

Inter-Religious Dialogue: Urgent Challenge and Theological Land-Mine

John A. Coleman S.J.

Abstract: This paper was first presented as The Slattery Lecture, at the University of Notre Dame Australia, 5th June, 2007. Theories of religious pluralism and approaches to interreligious dialogue are discussed in relation to the current world-reality—which demands dialogue—and the as-yet-to-be adequately developed theology of interreligious dialogue. [Editor]

Introduction:

A document entitled “ Our Mission and Inter-Religious Dialogue” of the 34th General Congregation of the Jesuits, held in 1995, begins with these words.: “ If we imagine, as Ignatius did, the Trinity looking down on the earth as the third millennium of Christianity is about to unfold, what would we see ? More than five billion human beings—some male, some female; some rich, many more poor; some yellow, some brown, some black, some white; some at peace, some at war; some Christian (1.95 billion), some Muslim (1 billion), some Hindu (777 million), some Buddhist (341 million), some of new religious movements (128 million), some of indigenous religions (99 million), some Jewish (14 million), some of no religion at all (1.1 billion). What meaning and what opportunity does this rich ethnic, cultural and religious pluralism that characterizes God’s world today have for our lives and for our mission of evangelization ? And how do we respond to the racism, cultural prejudice, religious fundamentalism and intolerance that mark so much of today’s world”¹.(#1) The Jesuits here echo my long time colleague at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley and distinguished scholar of Confucianism, Judith Berling in her book, written for theological educators and

ordinary people in the parishes, Understanding Other Religious Worlds: A Guide for Inter-religious Education. Berling says “ Learning other religions is a requirement for living as Christians in a religiously diverse world.”²

I want to address, then, an issue which is truly pressing, urgent and of the very highest cultural/ political priority today (inter-religious dialogue) yet one which is, simultaneously, for theologians and Christians, a kind of dangerous mine-field. Numerous Catholic theologians, from Jacques Dupuis through Roger Haight, have been censored or silenced because of their attempts to break through the present theological impasse on inter-religious dialogue.³ I want to begin by outlining the main points I will be developing and telegraph at the outset my two main conclusions: (1)” To be religious (or authentically Catholic) today”, as the Jesuit document states it: “ is to be inter-religious in the sense that a positive relationship with believers of other faiths is a requirement of a world of religious pluralism”; (2) No currently available theology of inter-religious dialogue (whether from popes, bishops or most theologians) is yet adequate! None really invites to a dialogue which is truly a two-sided dialogue and yet committed and theologically grounded. We need to shift from an over-arching theology of the religions based on soteriology, to a more modest, yet faithful, practice of dialogue by which we engage in conversation before broaching a full-blown theory of how God and the Spirit acts in history outside the visible church.

I will try to touch on four major points. (1) Inter-Religious dialogue is urgent, no luxury for the first world and an indispensable element for world peace and justice; (2) Three Stances in the church on dialogue: exclusivist, inclusivist, pluralist (3) Vatican II on Inter-Religious Dialogue: Jean Danielou versus Karl Rahner and its mirror in the post-

Vatican II Church in John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger (especially as found in his 2000 Declaration as Prefect of the Congregation of Doctrine and Faith, Dominus Jesus); (4)

How do we go forward now to a fruitful and urgent inter-religious dialogue?

Throughout, however, I will, from time to time be referring to the Jesuit document on inter-religious dialogue as a kind of useful starting point for our inquiry.

I. The Urgency of Inter-Religious Dialogue

The Swiss theologian, Hans Kung, has spent the better part of the last two decades promoting an ambitious project for a new global ethic involving dialogue among the world religions. Kung acutely sees that, if we are to avoid the ominous ‘ coming clash of civilizations’ (mainly between the Christian-Western versus a Muslim Middle-Eastern world) predicted by the influential Neo-Conservative political scientist, Samuel Huntington, inter-religious dialogue will be crucial to the emergence of a world order which shows harmony rather than a clash of civilizations.⁴ As Kung strings together his staccato-like syllogism it reads: “ No world order without peace; no peace in the world without dialogue between the world religions; no world order without a global ethic. No efficacious global ethic without a genuine dialogue between the world religions.”⁵

Inter-religious dialogue is not just something for India, Sri Lanka, Korea or Palestine. In the United States, there are more Muslims (six million) than either Episcopalians or Presbyterians or Jews. Over four million Buddhists and more than a million Hindus presently live in the United States. Buddhist and Hindu temples, Sikh gurdwaras, as well as Muslim mosques, dot all our largest cities. My own city of Los Angeles is the most pluralistically Buddhist city in the world. Its more than 300 temples

bring together and inter-twine Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Tibetan, Cambodian and Thai Buddhism. As Kwak Pui Lan puts it: “The question for western Christians is no longer how to missionize non-believers in far away lands but how to live among religious neighbors whose children go to the same schools as theirs.”⁶ We mingle at work; we inter-marry; some westerners convert to Buddhism or Islam.

