within, "from the viewpoint of the believing Christian orientating him—or herself by the New Testament ... there is a *true religion:* Christianity insofar as it witnesses to one, true God as he has declared himself in Jesus Christ." Küng observes that the one, true religion can let others be: as religions *true up to a point* ("conditionally"—or some similar term—true).[240]

Avery Dulles points out that the present encounter of the religions can have positive significance for the interpretation of what is revealed in Christ. "We cannot accurately predict what we may learn from the dialogue that seems to be getting under way." But he affirms that

[238]Küng, "Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Religions," 122.

[239]Küng, "Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Religions," 122.

[240]Küng, "Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Religions," 122.

there is no reason to think it will diminish the revelatory importance of Jesus Christ. "It may well be that in the light of other revelatory symbols, the universal and abiding significance of Christ will be more strikingly manifested."[241] The revelation of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ assures us that Jesus Christ is the *universale concretum*, i.e., "the concrete realisation of that, toward which all reality is striving."[242] "For in him the whole fullness of the divinity dwells bodily" (Col. 2:9). But his universal significance is still being disclosed to us "in the real contexts of ongoing history ... in the encounter of the gospel with the world religions."[243] As the unsurpassable "real symbol" of God's self-communication to the world in absolute love, Jesus Christ possesses permanent and universal significance. But "even though it already is the supreme and definitive self-disclosure of God, the Christ symbol cannot be adequately appreciated for our time, except in the context of many other symbols, including those of extra-biblical religions."[244]

The Christian, then, will approach dialogue with other religions with both commitment and openness: commitment to Jesus Christ as the supreme and definitive self-disclosure of God, openness to the many and various ways in which God has spoken in the non-Christian religions and openness to the light shining there that can both illuminate new depths in the supreme revelation of God in Jesus Christ and receive greater clarity in his light.

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[241]Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 191-192.

[242]Karl Lehmann, "Absolutheit des Christentums als philosophisches und theologisches Problem," in Kasper, *Absolutheit des Christentums*, 37-38 (author's own translation).

[243]Carl Braaten, "The Uniqueness and Universality of Jesus Christ," in *Mission Trends No. 5: Faith Meets Faith*, eds. Gerald Anderson and Thomas Stransky (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 86.

[244]Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 192.