"CHRISTIANITY AND THE WORLD RELIGIONS,"
A RECENT VATICAN DOCUMENT

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[The author analyzes "Christianity and the World Religions," a document of the International Theological Commission approved in 1996 and published in 1997. While appreciating the basic thrust of the document, he points out three problem areas: an acceptance of a standard though misleading typology; a significant inconsistency in contextualizing various magisterial and biblical claims; and the use of language that leads to the appearance of serious epistemic arrogance. He concludes by offering four recommendations for improving the theology of interreligious dialogue.]

O VER THE LAST SEVERAL DECADES, Catholic participation in interreligious dialogue has received substantial support from the official magisterium. Beginning especially with *Nostra aetate* from Vatican II (1965) and more recently through pronouncements of Pope John Paul II, the Catholic Church has sought not only to engage in dialogue with members of other religious traditions but also to find a sound theological foundation for this dialogue. In this article I examine the document published by the Vatican's International Theological Commission (ITC) entitled "Christianity and the World Religions" (1997)[1] in the context of magisterial teaching on world religions in *Nostra aetate* and in recent theological publications. After my analysis, I suggest ways in which this tradition might be further developed.

The basic insights of *Nostra aetate* have been repeatedly confirmed and helpfully extended in recent magisterial teaching especially by John Paul II.[2] In his encyclical *Redemptor hominis,* he noted that "every man . . . has

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[1] An English translation prepared by Michael Ledwith was published in *Origins* 27 (August 14, 1997) 149–66. Citations from the text in this article are identified by number in parentheses.

[2] For a comprehensive overview of recent magisterial statements and historical and contemporary theological work in this area, along with a proposal for a the-

been redeemed by Christ, and ... with each man ... Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it."[3] This reality of redemption is a central ground for dialogue. Several years later, the Secretariat for Non-Christians issued a text entitled "Dialogue and Mission" which recognized that dialogue, in the search for truth, is an aspect of "positive and constructive interreligious relations ... which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment."[4]

In 1991, the same curial office, now known as the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, together with the Congregation for the Evangelization of the Peoples, issued "Dialogue and Proclamation." There the Pontifical Council reaffirmed the *Nostra aetate* tradition of evaluating other

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ology of the world religions, see Jacques Dupuis, S.J., *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997). Many theologians were shocked by news that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had initiated an investigation into Dupuis's *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (see "Another Theologian under Investigation," [London] *Tablet* 252 [November 21, 1998] 1550, and John L. Allen, Jr., "Two European Scholars under Scrutiny for Heresy," *National Catholic Reporter,* [20 November 1998] 6). Allen notes the broadly positive reception Dupuis's work has received and mentions three *quaestiones disputatae* raised by Paul Griffiths in a review in the *Thomist.* The *Tablet* reports that Archbishop Henry D'Souza of Calcutta, president of the Indian Conference of Bishops supports Dupuis, especially for his "orthodoxy and steady pursuit of theological reflection in conformity with the Church's teaching." D'Souza added that it was "a pity" that Dupuis "had to stop teaching in order to defend" himself. Gerald O'Collins, S.J., notes the remarkable service of Dupuis and claims that "Like John Paul II, Fr Dupuis recognises those treasures of religion through which millions of non-Christians will, we may confidently hope and pray, find salvation and be united with all the redeemed in the coming kingdom of the glorious Son of God. To condemn Dupuis's book would, I fear, be to condemn the Pope himself" ("In Defence of Fr Dupuis, Letter to the Editor," *Tablet* 252 [December 12, 1998] 1650). If Dupuis's book is called into question, I would argue that the ITC document should be questioned. Cardinal Franz König has also endorsed Fr. O'Collins's and Archbishop D'Souza's comments, calling Dupuis's writings "masterly." König also finds the CDF investigation is "detrimental to its task" of guarding and promoting the faith and suggested that the congregation needs "to find better ways of doing its job to serve the Church effectively, especially when it is a matter of breaking new theological ground, as is the case here" ("In Defence of Fr Dupuis," *Tablet* 253 [January 16, 1999] 76–77, at 76). It is regrettable that this rigorously orthodox and theologically cautious Catholic scholar should be compelled to stop teaching to respond to inquiries regarding his magisterial and balanced book, especially since his book synthesizes recent work in the field and hardly offers novel theological claims.

[3] John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis* no. 14; text in *Origins* 8 (March 22, 1979) 625–45, at 634.

[4] "The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission," *Acta apostolicae sedis* 76 (1984) 816–24, at 816, no. 3.

traditions positively by seeing them as graced by the Holy Spirit and having "a providential role in the divine economy of salvation."[5] This document also linked dialogue with "integral development, social justice, and human liberation. ... There is need to stand up for human rights, proclaim the demands of justice, and denounce injustice not only when their [local churches'] own members are victimized, but independently of the religious allegiance of the victims. There is need also to join together in trying to solve the great problems facing society and the world. ..."[6] Yet important questions remained to be discussed regarding the theological groundwork to understand the meaning of this reality and to guide the Christian contribution to the dialogue.

THE INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION'S TEXT

The 1997 document of the International Theological Commission, "Christianity and the World Religions," seeks to provide a sketch of a theology of world religions. Much of the document is a nuanced and insightful reappropriation of major elements of *Nostra aetate*. It also attempts to put the practices, attitudes, and insights ensconced in that tradition on a firm theological footing. The text begins with a lengthy exploration of the status quaestionis in the Catholic theology of religions and finds two basic lines of thought. The first line of thought, associated with "Jean Daniélou, Henri de Lubac and others, considers that religions are based on the covenant with Noah, a cosmic covenant" that can give them positive, but not salvific, value (no. 4). The other line, associated with Karl Rahner, finds that the offer of grace reaches all and that the traditions "can have salvific value even though they contain elements of ignorance, sin and corruption" (no. 4). The latter line is seen as part of the familiar "exclusivist, inclusivist, pluralist" typology. The document rejects indifferentism with regard to the truth of traditions: "To sacrifice the question of truth is incompatible with the Christian vision" (no. 13) and thus rejects certain forms of the pluralist hypothesis, especially those that develop a nonnormative christology (nos. 20–22).