Dianna Eck from Harvard’s Center for the Study of World Religions, in a book mapping this new religious pluralism, A New Religious America: How a Christian Country Has Now Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation, puts it this way: “ We cannot live in a world in which our economics and markets are global, our political awareness is global, our business relationships take us to every continent, and the internet connects us with colleagues half a world away and yet live on Friday, Saturday or Sunday with ideas of God that are essentially provincial, imagining that somehow the one we call God has been primarily concerned with us and our tribe,”⁷

What is true of the United States is, pari passu, increasingly true of Europe (where Islam is the second largest religion, outpacing Judaism and Protestantism in Belgium and France) and yes Australia. Census data for Australia shows almost a million non-Christian adherents of other religions, the largest being Buddhism and Islam but with a hefty presence of Hinduism. Most importantly, just these groups grew apace in Australia between 1996 and 2006. Buddhists increased by 79 %; Muslims by 40%; Hindus by 41 %; Jews by 5%, Sikhs by 44% and other religions by 24 %. Yet in many of these societies, this new immigration has also spawned an increase of hate crimes and bouts of xenophobia. As Diana Eck puts it, in newly religiously pluralist societies, the language of pluralism must not be just about quaint differences but about engagement,

involvement and participation. Religiously pluralist societies need to construct a new language of exchange, dialogue and debate, knowing that dialogue is aimed less at achieving agreement than in fostering genuine relationship.

In my own society, which some right-leaning Christians mistakenly want to call a “Christian nation”, the new migrants often face harassment, stereotypes, violation of their religious liberties, zoning machinations to deny them permits to build their temples or schools.. As Eck puts it, it is perfectly fine for the Baptists to bear witness to their faith but they should not bear *false witness* about other faiths!⁸ In a sociological survey of recent immigrants of non-Christian religious backgrounds published in his book, American Mythos: Why Our Best Efforts to be a Better Nation Fall Short, Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow reports 57 % of his sample responding that they experienced discrimination, hate actions against their places of worship or denial of religious liberty . He notes the anomaly that while Americans are notoriously quite religious as a nation, they are equally famously very religiously illiterate about other groups.⁹

Much is at stake for a civil, more democratic and functioning religiously pluralist society on whether inter-religious dialogue does or does not really occur. (short sociological answer: it only rarely occurs and almost never goes deep). Much is at stake for our global order in a religiously diverse world on whether inter-religious dialogue does or does not regularly occur. This constitutes the sociological or pragmatic argument: We need to work together for peace and justice. The World Council of Churches’ Kyoto consultation stated it this way: “We affirm the great value of dialogue at the level of spirituality in coming to know and understand people of other faiths as people of prayer

and spiritual practice, as seekers and pilgrims with us and as partners with us in working for peace and justice.”¹⁰

The Jesuit document also lifts up this pragmatic motif: “In a world where Catholics form less than 20% of the population, it is imperative that we collaborate with others to achieve common goals. In the context of the divisive, exploitative and conflictual roles that religions, including Christianity, have played in history, dialogue seeks to bring out the unifying and liberating potential of all religions, thus showing the relevance of religion for human well-being, justice and world peace. Above all, we need to relate positively to believers of other religions because they are our neighbors and the common elements of our religious heritage and our human concerns force us to establish ever closer ties based on universally accepted ethical values.” (# 3)

So far we have seen a sociological argument for dialogue, collaboration on endeavors for human rights and just structures. But what of the more theological questions? Can we pray together, as John Paul II did with representatives of the world religions at Assisi? The President of the Southern Baptists in the United States once egregiously asserted: “God does not hear the prayers of the Jews!” Does God countenance the kind of communicatio in sacris which Pope John Paul II attempted when praying with non-Christian, non-Jewish confreres? Can we assert that the sacred writings and rituals of other religions have some divine mandate ? Doesn’t dialogue eclipse the clearly scriptural mandate to try to convert the whole world ? What does inter-religious dialogue do to the Christian assertion that Jesus is a unique mediator, the way, the truth and the life? Does dialogue, as Cardinal Ratzinger suggested in Dominus Jesus, court a kind of relativism and religious indifferentism ? Can a dialogue based on the current,

and surely orthodox , inclusivist Catholic doctrine that all grace anywhere comes from and through God in Christ and the spirit (even if mysteriously it blows where it will) be really productive or fruitful or is it a kind of dialogue of the deaf where Christians find in other religions only what they already know and know better in their own ? This is the mine field I refer to. So, we turn now to a more theological account of inter-religious dialogue. Before engaging Vatican II, Danielou versus Rahner and John Paul II versus Ratzinger, however, a brief note on the three competing Christian views of the religions: the exclusivist, the inclusive and the pluralist.

