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AS LONG AS WE WONDER: POSSIBILITIES IN THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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The application of George Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic approach to interreligious dialogue calls into question our ability to communicate across the divide of different religious traditions. Examining his postliberal theology and accepting Lindbeck's caution about the difficulty of understanding a tradition other than one's own, the aims of interreligious encounter need to be revised. This article draws on the theological traditions of God's incomprehensibility as overabundance and offers "wonder" as a theological fruit of interreligious exchange.

INTERCONNECTED SYSTEMS OF INFORMATION, economics, and politics have shrunk our world. The flow of persons in this globalized context makes encounter with difference a daily reality as persons of diverse cultures and religions are increasingly becoming neighbors. Whether "neighbor" means genuine relationship or simply a common location, dialogue is a clear necessity. In sharing the future of planet Earth with persons who are religiously "other," conversations across differences are essential. Fortunately, from a Christian perspective, mainstream religious leaders, both Protestant and Catholic, have encouraged such conversations. Interreligious dialogues have proliferated in many forms, from academic discourses to organized exchanges in local communities. As these become more sophisticated and increasingly constructed as genuine dialogue, the possibility for understanding across religious difference is held up as an admirable goal.[1]

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[1] For an overview of interreligious dialogue see Aasulv Lande, "Recent Developments in Interreligious Dialogue," in *The Concept of God in Global Dialogue*, ed. Werner G. Jeanrond and Aasulv Lande (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis 2005) 32–47.

Yet, George Lindbeck's postliberal theology with its outline of the cultural-linguistic theory of religion should give pause to the enthusiastic embrace of dialogue as a means to theological understanding. While the appearance of his *The Nature of Doctrine* attracted much attention, his insights regarding projects of dialogue have not been fully applied.[2] Nearly 25 years later, his caution that understanding across religious difference is a practical impossibility can lead to finding new theological possibilities in interreligious dialogue.

LINDBECK'S POSTLIBERAL THEOLOGY IN CONTEXT

Lindbeck's postliberal theology can be situated in a broader history of theological responses to religious pluralism that sees a pendulum swing in the Christian response to religious difference.[3] For the better part of Christian history, dialogue was also seen as impossible, unnecessary, or fruitless. The exclusivist theology of "no salvation outside the Church" structured negative encounters of conquest, colonialism, and missionary endeavors that could only rarely be called "dialogue." Radical difference was invoked by the upper hand of power to disastrous effect for those labeled "infidels" or "savages."[4] Those who did engage in dialogue with non-Christians met not only the resistance of Christian authorities but also the more diffuse European attitudes of cultural superiority.[5] In some readings of history, this negative encounter was to be followed by a more enlightened awak-

[2] Lindbeck first outlines his theory and theology of religions in "*Fides ex Auditu* and the Salvation of Non-Christians: Contemporary Catholic and Protestant Positions," in *The Gospel and the Ambiguity of the Church,* ed. Vilmos Vajta (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974); its widespread reception came with his *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

[3] For an overview of Christian theological responses to religious difference in history, see Francis A. Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (New York: Paulist, 1992). See also Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation? A Feminist Approach to Religious Difference* (New York: Continuum, 2005) chaps. 2 and 3.

[4] See, for example, the work of Bartolomé de Las Casas, *The Devastation of the Indies: A Brief Account,* trans. Herma Briffault (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1992) and David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1996).