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[5] Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, "Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (19 May 1991) no. 17. The full text is published in *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading Redemptoris Missio and Dialogue and Proclamation,* ed. William R. Burrows (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 93–118, at 98, no. 17. The text is also available on the internet: ⟨http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/curia.pontifical_councils.interelg.document.19_may_1991.dialogue_and_proclamatio.english.shtml⟩.

[6] Ibid. no. 44.

The ITC text goes on to propose fundamental theological presuppositions for the dialogue. It appropriates themes from the Bible and the patristic tradition (especially as cited in recent magisterial statements), concluding with theological axioms that humans can be saved only in Jesus and that other "possibilities of salvific 'mediation' cannot be seen in isolation from the man Jesus, the only mediator" (no. 49). The universal salvific action of the Spirit leads to an understanding of the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation (nos. 62–79). For example, the document recognizes that the original meaning of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* was "that of exhorting the members of the church to be faithful" (no. 70). When the force of this call is properly understood, not as condemning others but as exhorting Christians, the call can be seen not to contradict God's universal call of all to salvation.

On this basis, the text then addresses four major questions. First, with regard to the presence of salvific elements in other religions, it endorses a version of the "Rahner line":

The affirmation of the possibility of the existence of salvific elements in the religions does not imply in itself a judgment about the presence of these elements in each one of the specific religions. On the other hand, the love of God and of one's neighbor, made possible in the final analysis by Jesus the sole mediator, is the only way to reach God himself. The religions can be carriers of saving truth only insofar as they raise men to true love. If it is true that this can be found in those who do not practice any religion, it nonetheless seems that true love for God must lead to adoration and religious practice in union with other men (no. 87).

Second, in dealing with the question of relevation, the document finds that "[a]lthough one cannot explicitly exclude any divine illumination in the composition of those books (in the religions that have them), it is much more fitting to reserve the qualification of *inspired* to the books of the canon (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 11)" (no. 92). Third, it finds that "pluralist theology" is not only historically, epistemologically, and theologically oversimplified (no. 100), but also deceptively attractive in an era in which the "pluralism of the marketplace" reigns, because "pluralist theology" seems to construe different traditions occupying market niches and people as "consumers" choosing among them. The document also finds "pluralist theology" unable to sustain the rationale for engaging in dialogue seeking truth: "[T]he pluralist theology, as a strategy of dialogue among the religions, not only is not justified in consideration of the truth claim of one's own religion, but simultaneously destroys the truth claim of the other side" (no. 99). Fourth, it finds that the interreligious dialogue must be situated in the context of the mystery of salvation. Thus it involves a rich social anthropology in which all people are seen as "hoping to be saved" even though they may not be aware of it (no. 112). Hence, interreligious dialogue takes place in the light of the ultimate end of humanity.

THREE PROBLEMATIC AREAS

Despite its notable strengths, the document also has, in my judgment, some disturbing weaknesses.[7] Without denying its thoughtful and nuanced understanding, I argue here that it contains three problematic areas: its acceptance of a standard (and misleading) typology; a disturbing disconnection between its theory and practice of stating claims; and the use of language that leads to an appearance of epistemic arrogance. My claim is that the document—and the discourse of those who debate the Catholic theology of world religions more generally—could and would be much improved if these weaknesses could be overcome. Insofar as "Christianity and the World Religions" is representative of the theology and practice of interreligious dialogue, these suggestions for improvements can also be applied more generally in this area of Christian theology.

Typology

First, the document's account of the *status quaestionis* maintains intact the familiar, but problematical, typology of the theology of world religions, the "exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism" typology (no. 9).[8] The effects of using these types of schemata have come under significant criticism by various Catholic theologians.[9] For instance, the document fails to take into

[7] The problems identified in what follows are not unique to this document. Examples can be found in many of the theologies of religious diversity developed in the Catholic tradition. But the document offers an opportunity for addressing these issues. This document can be read in light of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's address to the presidents of the doctrinal commissions of the bishops' conferences of Latin America, in May 1996 ("Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith Today," *Origins* 26 [October 31, 1996] 309–17). While Ratzinger's rejection of indifferentism and of new-age relativism are well warranted, it is not so clear that the criticisms he raises apply to the developed positions of John Hick and Paul Knitter. Ratzinger addresses only early and unnuanced appropriations of the writings of Hick and especially of Knitter's early work, critiqued by K.-H. Menke, *Die Einzigkeit Jesu Christi im Horizont der Sinnfrage* (Freiburg: Johannes, 1995). Ratzinger cites Menke ten times in twenty notes; he also adverts to the ITC document in his own address.

[8] The document conflates this typology with a typology of "ecclesiocentrism-Christocentrism-theocentrism" (nos. 10–13). This typology shows similarities with the work of Jacques Dupuis, S.J., *Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991). I do not address this second form of the typology here.

[9] See J. A. DiNoia, O.P., *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1992) 163–64, and the literature cited 179–80; see also Roger Haight, S.J., "Jesus and World Religions," *Modern Theology* 12 (July 1996) 322–23; Terrence W. Tilley et al., *Postmodern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995) 156–59.

consideration J. A. DiNoia's important criticism that this typologizing "obscures the more basic issue posed by current circumstances of religious interaction: how to affirm the universality of the Christian dispensation without sacrificing its particularity."[10] One might also add that the typology also obscures another basic issue: the need to recognize the religious other as *other,* not as a mere outsider to, reflection of, extension of, or unwitting member of one's own tradition (e.g. "non-Christian").