II. Three Stances: Exclusivist, Inclusive and Pluralist

I have found two recent books by my colleague at Loyola Marymount University, James Fredericks-- Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions (Paulist, 1999) and Buddhists and Christians; Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity (Orbis, 2004)-- very helpful guides to a theology for inter-religious dialogue.¹¹ Fredericks contends that we must bring to inter-religious dialogue the integrity of what we believe as Christians, not watered down for gentility or filtered out for civility. We know from the New Testament two bed-rock truths which seem to be binding on Christians: (1) That, in some real and unique sense, all salvation is through Jesus Christ, that his is the only name in which all men and women are saved and that he is a unique and irreplaceable mediator between humanity and God; (2) That God wills that all men and women come to salvation. We also know that it is not always very easy to rhyme these two truths.

In the history of Christian attitudes toward inter-religious dialogue, three different stances have come to predominate, stressing now more one, now the other of these two truths. In the exclusivist attitude (perhaps best exemplified in the writings of some evangelical theologians), emphasis so falls on ‘all salvation coming through Christ’ that it seems that salvation requires an explicit faith in Jesus Christ. In this view, non-Christians are damned (or somehow excluded from salvation) not for any free act of their own but by a quirk of God’s election to choose, in his sovereign goodness, whom he would. Except perhaps for the aberrant position of the American Jesuit, Leonard Feeney, in the 1940’s(he was condemned by Rome for a very narrow reading of extra ecclesiam nulla salus), Catholics have not been usually tempted to exclusivist views of salvation. Somehow, whether through a belief in ‘ baptism of desire’ or through the belief (as the Jesuit document on inter-religious dialogue puts it) in a Deus Semper Major (a God who is much bigger than our categories, much freer than our theology, who labors in all things even outside the Christian church), Catholics have tended, characteristically, to be inclusivists on the question of salvation. As the Jesuit document puts it:” God wants all people to be saved and leads believers of all religions to the harmony of the reign of God in ways known only to him”. (#5)

The Jesuit Karl Rahner, with his famous theory about the ‘ anonymous Christian, is, perhaps, the best known advocate of this Catholic inclusivism about God’s action in other religions. For Rahner, the saving work and grace of Christ (and of Christ’s and the Father’s Spirit) are at work outside the boundaries of the institutional church and of those who are self-consciously Christian.¹² This Rahnerian motif, is rephrased in the Jesuit document on inter-religious dialogue: “ It is the same Spirit, who has been active in the

incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and in the Church, who was active amongst all peoples before the incarnation and is active amongst the nations, religions and peoples today.” (#7)

I prefer to follow Rahner rather than the exclusionists on this question. But there are both theological and ecumenical difficulties with the Rahnerian inclusivist position. On the one hand, has Rahner not extended the boundaries of the church so far beyond the visible community of Christian believers that, thereby, the notion of the visible church becomes meaningless ? On the other, those who insist, as Dominus Jesus does, that there is no “ economy of the eternal Word that is valid also outside the Church and unrelated to her” (# 9) may be conflating, unjustifiably, the church, as such, and the reign of God (which while related to the church is not entirely co-extensive with it). Does the Rahnerian inclusivist position put Christians in the strange position that they know more about the so-called ‘ anonymous Christian’ than those so-called anonymous Christians know about themselves ? Does dialogue with a Buddhist or a Hindu, on this Rahnerian view, lead the Christian really to learn anything new that he or she did not already know ? On these inclusivist premises, what seems to be Buddhist or Islamic or Hindu religious authenticity is, of course (we who are in the know, know!) really the Christ as logos or the Spirit or the Father ? In inter-religious dialogue, on this Catholic inclusivist premise, we may, perhaps, deepen our understanding of who we already are but do we truly see, learn from and listen to others in their otherness ? For palpably, non-Christians teach things of fundamental importance to them that Christians do not teach or believe and vice versa. Non-Christians believe things and engage in practices which are not only different from what Christians believe and do but in some ways contradictory to them (or not easily

able to fit into Christian categories, at all!). Does an inclusivist view really invite the kind of dialogue which allows the other really to be other?