[5] For example, while Matteo Ricci and Roberto DiNobili both adopted novel methods of weaving themselves into the cultural practices of Asia in order to converse on religious issues with practitioners of Hinduism and Confucianism, superiors in Rome resisted their efforts. The work of Bartolomé de las Casas in championing the rights of native peoples in the so-called "New World" came out of his lived encounter that recognized the complex humanity of the non-Christian peoples. His voice ran notably against the grain of Europeans bent on conquest.

ening to what was shared among people of diverse faiths. For, after colonial explorations paved the way, and colonial administrators, explorers, and missionaries began feeding information back to their homelands, European universities began to study religions (in the plural), thereby prompting new theological reflection and "dialogue" in a textual sense.[6] With access to the scriptures of other traditions, philosophers and theologians alike began to reflect not only from the particular of Christian doctrine, but from the universal of "natural religion."[7] But, as postcolonial investigations demonstrate, the study of religions that provided the foundation for imagined dialogue with other faiths was structured to privilege the religion of the colonizers.[8] Now, universality and similarity were invoked alongside a hierarchical ordering with the effect of rendering the "other" as "less than" oneself. Or, in the words of Lynda Lange, the other was not perceived as other, but rather as "deficient examples of the 'same.'"[9]

The pattern of privileging Christianity persisted as theologians began to move away from exclusion toward all too enthusiastically incorporating people of other faiths into the Christian framework. The most transparent theological example is Karl Rahner's description of the "anonymous Christian." Outlined in the 1960s, Rahner's theology provided an impetus for Christians to encounter people of other faiths by expecting to see in the other faith traditions a reflection of Christ's light and anticipations of Christ's presence.[10] Even more recent writings have continued liberal the-

[6] See Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998) 275.

[7] I think of, from the philosophical side, Immanuel Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* and, from the theological side, Friedrich Schleiermacher's *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. Even those working within exclusivist/doctrinal boundaries found ways to "incorporate" persons of other faiths into the Christian church since outside the church there was "no salvation." For example, following trajectories articulated by Robert Bellarmine, Cardinal Thomas-Marie-Joseph Gousset argued in 1848 that if the "soul of the Church" includes faith, hope, charity, grace, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, then "one can belong to the body [of the Church] without belonging to the soul; just as one can belong to the soul without belonging to the body of the Church" (Cardinal Gousset, *Théologie dogmatique: Theologie dogmatique: Ou exposition des preuves et des dogmes de la religion catholique* [Paris: Lecoffre 1848] 497, as quoted in John J. King, *The Necessity of the Church for Salvation in Selected Theological Writings of the Past Century* [Washington: Catholic University of America, 1960] 5).

[8] See Kwok Pui-lan, "Beyond Pluralism: Toward a Postcolonial Theology of Religious Difference," in *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005) 125–49.

[9] Lynda Lange, "Burnt Offerings to Rationality: A Feminist Reading of the Construction of Indigenous Peoples in Enrique Dussel's Theory of Modernity," *Hypatia* 13 (1998) 132–45.

[10] See, e.g., Karl Rahner, "Jesus Christ in the Non-Christian Religions," in *Theo-*

ology's pattern of including people of other faiths in the framework of Christian salvation.[11] But this framework for dialogue provided by inclusivist theologies does a disservice to Christians as it encourages them to encounter people of other faiths primarily in the hopes of finding themselves in the other. Here the erasure of the uniqueness of the other is evident. This seeming "imperialism" of Christian theology spurred the transformation toward pluralistic theologies that see all religions leading independently to salvation.[12]

Under scrutiny, however, many pluralist theologies fare no better, as they similarly create theological frameworks that encourage Christians to see and value the "sameness" one finds in the other. While important in their movement away from the destructive tendencies of exclusivism, these theologies nevertheless demonstrate how dialogue can be envisioned such that "in the exchange" the other is not really allowed to be distinctive. Inclusivist and pluralist theologies have moved too quickly to a facile inclusion of the "other," as if dialogue were simply a matter of one-to-one correspondence of the elements of one religion with those of another. The other's difference is not taken seriously. As Mark Heim has commented:

> In [an] indirect but determinative way, Christianity remains normative as a kind of photographic negative. The shape that Christian faith may take is determined by contemporary standards: the specific content inside the silhouette of Christianity may be washed out and replaced with the content of any other faith. But the boundaries of the image remain set and there is no possibility of religions bringing their own profile to change the outline.[13]

In the most basic sense, theologies of exclusivism, inclusivism, and even pluralism continue orientalist patterns of thought precisely because they do not take the other seriously enough to let the other be other. We might identify the dissolution of difference as among the dangers of dialogue, and heed the suggestion of postcolonial theorist Edward Said to "take the Other seriously."[14] Theologies and dialogues set up to render the other

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logical Investigations, vol. 17, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1981) 41. See also Jeannine Hill Fletcher, "Rahner and Religious Pluralism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (New York: Cambridge University, 2005) 235–48.