Beyond these unhappy consequences, the typology ensconces a fundamental confusion because it mixes different genres as if they were the same. The problem with the mixing of genres begins with the construction of this scheme. The typology seems to create a trajectory from an intolerable exclusivism to the liberal view of the pluralists.[11] It plausibly constructs positions as if they offered three types of answers to a fundamental soteriological question: "How can those who know not Christ be saved if salvation is only in Christ?" Exclusivisms answer, "They cannot." Exclusivist positions find Christ normative for and constitutive of salvation, but at the cost of finding most of humanity damned to hell eternally by an all-good God because most human beings do not know Christ as normative. Inclusivisms answer, "They can, but because Christ is the constitutive mediator of all divine grace available to them." Inclusivist positions find that Christ is normative for Christians and constitutive of salvation for all (even those who know him not), but do this at the cost of denying the possibility that God could have chosen otherwise.[12] Pluralisms answer, "All are or can be saved." However, they do so at a price of denying that Christ is constitutive or normative of salvation for all, while affirming that Christ is normative (and perhaps constitutive) of salvation for Christians. Pluralisms typically create an unbridgeable gulf between the divine and its manifestations so that no particular religious truth claims can be maintained (no. 99). Pluralisms also evacuate the particular concepts of salvation/enlightenment/release developed in various religious traditions of any determinate significance, for pluralisms tend to construe such particular con-

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[10] DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions* 180.

[11] For a similar claim, see ibid. 163.

[12] The logic of this a priori argument would run roughly as follows: Either God could or could not allow salvation to come to humanity apart from the Incarnation of the Word. If God could not allow that, this would be a severe limit on God's power incompatible with divine omnipotence and freedom; God would be forced by human sin either to become human or to "abandon" the divine universal salvific will or to "forsake" its effectiveness. If God could allow salvation to come to humanity apart from the Incarnation of the Word, then it is possible that God has done so. Obviously, arguing for the precise understandings of the terms involved that would show this argument valid is beyond the scope of the present article. Roger Haight offers a stronger version of this argument ("Jesus and the World Religions" 332–33).

cepts as merely phenomenal, and the divine which brings about the ulti-
mate rescue/reorientation of humanity as well as the salvation brought
about as noumenal.

However, this convenient, seemingly plausible, and simple categoriza-
tion is intrinsically flawed because the positions are not of the same genre
and do not address the same questions. "Exclusivism" emerges from a
rigorous theological position; "inclusivism" from a generous theological
position; but "pluralism" has its roots in recent phenomenology, compara-
tive religion, and philosophy of religion. "Pluralism" in its contemporary
form has its primary exponent in the philosopher of religion John Hick,
whose theological antecedents are in the stream of liberal Protestantism
that began with Schleiermacher.[13] Even Schleiermacher's apparent super-
sessionism in *The Christian Faith* is based on propositions explicitly "bor-
rowed from the philosophy of religion,"[14] a fact about his own systematics
often overlooked. The root issue that the "pluralist" hypothesis addresses
is *not* the issue of salvation, but of designating a universal religious truth or
religiosity presumed to be common to all (valid) religions.[15]

This is not to say that questions of truth and salvation are not linked; it
is not to say that pluralisms do not have a concern with "salvation" in some
form. Rather, it is to insist that the concepts of truth and salvation are
construed and linked very differently in each of these approaches. Exclu-
sivisms take salvation as consequent upon one explicitly accepting the
Truth; inclusivisms take salvation as not directly related to knowing the
Truth, but to being in some way "in" the Truth; pluralisms take salvation
as effected despite our human inability to know the Truth. To take these

[13] See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Tran-
scendent* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989), and my review of his book in *TS* 51
(1990) 137–39. Hick's debt to Schleiermacher is evident in his advocacy of an
"Irenaean" theodicy partly drawn from Schleiermacher in *Evil and the God of Love*
(London: Macmillan, 1966). Chester Gillis identified Hick's hermeneutical position
as developed from Dilthey and Schleiermacher in *A Question of Final Belief: John
Hick's Pluralistic Theory of Salvation* (New York: St. Martin's, 1989) 149.

[14] Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith,* trans. H. R. MacKintosh
and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928) 31. For his supersessionism, see
44; for an attribution of a primal revelation to all religious communions, see 50; for
a "Kantian" formulation of the problem of knowledge of God, see 52.

[15] The structure of Hick's argument for "the pluralistic hypothesis" in *An Inter-
pretation of Religion* does not advert to issues regarding salvation. The hypothesis
is developed primarily to resolve epistemic questions occasioned by phenomeno-
logical, not theological, reflections on the soteriocentric character of postaxial re-
ligions. Hick's analysis of the ITC document includes a claim that the ITC recog-
nizes pluralism "as an option to be considered" ("The Latest Vatican Statement on
Christianity and Other Religions," *New Blackfriars* 79 [December 1998] 536-43, at
542). Perhaps pluralism is to be "considered," as Hick says, but the document
clearly considers pluralism unacceptable.

views as constituting a typology or a trajectory unhappily conflates these different, and possibly incommensurable, positions as if they were all of the same genre, had the same origins, and addressed the same questions. The "exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism" typology creates the illusion that proponents of the three types are arguing about the same issues, whereas they are not. Hence, the typology effaces important differences between these positions and treats a position developed in the philosophy of religion as if it had the same logical status as positions developed in theology proper. This is a major intrinsic flaw in this typology that misleads people into thinking these positions are all of the same type, which they are not.

Taken as a trajectory, the typology unhappily also gives rise to a second problem, namely, intertype polemics. Pluralist criticisms of Karl Rahner's anonymous Christianity, a paradigmatic Catholic inclusivist position, suggest that Rahner's approach reduces other traditions to outposts of Christianity and is thus "presumptuous, offensive, and a block to dialogue."[16] Inclusivists and others tend to accuse pluralists of propounding an intellectually imperialist system that, if accepted, undermines the life world of every particular tradition.[17] But both approaches, considered at this level of generality, pay the price of refusing to recognize the religious other as other. Inclusivisms tend to reduce saving grace in the other traditions to mere anticipations or dependents of the salvation in Christ; as noted above, pluralisms tend—as DiNoia suggested and the ITC document (no. 99) claims—to deny the truth-status of the distinctive truths that give identity to the different traditions by reducing those claims to "mythological truth." Inclusivisms tend to deny the integrity and efficacy of the religions because salvation—whatever it is and however it is mediated to the individual—in

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[16] Knitter summarizes Rahner's classic statement and Hans Küng's trenchant criticism of that view, as well as suggesting ways beyond Rahner (No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985] 128–35, at 131). This criticism is not entirely fair to Rahner's position. The status quaestionis has become more nuanced since the magisterial survey of Dupuis, Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism.