The inclusivist theology of the religions has turned out to be, at times, a severe hindrance to true inter-religious dialogue. As Fredericks puts it: “ Christians should be prepared for when Theravada Buddhists are baffled not only by the notion of a ‘ Spirit’ that ‘ works’ but also by the very idea of history...Catholic ‘liberals’, following the course charted by Karl Rahner, want to recognize other religious traditions as the work of the Holy Spirit. My own Buddhist friends assure me that this is not the case and that I will never appreciate the Dharma to the extent that I persist in this belief. How are Shiite Muslims and Vajrayana Buddhists to react to assurances by Catholics that they are saved by Christ ? Perhaps they react the way Catholics do when they learn of Hindu groups who teach that Jesus of Nazareth is an avatar of Lord Vishnu.”¹³

Inclusivist positions on inter-religious dialogue have sometimes, mistakenly, been seen to be so broad that they would preclude any preaching of the gospel, any attempt to convert or evangelize. If God, Christ and the Spirit are already somehow at work among Hindus, Buddhists, Moslems, Jews—why would we want to preach the gospel to them? Yet what invitation to dialogue can be found in Dominus Jesus’ contention that inter-religious dialogue finds its intrinsic purpose in “ conversion to Jesus Christ and adherence to the Church” (#22)? Perhaps, as some theologians have suggested, Christianity is an ‘extraordinary’ and not the ‘ ordinary’ way to salvation. In any event, most men and women have never really had an explicit opportunity to hear and accept or consciously reject the true gospel message. This is why any exclusivist position on salvation seems heartless and arbitrary on the part of God. To avoid any incipient

relativism in its inclusivist position, the Jesuit document states that we must not conflate dialogue and proclamation. Both are aspects of the one evangelizing mission of the church but dialogue has its own integrity short of proclamation: “Dialogue is ‘an activity with its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity’ and it should’ never be made a strategy to elicit conversions’ “ (#7)

Pluralism, the third stance, is more relativistic. It tends to argue, as John Hick and Paul Knitter have in their book, The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions , that absolute claims about Jesus are neither possible nor necessary.¹⁴ All religions are equal, if different, avenues, toward God. .To absolutize Jesus or claim some cross-cultural uniqueness for him, argue these pluralists, is a species of ethnocentrism. Both exclusivism and inclusivism must be rejected as triumphalistic arrogance, a way for Christians to excuse themselves from having to take non-Christians seriously. In the end, all religions are partial and incomplete interpretations of a transcendent Absolute who remains a mystery. For these pluralists, Christians have to eschew not only missionary activity but also any claims to the special nature of Jesus as a privileged access to God. Jesus may offer a privileged access, perhaps, for Christians, but not in any absolute (but only a narrow cultural) sense.

Fredericks contends that pluralists end up not being faithful to the Christian doctrine of the incarnation and the commission of Christ that the gospel be actually preached and witnessed, even unto the ends of the earth. In the end , since religious differences do not really count for salvation, since all religions equally lead to salvation, theological differences become insignificant. John Hick’s pluralist model is based on a Kantian epistemology that undermines, at the outset, any notion of a normative revelation

of God within history . For Hicks, religions are not ‘ acts of God’ (to say so is to use only mythological language). In Hicks proposal, the religions of the world are merely human acts: interpretations of some ‘ Real’ which ultimately remains inaccessible to human beings. ¹⁵

In a paradoxical way, both inclusivist and pluralist views of salvation discourage a dialogue which respects and honors difference. For the inclusivist, we find in our dialogue the God we already know in Jesus and in the Spirit (even if we are, perhaps, puzzled about how they work outside the boundaries of the church). For the pluralist, religious differences do not really count. At the core (whatever our beliefs or practices) we equally encounter the same mysterious Absolute. Yet the points on which believers differ are, at times, precisely about the issues which frequently, are the most precious to the believer. They are the points which force the inter-locutor in the dialogue to take notice and wonder: to go back to her own sources to ask: do we have anything akin, e.g., to the Buddhist notion of ‘Nothingness’ in Christianity? Can we learn something from our encounter with another religion? Is dialogue a ‘ reciprocal enrichment’ ? As Fredericks pushes the question: “ Surprisingly few Vatican statements entertain the possibility that Catholics might benefit significantly from dialogue. This fact must be counted a sign of the underdevelopment of Church teaching in regard to inter-religious dialogue.”¹⁶

III. Vatican II: Danielou Versus Rahner and Its Aftermath in the Post-Vatican Church

One great achievement of Vatican II was to assert unequivocally that all men and women are touched by the grace of Christ. Gaudium et Spes teaches that “ by his incarnation, the Son of God united himself in some sense with every human being” and later states that an incorporation into the paschal mystery and the Resurrection “ applies not only to Christians but, also, to all persons of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for all and since all are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the Paschal mystery”. (#22) Nostra Aetate, the Vatican II Declaration on non-Christian religions, evokes a presence in other traditions of “ a ray of that Truth which enlightens all” (#2). Ad Gentes, the Vatican II Declaration on the Missionary Activity of the Church, acknowledges “ the seeds of the word” and points to “ the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations” (#11). Lumen Gentium, the Constitution on the Church, refers to the good which is “ found sown” not only “ in minds and hearts” but also “ in the rites and customs of peoples” (# 17).