[11] For example, Jacques Dupuis's *Toward a Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997) closely follows Rahner's inclusivist pattern.

[12] This was John Hick's critique of Rahner's inclusivism: see Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 20.

[13] S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995) 110. See also Heim, *The Depths of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001).

[14] Edward Said, "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989) 223.

knowable often do not take the other's complexity and difference seriously enough.

In an era of postcolonial concerns and postmodern trends of thought, Lindbeck's postliberal approach responded to theological developments by affirming the distinctiveness of the various religious communities around the globe.[15] His work is best understood as a response to the shortcomings of the liberal project, as he suggests instead a return to the rich texture of the Christian story rather than the textureless and generic religious experience he saw espoused by liberal theology. In an imagined dialogue on religious difference he wrote, "The impoverished abstractions of a purportedly universal though residually Christian idiom are replaced by the rich particularities of native tongues."[16]

But Lindbeck's program has different effects on internal versus external considerations of particularity. Internally, particularity is identified as something that all Christians share by virtue of sharing in the unique story of Christ. Externally, all religions have a unique story and thus particularity is affirmed of other communities as well. Yet, what provides for ecumenical unity in sharing a particular story is precisely what makes interreligious relations more strained among those who share no common story. Lindbeck admits, "The gravest objection to the approach we are adopting is that it makes interreligious dialogue more difficult. . . . Those for whom conversation is key to solving interreligious problems are likely to be disappointed."[17] In asserting the requirement of a shared story as the basis for conversation and understanding, Lindbeck's position appears as a pendulum swing back toward difference where dialogue is impossible. Indeed, in 1997 he suggested that "there are reasons for thinking that the context which favored . . . dialogical foci in discussions of interreligious relations is disappearing."[18] Yet, while Lindbeck himself eschews dialogue on a variety of grounds,[19] a new reading of interreligious dialogue through his cultural-

[15] Although it capitalizes on postmodern trends of thought, Lindbeck's work is most helpfully described as "postliberal" (his characterization) rather than "postmodern" (as some have termed it). See Stefan Eriksson, "Refining the Distinction between Modern and Postmodern Theologies: The Case of Lindbeck," *Studia Theologica* 56 (2002) 152–63. Eriksson is responding to the characterization of Lindbeck as postmodern in Nancey Murphy and James Wm. McClendon, Jr, "Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies," *Modern Theology* 5 (1989) 191–214.

[16] George Lindbeck, "The Gospel's Uniqueness: Election and Untranslatability," *Modern Theology* 13 (1997) 423–50, at 426.

[17] Ibid. 427.

[18] Ibid. 425.

[19] Lindbeck cites the changed postcolonial situation as well as the genuine difficulties of dialogue from a cultural-linguistic perspective; ibid. 425 and 426–27.

linguistic approach will illumine the yet unclaimed theological fruits that emerge as possibilities in the impossibility of dialogue.

IMPOSSIBILITY OF DIALOGUE IN A CULTURAL-LINGUISTIC SCHEME

To identify the impossibilities and possibilities in dialogue that emerge when it is considered through the cultural-linguistic lens, a closer look at Lindbeck's program is in order. Since "dialogue" in its basic definition is an exchange of words, and interreligious dialogue is the exchange of words between persons of different religions, it is with the "linguistic" part of the cultural-linguistic framework that this exploration begins.