[17] See the essays collected in Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll:, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990), especially Kenneth Surin, "A Politics of Speech: Religious Pluralism in the Age of the McDonald's Hamburger." A more nuanced version of this argument could be developed using Robert Schreiter's concept of the "global hyperculture" and recognizing that "pluralism" is an ideology especially congruent with the global system that threatens to overtake distinctive local cultures (Surin's point); see The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997). Schreiter does not include theologies of religious pluralism in his discussion of the theological universals that counter the global system (14–21) or in his discussion of intercultural hermeneutics (30–32). This omission suggests that the place of this discussion resides in the Enlightenment discourse, the ideology of the culturally flattening global system.

Jodo-shinsu Buddhism, Judaism, Vedanta, or any of these religious tradi-
tion, is through Christ, not through the love of Buddha, the observance of
the Law, or the practice of meditation. While salvation may indeed be
mediated only through Christ, that is a position that cannot be taken a
priori; and building a nonhegemonic a posteriori argument for this view,
that is, one which both recognizes the other as distinctively other and
preserves the universal salvific will of God, is very difficult.[18] Prescinding
from constructing theologies of religious diversity, utilizing this categorial
scheme as a framework could allow theologians to prescind from the re-
peated polemics that the scheme seems to generate in the literature.

The ITC text finds that, as a "mediating" position, inclusivism is the
position "most commonly held by Catholic theologians" (no. 11). However,
if one takes the polemics noted above at their sharpest and baldest, one
would conclude that inclusivism is finally either merely exclusivism with a
happy face or pluralism with an overt hegemonic christomonist ideology
(rather than a covert hegemonic liberal ideology, as with pluralism). This
would not be fair, as the most creative Catholic positions have sought to go
beyond this sort of inclusivism. The continued utilization of this typology
does not advance the discussion in the field.[19]

What is the alternative? The strength of the ITC document lies in the
fact that it recognizes the great importance of preserving a connection
between salvation and truth (no. 13). This connection could perhaps better
be dealt with not as the foundational justification for, but as the desired
goal of interreligious dialogue. Jacques Dupuis images complementary tra-

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[18] S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.:
Orbis, 1995) attempts such an argument in critical dialogue with pluralist positions.

[19] Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism,* would have to be
classified as a form of inclusivism by the ITC document. Yet Dupuis clearly seeks
to go beyond inclusivist positions without moving into "pluralism." Dupuis writes,
"Truth and grace found elsewhere must not be reduced to 'seeds' or 'stepping-
stones' simply to be nurtured or used and then superseded in Christian revelation.
They represent additional and autonomous benefits. More divine truth and grace
are found operative in the entire history of God's dealings with humankind than are
available simply in the Christian tradition. As the 'human face' or 'icon' of God,
Jesus Christ gives to Christianity its specific and singular character. But, while he is
constitutive of salvation for all, he neither includes nor excludes other saving figures
or traditions. If he brings salvation history to a climax, it is by way not of substi-
tution or supersession but of confirmation and accomplishment" (388). The diffi-
culty of understanding Dupuis's position lies in discerning just what being "consti-
tutive of salvation for all" means; if we assume the typology, in using this term
Dupuis seems to place himself with the inclusivists over against the pluralists. Yet
I read Dupuis as trying to break the boundaries of the typology, even though he
uses a concept ("constitutive") that seems to link him to the typology. Dupuis's
strong eschatological focus substantially changes the meaning of "constitutive" so
that his view no longer fits the categories.

ditions converging in the eschatological reign of God,[20] an image that can be seen as born in the praxis of solidarity and dialogue and nourished by Christian hope. Only when this convergence occurs can we know which of our truth claims, if any, best reflect and express that saving truth that makes us free (John 8:32).

DiNoia has argued that the "ways in which the presently observable and assessable conduct of non-Christians will conduce to their future salvation are now hidden from view and known only to God."[21] But if knowing the truth as truth is neither necessary (as John Paul II stated in *Redemptor hominis*) nor sufficient for salvation, then it is not clear how we could know whether a religious tradition was salvifically efficacious or how salvific efficacy could function as a truth criterion for preferring one religious tradition's truth claims over those of another tradition. In short, leaving behind the "exclusivist-inclusivist-pluralist" typology does more to advance the discussion of the theology of "Christianity and the world religions" than keeping it. Had the ITC document abandoned the typology, it could have reflected more clearly the insights of the important new contributions made by Catholic theologians seeking to work outside that paradigm.[22]

Theory vs. Practice

The second problem is internal to the ITC document. Yet similar problems crop up in many theologians' writings. The problem is that there is a disturbing disconnection between the document's theory and practice at a most crucial point. The ITC cites its earlier work on theologies in context and notes: "The context—literary, sociological, etc.—is an important means of understanding, at times the only one, texts and situations; such

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[20] Ibid. 389.   [21] DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions* 75.

[22] I would include Knitter's later work in this category. Although he has consistently aligned himself with the "pluralists" over against the "exclusivists" and "inclusivists" (see Paul Knitter, "Five Theses on the Uniqueness of Jesus," *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul F. Knitter,* ed. Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997] 140), Knitter's position has evolved significantly in light of criticism. Dupuis recognizes this (*Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* 284 n. 7), especially in acknowledging how Knitter in *Jesus and the Other Names* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996) articulates a more evolved Christology. A further development in Knitter's work is a clear commitment to social justice and ecological wisdom, that leads him to support a "globally responsible, correlational dialogue of religions" which goes beyond the "pluralist" position (Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names* 17). Yet Dupuis's criticisms of Knitter miss the mark where he argues that it is "untenable" to hold, as Knitter does, that a representational (rather than a constitutive) christology that sees that Jesus in his death and Resurrection "causes or constitutes the universal availability of God's salvific love" (Dupuis 284, citing Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names* 133).

contexts are a possible place for truth, but they are not identified with truth itself" (no. 101). This very important brief statement of a key item in hermeneutics requires examination and application.