In the post-Vatican church, discussion has shifted from whether those who follow other religious paths can be saved to how they are saved and the role played by Christ, the Holy Spirit and the Church in that salvation. Principal documents to look at for this question are the following: (1) Encyclicals and allocutions of John Paul II on inter-religious dialogue, principally Redemptoris Hominis (1979) , Dominum et Vivificantem (1986) and various allocutions of the pope to Hindus, at Assisi and on the occasion of the World Day for Peace; (2) Dialogue and Proclamation, a document issued in 1991 by the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue; (3) Cardinal Ratzinger’s 2000

document, Dominus Jesus; (4) Documents from the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) especially its 2000 document, Doing Theology in Asia Today.¹⁷

All are inclusivist and all, in some sense, fulfillment theologies. Yet one notes a very different emphasis in the writings of John Paul II , on the one hand, and Ratzinger's Dominus Jesus, on the other or in the clear, if sometimes subtle, different tones in Dialogue and Proclamation and The Asian Bishops' documents on inter-religious dialogue than that found in Dominus Jesus.

Already at the Council, these different emphases found their theological source in the very divergent views on non-Christian religions of two important Jesuit periti, the French Jean Cardinal Danielou and the German Karl Rahner. Danielou had published widely in the 1950's and 1960's on the meaning and theological role of other religions. He saw history as a progressive manifestation of the divine to humankind. Danielou sharply distinguishes between the natural and supernatural orders. In the natural order, the other religions are human expressions of a desire for God but do not reach their true finality in Christ. As Danielou put it in his book, The Salvation of the Nations, “ The essential difference between Catholicism and all other religions is that the others start from man. They are touching and often very beautiful attempts, rising very high in their search for God. But in Catholicism, there is a contrary movement, the descent of God towards the world, in order to communicate his life to it”¹⁸. The other religions remained steeped in the natural order and have no salvific power as such .They represent a kind of natural human longing, an aspiration merely. Danielou's influence can be seen in Ad Gentes which speaks of the other religious paths as endeavors in which people “ search for God, groping for Him that they may by chance find him” and as human initiatives

which “ need to be enlightened and purified (in another place Ad Gentes refers to their being ‘ purged of evil associations, healed, ennobled and perfected ‘ by conversion to the Gospel) (# 3, 9) In Danielou’s theology, the grace of Christ may mysteriously touch individuals outside Christianity but the other religions, their scriptures and rituals, remain purely human customs.

Karl Rahner did not make such a strict distinction between the natural and the supernatural orders. He argued that the so-called ‘ natural order’ was a kind of thought experiment, a ‘ remainder’ concept. Human beings everywhere are never utter strangers to divine grace. God’s grace, for Rahner, is always already at work in human beings in concrete ways and in their real history. Consequently, his assessment of the meaning of the different religions diverges from Danielou’s: “ In view of the social nature of man... however, it is quite unthinkable that man, being what he is, could actually achieve this relationship to God in an absolutely private interior reality and outside of the actual religious bodies which offer themselves to him in the environment in which he lives”¹⁹. For Rahner, the Holy Mystery in which we find the human and divine already incomprehensibly and profoundly always inter-related does not allow excluding the religions from the supernatural working of grace. Danielou saw the other religions as merely, at best, a kind of ‘ preparation’ for hearing the gospel, Rahner argued that God saves human beings through their religions, not merely despite them. The other religions represent, in some obscure but real sense, a participatory mediation in the grace of Christ.

A careful reading of the documents of Vatican II which treat inter-religious dialogue uncovers some texts which seem closer to Danielou and others (especially Ad Gentes # 3 which contends that “ this all-embracing plan of God for the salvation of the

human race is accomplished not only as it were secretly in their souls”).to Rahner. Yet, these Vatican II documents never quite go as far as Rahner did in recognizing the other religions as somehow mediations, in themselves, of Christ’s salvation. Rahner himself recognized this after the Council and thought that the Church had left the issue a still open theological question.

I can not here do a detailed analysis of the various texts of John Paul II, Dialogue and Proclamation, The Asian Bishops and Cardinal Ratzinger’s Dominus Jesus. The long and the short of it is that John Paul II was closer to Rahner and Ratzinger to Danielou. This becomes evident in the sharp distinction made in Dominus Jesus between what it calls “belief”, as found in the other religions, and “theological faith” found only in Christianity. Faith, it claims, is “a supernatural virtue infused by God” while belief, as found in the other religions “is that sum of experiences and thought that constitutes the human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration which man in his search for truth has conceived and acted upon in his relationship to God and the Absolute.” Drawing on this distinction, Dominus Jesus excoriates contemporary theologians who sometimes confuse theological faith with belief as found in the other religions and fail to understand that the other religions can only provide “religious experience still in search of the absolute truth and still lacking assent to God who reveals himself”.(#7)