The Challenge of "Language-Games"

Drawing on philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (even if—as Lindbeck admits—"in ways that those more knowledgeable in Wittgenstein might not approve"[20]), a cultural-linguistic approach indicates that we cannot understand the words our dialogue partner offers in the exchange without understanding the "language-game" of which it is a part. Different meanings will be ascribed to a single word based on its use in a particular context. To assign a meaning to a word, one would first need to understand the "game" in which it is situated. This is determined, in part, by the variety of linguistic contexts available in language (e.g., answer, question, description, command, exclamation, etc.).[21] But a word is given meaning in relation to both its linguistic context and the attendant practices related to the communicative act since both constitute the arena of the language-game.[22] Hence, one understands the meaning of a word only when one understands its use in a particular context, a context that includes not only words but activities as well.

[20] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine* 24. Lindbeck is working primarily with Wittgenstein's later work. See Stephen W. Need, "Language, Metaphor, and Chalcedon: A Case of Theological Double Vision," *Harvard Theological Review* 88 (1995) 237–55, at 239; and Jay Wesley Richards, "Truth and Meaning in George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*," *Religious Studies* 33 (1997) 33–53, at 35.

[21] The word "fish" can be used to illuminate the idea of "language games." "Fish" not only denotes both an object and an activity; it might also be used in different ways in each denotation. "Fish" means different things when offered in answer to the questions, "What's for dinner?" and "What sort of pet do you own?" The command "Fish!" can be the opening of a sporting competition, a command to fetch a particular object, or a directive to search blindly. Thus, the meaning of "fish" can be understood only if one understands its context.

[22] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: MacMillan, 1968) 10 §21 and 11 §23.

To illuminate this idea of "language-game" with an example from religious discourse as might be related to dialogue, consider the term "Christ." It has a variety of meanings. It could be used to indicate "Messiah" or "Anointed One," the historical person Jesus, the character "Jesus" in the narrative of Scripture, a reality experienced by those who followed Jesus of Nazareth, a spiritual reality for contemporary Christians, or a spiritual reality anonymously experienced by all persons. Which meaning is being communicated by the term can be determined only by understanding the context in which the term is articulated by a speaker in a given language-game. Further, the given speaker is embodied and her or his expression accompanied by distinctive activities that impact the word's meaning. "Christ" proclaimed with hands raised at an altar has a different meaning than when exclaimed with fist slamming on a table. It is the same word, but its particular context and specific attendant activities communicate its meaning. Thus, any word someone uses in a dialogue to communicate about his or her religious outlook or experience does not have a univocal meaning accessible outside the language-game in which it is uttered.

The Challenge of "Cultural" Differences

Lindbeck widens the scope of Wittgenstein's "language-game" (imaged as a localized context where a particular word is uttered) to accommodate the "culture" dimension of his cultural-linguistic theory of religion.[23] First, he envisions that the sacred scripture of a tradition provides not only the words used in communication but also the rightly played language games.[24] Further, while religions are "language-like" in that their scriptures provide the terms of communication and understanding, they are "culture-like" in

[23] Here those "more knowledgeable in Wittgenstein" might disagree with Lindbeck's usage, since there is a danger in conflating "language-game" and "cultural-context" in that each context permits a variety of language-games. See Susan Brill, *Wittgenstein and Critical Theory: Beyond Postmodern Criticism and toward Descriptive Imaginations* (Athens: Ohio University, 1995) 117–43. This same danger applies when Lindbeck conflates "language-game" with "a discrete religion." See my analysis in *Monopoly on Salvation?* Furthermore, even the suggestion of a singular language-game among the Christian community rooted in Christian Scripture is suspect since what constitutes "canon" is variable over time and communities. See Wayne Meeks, "A Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment," *Harvard Theological Review* 79 (1986) 176–86, and Terrence W. Tilley, "Incommensurability, Intratextuality, and Fideism," *Modern Theology* 5 (1989) 87–111.