The first clause seems unassailable and even understated. We cannot understand the meaning of an utterance, a text, a monument, an artifact, a life, or a movement apart from the context(s) in which each is incarnated. The ITC document's treatment of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* provides an excellent example of allowing a clearer understanding of a difficult claim by the process of more clearly understanding the force of the utterance in its context. Even if a text carries a timeless meaning independent of its actual instantiation in a context, that meaning is not directly accessible to us. We can only understand contextualized meanings.[23] However it may be for God or angels, humans require contexts.

The second clause means something like this: Whether we judge utterances, texts, monuments, artifacts, lives, or movements to tell, reveal, or live in the truth is an issue to be distinguished from the issue of their meaning. But the issue of truth is necessarily second. We logically and practically cannot raise it unless and until we understand the items we seek to understand in the contexts in which they carry their meaning. This seems to be entirely obvious in theory: we must first understand an item before we can evaluate it as true, beautiful, just, etc.

Unfortunately, the practice of part of the ITC document is otherwise. In its section on "fundamental theological presuppositions" (esp. nos. 32–48), the ITC document uses proof texts from the Bible and the Fathers of the Church to show Christ's universal normativity for salvation. This section takes short quotations from ancient texts with little consideration of the intratextual context (and no consideration of the extratextual contexts) in which these were given or the force with which they were given. In contrast with the nuanced analysis of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus,* the ITC fails to note either general or specific problems with the texts they cite and the way they utilize them. For example, the ITC document cites Justin's and Clement's views that the Greeks stole ideas from Moses and the prophets, without ever noting that these claims are defensive and polemical rhetoric that are not merely historically unverifiable, but actually likely to be simply false (no. 44). The fact that the recent statements of the magisterium have cited these motifs from tradition, as the ITC document notes (introducing no. 40), does not show that they are properly understood nor does it make these claims true. By the ITC's own contextual hermeneutics, it would be

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[23] For a brief discussion of the relationship between truth and warrant (or justification) in the context of a thoroughly contextual understanding of meaning, see Terrence W. Tilley, *The Wisdom of Religious Commitment* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1995) 68–71.

more accurate to argue that the magisterium has used these texts without regard to the contexts in which they could have meaning, a point repeatedly and accurately made by many of the participants in this theological discussion.[24]

In its consideration of the normativity and sufficiency of Christ for salvation, the ITC document ignores the historically certain—as certain as historians get—claim that the early Christian texts were worked out in crucibles of conflict. Just as the anti-Jewish polemics in the Gospels of John and Matthew are the products of young and marginal communities attempting to find their own identities, in part, by vilifying their dearest and closest sibling or parent, so the exclusive universality of salvation through Christ characteristic of the New Testament and of the patristic writers is developed as this new religious sect was struggling for its life and identity against competing sects and mystery religions in late antiquity, not to mention a state religion whose liturgies often appeared to these Jews and Gentiles who believed in Jesus as blaspheming idolatry.[25] In such a social-religious context, mild claims and polite recognition of diversity are hardly to be expected.

The unfortunate fact is that the ITC document fails to connect the overheated rhetoric of early writers with their social situation except to contextualize and ameliorate the "anti-Jewish polemic" characteristic of many early Christian texts. My point here is not that the claims made by Justin, John, and Clement are not true, but that, when we fail to see these claims in their actual context, to recognize their rhetorical force, to understand that these were potent verbal weapons in the early Church's battle for its life, we fail to follow the key hermeneutical approach that the ITC document notes for interpreting texts and uses in examining *extra ecclesiam nulla salus.* Because of this omission the ITC literally and logically cannot properly raise the question of whether these claims are true or should be normative for us, because they have failed to show what the texts meant in

[24] See Knitter, *No Other Name?* 173–86. Knitter raises issues regarding the contexts for and forces of New Testament christological claims about Jesus' uniqueness. Yet the ITC document uses early Christian texts as if they were unproblematical and fails to address the problems that Knitter and other scholars properly raise about these texts.

[25] For discussion of the development of Christianity and Judaism in the early period of Christianity, see E. P. Sanders et al., ed., *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition,* 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980–81); James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Trinity International, 1991); Shaye J. D. Cohen, "The Significance of Yavneh: Pharisees, Rabbis, and the End of Jewish Sectarianism," *Hebrew Union College Annual* (1984) 27–53. For a theological appropriation of this need for self-definition, see Michael Goldberg, *Jews and Christians: Getting Our Stories Straight* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985).

their context. To advocate claims or assess truth values of texts presumes that one knows and can show their meaning. The ITC document does not do so. Without analyzing the meaning of these claims in their context, the document concludes that these claims express the truth (no. 49). Either the ITC document is unreliable in its work on *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* or on its work on the early Christian texts, or it is incoherent in its hermeneutical practice because it engages in two incompatible hermeneutical approaches to understanding the meaning of those two sorts of claims.