John Paul II was closer to Rahner. In Redemptoris Hominis the pope recognized in the beliefs of those who follow other religions “an effect of the Spirit of truth operating outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body” (# 6). In a later encyclical on the Holy Spirit, Dominum et Vivificantem, he taught that Christians “must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being associated, in a way known to God,

with the Pascal Mystery”. The pope does not restrict this activity of the Spirit to purely private and interior illumination:” The Spirit’s presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions”.(# 5) In an address to the Roman curia concerning his day of prayer with Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus and Jews at Assisi, John Paul II voiced his firm conviction that” every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every human person”²⁰.In Redemptoris Missio, the pope even speaks of “ participated forms of mediation” by which the other religions as such (and not just individuals) are oriented toward and participate, somehow, in the unique mediation of Christ. To be sure, for John Paul II, all religions are not equal and Christianity represents the ultimate culmination and fulfillment of God’s revelation.

Dialogue and Proclamation, following John Paul II’s lead, undercuts somewhat any rigid distinction between mere human beliefs and theological faith in citing the faith of the centurion (who it is presumed remained an adherent to Roman religion) in response to Jesus miracle and affirms that the other religious traditions include elements of grace. “ The mystery of salvation reaches out to them, in a way known to God, through the invisible action of the Spirit of Christ. Concretely, it will be in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions and by following the dictates of their conscience that the members of other religions respond positively to God’s invitation and receive salvation in Jesus Christ, even while they do not recognize or acknowledge him as their savior.” (# 29)

Special attention, perhaps, should be afforded the documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences. They grew out of long and rooted experience with the four

kinds of inter-religious dialogue recommended by Dialogue and Proclamation: (A) The Dialogue of life where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations; (B) The Dialogue of Action, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people; (C) The Dialogue of Religious Experience where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the absolute (note unlike Dominus Jesus, Dialogue and Proclamation uses the term ‘ faith’ for non-Christian religious traditions); (D) The Dialogue of theological exchange where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other’s spiritual values. (#42)

Dialogue and Proclamation insists that the different forms of dialogue are interconnected and “ were it to be reduced to theological exchange, dialogue might easily be taken as a sort of luxury item in the Church’s mission, a domain reserved for specialists” (# 43). In a similar way, the Asian bishops weave a three-fold dialogue: with the poor, with culture and with the other religions. Such a dialogue is essential for the necessary and difficult inculturation of Christianity in Asia. As the Korean bishops put it in their response to the lineamenta for the Synod of Asian bishops in 1998: “ We have to study and re-evaluate the meaning and role of the great traditional religions in Korea. They too play a part in the salvific economy of God. This understanding is essential to the inculturation of the gospel.”²¹

Doing Theology in Asia Today appeared one month after Dominus Jesus. Its tone is starkly different. Whereas Ratzinger had warned of the dangers of relativism in inter-

religious dialogue, Doing Theology in Asia Today addresses that issue head on in contending that pluralism need not always entail radical subjectivism or relativism in the sense of claiming that all points of view are equally valid”. “ Just because certain persons or groups are misled in the search for truth, and just because they tend to perceive pluralism as relativism, or just because they tend to relativize all reality”, the Asian bishops assert, “ we cannot conclude that all pluralism leads to relativism” Indeed, they state “ the world created by God is pluriform” (p. 3) Whereas Dominus Jesus is apprehensive about and downgrades other religions to “ belief” and “ religious experience still in search for absolute truth”, the Asian bishops assert that they want to show “ a respect for the sacred and for the experience of the sacred in various communities and religious traditions.” (p. 2).

Dominus Jesus views dialogue, first of all, instrumentally, in the service of the Church’s proclamation of the gospel (#2) and, secondly, will only grant respect and equality to the “ personal dignity of the parties in dialogue’ but “ not to doctrinal content” (#.22) and certainly not to the religions since they “ contain gaps, insufficiencies, errors” (#.8) especially when “ it is also certain that objectively speaking they are in a gravely deficient situation” (#. 22). Contrast this with Doing Theology in Asia Today wherein fully half of the text is spent exploring how followers of other religions interpret their own scriptural texts, with a view to learning from them, since “ these ancient approaches to texts developed in various cultures of Asia are also part of the heritage of Asian Christians.” (p. 40).²²

Dominus Jesus “reserves the designation of inspired texts to the canonical books of the Old and New Testament.” (#.8). The Asian bishops, however, assert that “ Asian

Christian exegetes accept the inspiration of the scriptures of other religions as a mystery. It harmonizes with the incarnation of the divine Logos in Jesus Christ” (p. 40) Two notable differences separate Dominus Jesus from Doing Theology in Asia Today. First, the latter breathes an experiential sense of dialogue which has already been taking place and profoundly in the spirit of having something yet to learn from it. In a very insightful article on our topic, James Frederichs queries:” One must ask if the theologians who are responsible for the drafting of [Dominus Jesus] actually have had much experience in inter-religious dialogue or even sympathy for it.”²³ Dominus Jesus, he contends, contains no vision of the opportunity religious diversity offers Christian faith.