[24] In the example given above, Lindbeck might insist that the exclamation "Christ!" with slammed fist is a misuse of the term in the same way he classically challenged the "truth" of the statement "Christ is Lord" when it was part of the crusader's battle cry. See Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine* 64.

their scope. That is, the language-games found in sacred scripture shape a shared and holistic outlook of an entire community. Therefore, to understand the outlook of the community and individuals within it, one must understand the language-game of the scripture as it is lived out within the community.

Here Lindbeck's use of the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz adds yet another challenge to understanding across religious difference. Geertz explains that, to understand the statements of a community (its language), one must be fully immersed in the community's form of life and its practices (its culture). Calling for "thick description" of such cultural context, Geertz writes, "The whole point of a semiotic approach to culture is, as I have said, to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them."[25] Just as Wittgenstein suggests that we cannot know the meaning of a term without knowledge of its use in context, so, Geertz explains, we cannot know the meaning of behaviors and statements without a comprehensive sense of the cultural context as a life-form. As a precondition of understanding, we would need to know not only the language-games of our dialogue partner as communicated in their scripture but also his or her communal context as well.

The words exchanged in dialogue carry with them the comprehensive outlook or worldview shared by the community. This is what Lindbeck indicates when he describes the "culture-like" dimension of religion. Sallie King captures Lindbeck's meaning:

> Living in the Buddhist world, one lives in the world of the serenely smiling Buddha; a world whose vista embraces lifetime after lifetime of countless rebirths held in tension with an invitation to complete selflessness; a world in which one strives to remove all "thought coverings," to erase everything and plunge again and again into vast emptiness; a world in which one feels one's connectedness with all things and has compassion for all beings, the insect as well as the human. Say "Buddha Nature" and all this is implicit.[26]

Words exchanged in dialogue are part of a wider web of meaning, culture, and practice; to understand my dialogue partner I need to know the many components of the language-game and web of meaning her religion provides for her. Thus, to gain understanding as my dialogue partner speaks of

[25] Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 24.

[26] Sallie King, "A Pluralistic View of Religious Pluralism," in *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration*, ed. Paul Knitter (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2005) 100.

"Buddha Nature," I need to have familiarity with not only the "language" of her sacred scripture but the "culture" of her religious community as well.

But, thick description alone cannot capture the living and dynamic quality of religious communities. To understand the life of the community and its religious outlook, one must participate in that community. As sacred stories are given further meaning through the ritual practices, worship experiences, and communal life that extend from them, this meaning is written on hearts and minds in ways that can be understood only if experienced. For example, while a Christian may be conversant with the Hebrew Scriptures of his Jewish dialogue partner, he is not a practicing member of the Jewish community; therefore he will miss the rich Jewish understandings that emerge not merely from reading Torah but from embodying it in ritual practice. As Judith Plaskow explains, the critical moments of Jewish religious history recorded in the Bible are not merely a past record or source of information, but those moments also shape Jewish memory and consciousness. This shaping happens through "the liturgical reenactment and celebration of formative events." She writes, "The weekly renewal of creation with the inauguration of the Sabbath, the entry of the High Priest into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, the Exodus of Israel from Egypt every Passover—these are remembered not just verbally but through the body and thus doubly imprinted on Jewish consciousness."[27] Following through on Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic theory, one recognizes that genuine understanding across religious difference requires not merely conversation or study, but full participation in the life of the community. To understand a religious outlook one needs to be steeped not only in its language but also in its culture. Although not impossible, genuine understanding of multiple religious outlooks requires a level of engagement in the language, doctrine, practice, and culture of the religions that may amount to a practical impossibility for nearly all who seek such understanding.[28]

The Challenge of Different Religions Lenses

While dialogues can be structured to attempt the discussion of the many aspects of religious communities—their sacred story, ritual practices, and

[27] Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) 57.