The ITC document is seriously flawed in its hermeneutical practice regarding early Christian texts. This flaw leaves its claims about the normativity of the universality, sufficiency, and finality of salvation in Christ unwarranted. If the polemics against the Jews in the Gospels and in other early Christian writers ought not to be normative for us, how can the polemics against other religious traditions be normative? That the ITC has laid to rest many of the uncontextualized claims that undergird exclusivism is to be praised. But the difficult questions about the relationship of salvation(s) in and through Jesus and salvation in and through the other religious traditions cannot be resolved by appeal to proof texts or authorities. In omitting to show significant hermeneutical work on these proof texts, the ITC document does not advance the discussion and leaves the traditional claims vulnerable to critiques developed from more nuanced hermeneutical positions.[26]

Although not dealing with ancient texts, DiNoia uses an interesting and controversial principle, one that may be in tension with the inclusivist thrust of the ITC document. DiNoia argues that each particular religious tradition shapes its practitioners to a particular aim not reducible to any one of them such as salvation as understood by Christians. Noting that the religious and cultural contexts shape not only the documents people produce but the people that produce them, he argues that

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[26] Dupuis has a much more nuanced hermeneutical approach and recognizes the plurality of problems and positions in the New Testament and the other early Christian authors (*Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* 29–83). Nonetheless, Dupuis's analysis of the texts and theology of the early authors also fails to note the importance of these polemics in the quest for Christian self-identity. Until at least the harshest of the Christian rhetoric against the Jews and the other religions is understood as part of an effort to create an identity for the emerging Christian communities, we cannot adequately understand what those claims meant, much less what they ought to mean as monuments in the tradition or how they ought to apply normatively today. Interestingly, the ITC document recognizes extratextual context as at least a clue to understanding a text's meaning in its criticism of the pluralist hypothesis of gaining plausibility in the present epoch of the "pluralism of the marketplace" (no. 99). My point is that the hermeneutical principles they advocate and use need to be used consistently and thoroughly.

the availability of salvation outside the embrace of explicit Christian faith should be expressed in ways that respect the distinctiveness and integrity both of the traditions of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and Judaic communities, especially as these bear on the definition of the true aim of life. Esteem for other religions and readiness to engage in dialogue with them presumes at least a forthright acknowledgment of their differences from Christianity and, in addition, a willingness to let these differences count in constructing a theology of religions.[27]

Participants in the Catholic tradition are or should be aimed by that tradition at life with God in communion with the other saints. Participants in some Theravada Buddhist traditions are or should be aimed by that tradition at the cessation of the round of birth, life, and death by the arhat who has achieved Nirvana. To say participants in both traditions are shaped to aim at or inchoately desire "the same thing" ignores the context that shapes the meaning of each life. What such a more seriously contextualized hermeneutical approach would look like can not be settled here, but it is clear that it could reinvigorate the Daniélou–de Lubac strand of Catholic approaches to the issue of religious diversity and would require a much more nuanced and internally pluralistic Rahner strand. Such a theology may well demand that one start not with theory (in which social concerns are the practical application), but with the praxis of solidarity with the Other and all others as other than us, as Knitter suggests, as the necessary starting point "in practice" which makes possible a mutually enriching dialogue and gives vivid meaning to our theological claims.

Choice of Language

The third problem is that despite the best of intentions, the document is written in a style that conveys a certain epistemic arrogance. Consider the following: "The Christian party knows without doubt that the human person has been created 'in the image of God,' that is to say, in a constant call of an essentially relational God and capable of opening 'to the other' " (no. 110). This issue is not the content of that sentence. Not only is it a reasonable position to take, it is an excellent expression of Christian respect for each person in her or his own dignity and distinctiveness. It fits John Paul II's concern for the dignity of humanity and the contributions of the religions to justice. Even the studied ambiguity of the phrase "essentially relational God" reflects current lively debates about divine attributes among Christian theologians, especially in the U.S.

However, the force of the sentence as written and the mode of believing ascribed to its content are highly problematical.[28] It closes off serious inter-

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[27] DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions* 42.
[28] For an understanding of the notion of the "force" of claims in the context of speech act theory, see Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1991) chaps. 1–3. The forces of assertive claims and their

religious dialogue in which the Christian can expect to learn more about God than she already knows by listening to and appropriating wisdom from other traditions. The problem is with the phrase "know without doubt." If one knows *p* to be true, one literally cannot hope *p* to be true. To know and to hope are incompatible epistemic attitudes. Knowing implies certainty (to "know without doubt," as the document suggests). Hoping requires the absence of certainty. If one knows that *p* is true without doubt and if one hears another assert *q* and if one knows that *q* entails *not-p,* then, to be consistent, one must reject the other's assertion of *q* as false or to reject one's own belief that *p* is true. E.g., For example, if I know without doubt that I am created in the image of God, and if Stephen Jay Gould and Jacques Monod tell me I as a human being am nothing but a result of a random and unpredictable series of accidents (and this entails that I cannot be "created," much less "created in the image of God"), then I *know* Gould and Monod are wrong. I cannot merely *hope* that they are wrong. Moreover, it is unclear why I should even waste my time listening to either of them as having anything to contribute to understanding the nature of the human.[29]

In claiming that the Christian knows without doubt the truth about anthropology, the document may simply be engaging in rhetorical over-statement just as John, Justin, and Clement did, or it may not mean by "know" what "know" ordinarily means. If it is overheated rhetoric, then we need to recognize that fact and recognize and interpret the worth of such polemic in its context. The polemic in this case emanates not from apologists for a struggling new religion, but from established powerful authorities in a stable and mature tradition. It is directed not against external threats to its life and identity, but against some of its own faithful fellow-theologians trying to understand the relationships between Christianity and the world religions in a rather different context. If the document does not mean that the Christian "knows without doubt" in the ordinary sense of that phrase, it is difficult at best to ascertain what the document can mean by it. But the document does not give other indications of engaging in rhetorical overstatement or of using key terms in odd ways.

Hence, this phrasing could all too easily lead one to suspect that the ITC document is afflicted by a hidden epistemic arrogance. The phrase implies that we really do not need to listen to the other since we have the truth.

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levels of certainty (opine, hope true, know, believe as probable or possible) need to be understood in as nuanced a way as understanding the forces of directive utterances (command, beg, request, suggest, urge, etc.). For a standard analysis of the use of "know" presumed here, see Tilley, *The Wisdom of Religious Commitment* chap. 3, esp. 68–71.

[29] Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity* (New York: Knopf, 1971); Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and Nature of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989). Both authors deny that humans are created.