The second key difference between the two sets of documents, from Rome and Asia, is the strong insistence of the Asian bishops on that oft’ used phrase in the Vatican Council documents: in a way known only to God! They lift up strongly this notion of Mystery. Refuting any possible charge of relativism, Doing Theology in Asia points out that “there is but one Truth; Truth is a Mystery which we approach reverentially” (p. 3). Asian theology, the bishops claim, must display this reverence for Mystery and the mysterious action of Christ and the Spirit expressed –somehow—in the other religions, their cultural traditions, their scriptures, their followers. Much the same sense of mystery can be found in the Jesuit Document of 1995 which tries to root inter-religious dialogue in the charism of the Spiritual Exercises:

The Ignatian vision of reality provides the spiritual inspiration and ministerial grounding for this urgent task. It opens our eyes to the incomprehensible mystery of God’s salvific presence (Deus semper major) in the world. It makes us sensitive to the sacred space of God’s direct dealing with human persons in history. The contemplation of God laboring in all things helps us to discern the divine spirit in religion and cultures. The Kingdom meditation enables us to understand God’s history as God’s history with us. The Jesuit heritage is... an incentive to develop a culture of dialogue in our approach to other religions. (9 # 17)

In an essay on this Jesuit document, a prominent Jesuit comparative theologian with a specialty in Hinduism, Francis Clooney, proposes that the incomprehensible mystery of God (Deus semper major) serve as the primary guiding theological insight: “God is semper major, always greater than anything we can understand or imagine. God is ever at work, deep within ourselves and within our Christian community—and also beyond the boundaries of our own tradition, moving and working even among people who live religious lives very different from our own”²⁴

IV. Where Do We Go From Here?

I want to propose that precisely for the sake of genuine dialogue, we step back for a time, from any comprehensive theology of religions (exclusivism; inclusivism; pluralism). None is really fruitful for dialogue. On its own grounds, of course, Catholic theology will remain inclusivist and see Jesus as the unique mediator. It will hold to its dogmatic truths but do so with the deep sense that there remains also a Mystery which transcends every formula and formulation. There are true tensions and inconsistencies in the present theology of inter-religious dialogue. Ratzinger in Dominus Jesus may run the risk of diminishing the freedom and action of God. More liberal theologians in speculating how God may have somehow inspired the scriptures of other traditions or be at work in their rituals may forget the important rejoinder: “in ways known only to God” or downplay the clearly scriptural assertion that Jesus is the unique and irreplaceable mediator.

In the end, another paradigm besides a fixation on soteriology might be in order. Some have called it comparative theology. In comparative theology, Christians pull back

from any attempts to do a comprehensive theology of world religions which encompasses them all. They focus, instead, on developing practical skills for living responsibly and creatively with non-Christians. They try always to keep faithful to both fundamental truths within Christianity: God wants all men and women to be saved and Jesus is the unique and special and irreplaceable incarnation of God in whom dwells the fullness of God incarnate. Comparative theologians remain on the look-out for whatever will assist Christians to respond creatively to religious diversity. They listen respectfully to what seems similar (or has some overlap with) to their own truths. They cooperate in areas of justice and peace. They know that God does not deal with some people religiously and others only morally and neither should they. Comparative theologians also listen respectfully to what seems utterly foreign to Christianity. They try to see how, in doing so, they can deepen their own understanding of Christianity, find, perhaps, some hidden corresponding analogue to the truth of the other religion. They undertake a dialogue of friendship by cultivating deep inter-religious friendship which, as Francis Clooney notes, is not merely “ a bureaucratic enterprise that can be reduced to formal meetings where representatives of different religions sit down together and share conversation or prayer for a short time”²⁴

In the end, the main fruit of comparative theology is the one voiced in the Jesuit document: “Our spiritual encounter with believers of other religions helps us to discover deeper dimensions of our Christian faith and wider horizons of God’s salvific presence in the world”. And what of our inter-locutors—Buddhist or Muslim or Hindu? They remain free to take from the dialogue what fruit they will. Who knows, perhaps they can learn as Gandhi obviously learned from and appropriated the Sermon on the Mount without

ceasing to be deeply a Hindu. Or as Martin Luther King jr. did not cease to be a Christian by incorporating the Hindu doctrine of ahimsa or non-violence. We turn to comparative theology as a route to a deeper understanding of hidden depths in our own tradition (or perhaps lacunae which we have not yet seen integrated into our tradition).

If you want to make dialogue foremost, step back from any over-arching theology of religions (none yet fully fits; each puts some brakes on dialogue). So, for now, stay with the dialogue: privilege it, not some theory; engage in it. Absent widespread dialogue, we may simply lack the relevant data and experience, as of yet, to construct any comprehensive theology of the world religions.