[28] The work of Francis Clooney at the intersection of Hinduism and Christianity is one example of scholarly achievement of this rare bilingualism; individuals like Roshi Robert Kennedy, S.J., and Sallie King demonstrate the lifelong commitment of understanding through practice of dual religious systems. Chun Hyun Kyung and Raimon Panikkar give witness to the way Christians in many parts of the globe are shaped by the multiple religious traditions of their native place.

communal memories—genuine understanding of the outlook of persons of another faith cannot be attained by an external observer. This is because the web of belief, of which the other's sacred scripture is the heart, is not merely the foundation of a religion's language-game but forms the very lens through which persons view the world. To explicate this function of scripture and its challenge to dialogue, I move with Lindbeck from the philosophical and anthropological discussions of Wittgenstein and Geertz to the scientific discourse of Thomas Kuhn.

Beginning from an understanding that "reality" or "nature" presents uniform but ambiguous stimuli to all persons alike and that each person is endowed with similar neural apparatus, Kuhn argues that the stimuli presented are shaped into "data" based on the categories made available by the particular methods or paradigms the individual has learned from his or her community. The data presented by the universe are organized through the forms the paradigms provide.[29] However, paradigms limit what can be "known" or accessed of reality because they necessarily focus on some details and disregard others as irrelevant to the community's concerns. Paradigm procedures and applications inevitably "restrict the phenomenological field accessible for scientific investigations at any given time."[30] While the paradigm functions to organize stimuli, Kuhn argues, the use of a specific paradigm reciprocally programs one's neural apparatus to perceive the world in a particular way. It is therefore not just the interpretation of data that differs among communities employing different paradigms, but the perception of the stimuli or construction of the "data" themselves is different. The "training" or "programming" of one's neural apparatus takes place as the individual adopts the methods of a community.[31] He or she follows the lead of others in the community and applies the paradigmatic examples the community offers. Thus, the initiate learns by doing, by applying paradigmatic exemplars in a variety of contexts. These exemplars teach more or less intuitively the rules governing the community's life-form or language-game.[32]

For Lindbeck, the sacred scripture of a religion functions as the communal paradigm that provides all categories for organizing and understanding reality: "one privileged text functions as the comprehensive interpretive

[29] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970) 113.

[30] Ibid. 60.

[31] Kuhn describes the process in this way in *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1977) 309–12.

[32] In explaining this intuitive process, Kuhn points to Wittgenstein, suggesting that we know by application what a word means even if we cannot describe the rules that govern its use. Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* 44–45.

framework."[33] Thus, just as communities of scientists see the world in a particular way based on the paradigms they use, so too, religious communities see the world in a particular way based on the sacred texts that function as paradigms for them. Believers see the world imaginatively through scriptural lenses, allowing the structure of their narratives themselves to organize the sensory stimuli of the world. Within the pages of the sacred text are found the categories that shape religious persons' experiences of the world.

Following Kuhn, Lindbeck concludes that different paradigms create different and often incompatible modes of community life that do not offer points of contact for comparative conversations. In the conversation between communities, Kuhn notes the difficulty of adjudicating between claims:

> To the extent, as significant as it is incomplete, that two scientific schools disagree about what is a problem and what a solution, they will inevitably talk through each other when debating the relative merits of their respective paradigms. In the partially circular arguments that regularly result, each paradigm will be shown to satisfy more or less the criteria it dictates for itself and to fall short of a few of those dictated by its opponent.[34]

Paradigms answer specific questions. In doing so, they limit what can be known and shape what is known about reality. In adopting different paradigms, distinct communities know and experience "reality" in different ways. Since perceptions are shaped by particular paradigms, "there is no standard higher than the assent of the relevant community" to assess the conclusions reached.[35]

Because persons of differing religions are born into communities with specific language systems, and because these language systems provide distinctive categories for organizing sensory data, two persons of different faith-cultures not only speak different languages with regard to faith experiences, but they have different experiences. Lindbeck writes, "There are numberless thoughts we cannot think, sentiments we cannot have, and realities we cannot perceive unless we learn to use the appropriate symbol system."[36] Thus, without fluency in the language of a given religion, one cannot perceive the reality identifiable through the categories of that religious tradition.