And when we have the truth, we may need to explore it and intrepret it, but we do not need to seek it, or listen to hear if others have a better understanding of a truth and can enlighten us. Just as one cannot without confusion hope to be true what one knows to be true (these are incompatible epistemic attitudes toward a proposition), so one cannot without confusion seek what one has. In claiming to know without doubt facts about human anthropology that are distinctive to the Christian tradition and that are open for question in the dialogues between members of religious traditions, there is an epistemic arrogance that privileges "our" faith as more epistemically reliable than "theirs." This cannot properly be a presupposition of the dialogue, although it could possibly be a conclusion of it.

The document's rhetoric obscures the crucial difference between giving a wholehearted and firm assent to a doctrine and knowing a doctrine without doubt.[30] The former is compatible with engaging in respectful dialogue; the latter is not. The former is compatible with the practice of listening to the other as other, of avoiding collapsing the other's position into a reflection of one's own, and of refusing not to take seriously the positions the other takes; the latter is not. In order to engage in dialogue, one must not abandon or bracket one's commitment to one's particular views. If one did, what interest would a dialogue have? The ITC document is very clear on this point, especially in its rejection of the "indifferentist" strand of the pluralistic theology of religions. Dialogue between members of different religious traditions has as a constitutive presupposition that there is a difference between the dialogue partners that needs to be explored, understood, and perhaps overcome. To engage in dialogue demands holding fast to one's views while also humbly accepting the fact that one's views can be improved, and might, in some cases, be in error. It requires not a shift in beliefs held, but a nuanced understanding of the force with which they are held. Recognizing something like a principle of fallibility ("We do not now believe that any belief we hold is false, but we recognize that one or more of our beliefs, including some of those central and distinctive to our tradition, may be wrong or infelicitously expressed") is a prerequisite for engaging in dialogue in which one is prepared to learn from, as well as to teach, the other.[31] Such a principle is compatible with firm, wholehearted assent, although not with "knowing without doubt." In

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[30] The process leading to the recent "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" by the Lutheran–Catholic Dialogue, approved (with appropriate concerns) by the Lutheran World Federation Council and the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity (see *Origins* 28 [July 16, 1998] 120) exemplifies the need both to hold fast to traditional claims and to be able to engage in fruitful dialogue, listening to the other, to find ways in which a convergence might occur. Such can occur not only ecumenically, but in the interreligious dialogue as well.

[31] This approach does not imply that everything is negotiable. For example,

short, in its present form, the mode of believing such propositions advo-
cated by the ITC document has an infelicity of expression that conveys a
lack of epistemic humility that would make interreligious dialogue a
sham.[32]

CONCLUSION

Despite its contributions to understanding "Christianity and the World
Religions," the ITC document needs improvement at a number of points.
Its present form does not convey a real acceptance of the "humility of
Christ and the transparency of the Holy Spirit" which, as the document
notes (no. 116), is needed for interreligious dialogue. I suggest alternative
ways of thinking about one's confidence and commitment in faith so that
this difficulty could be overcome and that a more nuanced version could

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Roger Haight argues that holding "Jesus Christ as normative for the Christian
conception of reality does not inhibit dialogue," but actually "mandates interreli-
gious dialogue." Christians should approach other religions "with an openness and
an eagerness to learn more of God's ways in the world" ("Jesus and World Reli-
gions" 335, 337). Epistemic humility implies no lack of commitment to our own
religious claims and recognizes that we may learn more about God from persons
outside our own tradition.

[32] This infelicity affects other claims in the document. For instance, the text
declares that both those who are Christian "and those who are not are all hoping
to be saved. For this reason each one of the religions presents itself as a search for
salvation and proposes ways to reach it" (no. 112). If such a claim is made in an
introductory textbook, it has a proper place in the pedagogy of enabling students to
understand traditions other than their own. But more properly speaking, there is no
concept of "salvation" common to all religions, and it is infelicitous to state that
each tradition proposes a "way" to reach "it" (compare Heim, *Salvations*). Simi-
larly, the document claims, "Interreligious dialogue receives then its meaning from
the economy of salvation . . . [I]t is grounded in the event of salvation accomplished
through Christ and . . . takes place in the church in an eschatological situation" (no.
113). But part of the dialogue is about the meaning of the multivalent concepts of
"salvation/redemption/Enlightenment/liberation/release" and whether they are ac-
complished through Christ. If the dialogue takes place in the Church, are only
members and guests part of the dialogue? Must one enter Christian space to par-
ticipate? Can Christians engage in dialogue in the "space" of other traditions?
Finally, twice in the final section, the document refers to dialogue as *praeparatio
evangelica.* It states that the Church is "the sacrament of the mystery of salvation.
In this sense the interreligious dialogue forms a part, according to the times and
moments fixed by the Father, of the *praeparatio evangelica*" (no. 117). This suggests
that the rationale for the participation in the dialogue is evangelization to and
presumably conversion of others; it neglects to suggest that dialogue may have
intrinsic value in itself. While it is difficult, if not impossible, to construct a theology
for the interreligious dialogue that does not undergird the practice in terms internal
to the Church's theological tradition, the lack of nuance in parts of the document
point to elements of arrogance.

contribute to furthering the discussion and avoid the appearance of arrogant certainty.

In 1994 John Paul II wrote in *Tertio millennio adveniente* of the need for a humble attitude in the ecumenical dialogue:

The approaching end of the second millennium demands of everyone an examination of conscience and the promotion of fitting ecumenical initiatives, so that we can celebrate the Great Jubilee, if not completely united, at least much closer to overcoming the divisions of the second millennium. As everyone recognizes, an enormous effort is needed in this regard. It is essential not only to continue along the path of dialogue on doctrinal matters, but above all to be more committed to prayer for Christian unity.[33]

An analogous humility is needed in interreligious dialogue. Also needed are an examination of conscience (which implies that one might have been cognitively or morally in error), the promotion of joint initiatives, and committed prayer for human unity, if not in specific forms of religious practice and belief, then expressed in efforts to promote peace and justice.