The situation for any over-arching theology of world religions today is similar to that of the famous debates on grace and human freedom which raged between the Jesuits and the Dominicans in the seventeenth century. Neither side—in its comprehensive theory—seemed to do full justice to and make sense of God’s free grace and human freedom. The church intervened to interdict any definitive claims for a comprehensive theory of God’s foreknowledge and human will. All that was needed was to affirm both grace and freedom, without showing how they fully connect. Thus, too, today we confront the two truths: Jesus, the unique incarnation of God, is the privileged source of the salvation of all; God desires the salvation of all, even outside of explicit faith in Jesus. None of the over-arching theologies of world religions at present do full justice to both truths, while still opening to genuine dialogue. So long as both truths are affirmed, even if we must leave their precise connection to the mystery of God, we can dialogue (honestly and with no a priori restrictions on the Deus semper major) about justice, truth, spirituality, communion—and the Transcendent Mystery which unites us all.

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- 1 The Decrees of General Congregation Thirty Four, Decree 1.1.3 found on [www. Society of Jesus USA.org](http://www.SocietyofJesusUSA.org) or from a special edition of National Jesuit News April, 1995 I cite the relevant paragraph# of the document on Inter-Religious Dialogue.
 - 2 Judith Berling, Understanding Other Religious Worlds: A Guide for Inter-Religious Education (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004) p. 3.
 - 3 Cf. Roger Haight, Jesus Symbol of God (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999; Jacques Dupuis, Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997).
 - 4 Samuel Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).
 - 5 Hans Kung, Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991).
 - 6 Kwak Pui Lan, “ Interfaith Encounter” in Arthur Holder, ed., The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality (Malden, Mass: Basil Blackwell, 2005) p. 537.
 - 7 Diana Eck, A New Religious America: How a ‘ Christian Country’ Has Now Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001) p. 24.
 - 8 Eck, A New Religious America p. 24—italics mine.
 - 9 Robert Wuthnow, American Mythos: Why Our Best Efforts to be a Better Nation Fall Short (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006) p. 177. See also, Stephen Prothero, Religious Literacy (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2007).
 - 10 cited in Kwak Pui Lan, “ Interfaith Encounter” p. 538.
 - 11 James Fredericks, Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions (New York: Paulist Press, 1999); Buddhists and Christians : Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004 (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004).
 - 12 Karl Rahner, “ Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace” in Theological Investigations 1 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961) pp.297-317; “ Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions” in Theological Investigations 5 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) pp. 115-34; “ Observations on the Problem of the Anonymous Christian” in Theological Investigations 14 (New York: Seabury, 1976) pp. 280-98.
 - 13 James Fredericks, “ The Catholic Church and Other Religious Paths: Rejecting Nothing that is True and Holy”, Theological Studies 64 (2003), p.243, 253.

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- 14 John Hick and Paul Knitter, The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987).
 - 15 John Hick, The Myth of God Incarnate (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977); John Hick, An Interpretation of Religion: The Challenge of Other Religions (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).
 - 16 Fredericks, “ The Catholic Church and Other Religious Paths” p. 251.
 - 17 Encyclicals and allocutions as well as decrees of Vatican dicasteries can be found at the Vatican web site. Doing Theology in Asia Today and other FABC papers can be found at www.ucanewsthai.com
 - 18 Jean Danielou, The Salvation of the Nations (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962) p. 8.
 - 19 Rahner, “ Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions”, p. 128.
 - 20 Found in Inter-Religious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church (1963-1995) , ed. Francesco Gioia (Boston, Pauline, 1994) no. 572.
 - 21 Cited in Peter Phan, “ Reception or Subversion of Vatican II By the Asian Churches” in the AustralianEJournal of Theology no. 6, Feb., 2006.
 - 22 I have been helped by an article by Edmund Chia F.S.C., “ FABC’s ‘ Response’ to Dominus Jesus” first published in Jeedvadhara: A Journal of Christian Interpretation India (May, 2001) and by Peter N.V.Hai, “ Fides Quaerens Dialogum Theological Methodologies of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences” in Australian Ejournal of Theology Oct. 2006, Issue 8.
 - 23 Francis Clooney, “ The Link Between Inter-Religious Dialogue and Work for Justice” in In All Things: A Jesuit Journal of the Social Apostolate November 2000 p.4.
 - 24 Clooney, “ The Link Between Inter-Religious Dialogue and Work for Justice” p. 4.
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BIO: John A. Coleman SJ is Professor of Social Values at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles. He is also a Visiting Scholar in Perth where he holds the St Thomas More College Chair of Jesuit Studies. The position is jointly sponsored by the University of Western Australia and the University of Notre Dame Australia.