In general, the Roman magisterium over the last 30 years or so, and the ITC document in particular as a contemporary contribution to the tradition embodied in *Nostra aetate,* have made notable steps forward in promoting a theology that no longer rejects out of hand the ideologies and practices of other traditions as did some earlier exclusivist theologies. We are discovering that there are numerous possibilities for theologies that undergird the practices and attitudes present in such dialogues. The ITC document points the way forward, but its articulation needs significant nuancing and development if there is to emerge a sound theology of the world religions and of dialogue with those traditions.

Four Final Suggestions

Specifically, I make four main suggestions to take the theology of world religions forward. First, theological reflection must begin in solidarity with the other-as-other. As found in "Dialogue and Proclamation" (no. 44), as well as in the most recent work of Paul Knitter, and in John Paul II's *Tertio millennio adveniente,* work for social justice—including ecological justice— is the practical basis necessary for dialogue. Shared commitment to the dignity of all humans and the beauty of the earth can create the kind of trust in which authentic dialogue between those who differ can take place. Authentic dialogue is based not on a search for consensus, but on the commitment to solidarity. Consensus may be the result of authentic dialogue, but the result may also be genuine respectful disagreement on some issues along with ideological, strategic, or tactical agreement on others.

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[33] John Paul II, *Tertio millennio adveniente* no. 34.

When one begins with the praxis of solidarity, partial and provisional agreements are significant gains because, even if one disagrees about specific issues, each can trust the other to continue the quest for what is true, beautiful, and good. The theology of the interreligious dialogue should begin with authentic praxis, not with predetermined goals.

Second, rather than considering theological proposals as "typical," one needs to consider each theological position as a particular approach to developing a theology for interreligious dialogue. The hackneyed categorization, especially of opponents, as occupying a less-than-happy place on the typological spectrum fails to promote authentic dialogue among theologians. It encourages polemics rather than examination and nuanced development of particular theological claims. Rather than rejecting others' positions as "imperialistically inclusivist" or "indifferently pluralist," one ought to promote a fuller exploration of others' views. In a way, this is simply calling for charity in interpretation of others' positions, that is, understanding those positions in the most generous way possible. What the ITC and individual theologians need is not so much to reject the work of theologians with whom they disagree, but to encourage theological colleagues such as Knitter to explore deeply a "representational christology" in the context of a rich theory of God's sacramental presence to the world in and through Jesus, and to challenge theologians such as DiNoia to work out more fully how God's providential plan can include people who are not shaped by their tradition so that they may be ready for what Christians call salvation. While typologies may be useful for first approximations and pedagogical purposes for those trying to find their way in a complicated theological landscape, they are maps of very little use in challenging the theological community to develop richer and more faithful theological positions.

Third, understanding of another—whether the "other" of our own past, of theological "competitors" with whom one shares an agonistic quest for truth, of participants in other religious traditions—must always include contextual considerations. Context alone cannot determine the meaning of utterances, movements, or individuals' actions, but context does determine the range of meanings those items can have. Without understanding the context in which they are constructed, one cannot understand those items. Those who reject the "exclusivism" of the past and those who are shaped by it are all too easily prone to ignore the context in which that sort of defensive position developed. If one recognizes the context and the non-theological purposes of theological positions, one can understand them now and retrieve them for the present. The ITC document provides a model here through retrieval of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus.* That model needs to be applied more consistently. Insofar as believers fail to do so, they fail to give adequate warrant for the positions they hold.

Fourth, while those who seek to bring a theology of world religions to birth are generally humble and generous, they need a greater awareness of how to articulate that humility. In Anglo-American epistemology, it is crucial to distinguish between the truth of a claim and the warrant or justification for a claim, between beliefs of which one is certain and beliefs which one knows. One needs to be careful about saying what one "knows."[34] All too often one fails to recognize that what is at issue is not epistemology in general, but specific claims about specific issues and the warrants for those claims. One needs to utilize epistemological frameworks that recognize that specific issues are at stake in the interreligious dialogue, not general epistmological theory. One also needs to address others in ways that do not imply that the speakers are the *norma normans*. Hence, generic terms like "non-Catholics" or "non-Christians" need to be replaced is ways that allow others to see that one allows them to be who they are, rather than being defined by the dialogue partner.

In some ways, it is a very happy fact that "Buddha is a Catholic saint"![35] Before Christians ever thought of a theology of interreligious dialogue, some of our forebearers recognized the presence of God's beauty, truth, and goodness in Buddha's life. Thus Buddha became inscribed in the canon of saints as St. Josaphat. His life story manifested the asceticism and devotion of an Enlightened one, a boddhisattva (from which "Josaphat" is derived), a Buddha in practice, so much that he was taken (or mistaken) for a Christian by Christians. The influence of that story on Tolstoy, of Tolstoy on Gandhi, and of Gandhi on Martin Luther King, Jr., suggests that it is meet and just to begin by recognizing solidarity with others as other, to appreciate that other in whatever ways one can, to learn humbly from others, and only then to proceed to dialogue with those of other religious traditions.[36]

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[34] Some of the implications of this approach with regard to the relationships of the disciplines of history and theology are explored in Terrence W. Tilley, "Practicing History, Practicing Theology," *Horizons* 24 (Fall, 1998) 258–75.

[35] See Philip C. Almond, "The Buddha of Christendom: A Review of the Legend of Barlaam and Josaphat," *Religious Studies* 23 (1987) 391–406.

[36] An earlier version of this paper was presented in the World Religions section of the annual meeting of the College Theology Society, May 29, 1998, held at St. Louis University. I thank fellow panelists Gerald Carney and Daniel Sheridan for their critical comments, and my colleagues Dermot Lane, Maureen Tilley, Michael Barnes, Dennis Doyle, M. Therese Lysaught, Judith G. Mortin, S.S.J., Veronica Murphy, and James Heft, S.M., for their helpful observations.