[33] George Lindbeck, "Barth and Textuality," *Theology Today* 43 (1986) 361–76, at 371. See also Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine* 117.

[34] Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* 109–10.

[35] Ibid. 94.

[36] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine* 36.

The Challenge of Religions as "Formally Untranslatable"

In thinking with Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic program, the aim of interreligious dialogue to produce fruits of understanding is called into question because of the way persons in different frameworks will inevitably talk through each other. Since the stories of each religion present specific categories in an interconnected web of meaning, seeing the world through them is like approaching the data through different paradigms. In adopting different paradigms, distinct religious communities know and experience reality in different ways. The differing frameworks provided by distinct religious traditions produce radically distinct ways of experiencing reality and "fundamentally divergent depth experiences of what it is to be human."[37] Through the diverse paradigms of our religions, we are bound in similarity to one another within our faith tradition, but boundaries are placed between ourselves and those of a different faith. The distinctiveness of our stories and divergence of experience renders understanding across differences genuinely difficult.

Lindbeck can be misrepresented to offer only a vision of incommensurability as the ultimate roadblock to understanding across religious difference. It is true that he argues that there is no "experiential core" shared by persons of different religions because "the experiences that religions evoke and mold are as varied as the interpretive schemes they embody."[38] Thus, persons of different religions cannot hope to connect with one another on the basis of some universal religious experience common to all religions. Further, persons of different religious traditions cannot translate concepts from one religion's scheme to another without serious distortion. As Paul Knitter glosses Lindbeck's position, "You can't really understand one religious language by trying to translate it into another religious language. In fact, that's the word Lindbeck uses to express this unbridgeable gap between religions: they are "untranslatable."[39] It makes no sense, for example, for the Buddhist to say, "When I say 'Buddha-nature' you can substitute 'Christ-present-in-the-community'"; or for a Hindu to say, "When I speak of Kali [a feminine embodiment of the divine] you can just substitute Mary or one of the saints." Each of these terms makes sense only when embedded in their narrative-based religious framework. Similarly, it does not make sense to translate the Muslim vision of "the heavens" or "paradise" with the Christian term of "salvation" or "beatific vision." Even closely related terms in closely related traditions have different meanings

[37] Ibid. 41. [38] Ibid. 40.

[39] Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2003) 181.

when they are embedded in the narrative-based life of the community. "In short," Lindbeck writes,

> the cultural-linguistic approach is open to the possibility that different religions and/or philosophies may have incommensurable notions of truth, of experience, and of categorical adequacy, and therefore also of what it would mean for something to be most important (i.e., "God"). Unlike other perspectives, this approach proposes no common framework such as that supplied by the propositionalist's concept of truth or the expressivist's concept of experience within which to compare religions.[40]

For Lindbeck, there is no third space that could allow for a neutral assessment of ideas within the differing frameworks. But, mutual untranslatability and incommensurability do not mean an ultimate inability for communication or understanding a position different from one's own. One can understand another person's religious outlook if one adopts his or her paradigm.[41] As Gary Dorrien reminds us, "Lindbeck's model of religious understanding did not rule out the possibility . . . of speaking to people who do not share the linguistic world of Christianity. It ruled out only the kind of apologetic that appeals to reasons that are prior to faith. The logic of coming to believe in Christianity, he contended, is like that of learning a language. Rational arguments on behalf of Christian claims become possible only after one has learned through spiritual training how to speak the language of Christian faith."[42] For Lindbeck, only those who inhabit a particular story-shaped world can understand its expressions; but through committed practice and lifelong study a person could inhabit more than one framework and thus arrive at an understanding of both. Lindbeck explains:

> The gravest objection to the approach we are adopting is that it makes interreligious dialogue more difficult. Conversation between religions is pluralized or balkanized when they are seen as mutually untranslatable. Not only do they no longer share a common theme, such as salvation, but the shared universe of discourse forged to discuss that theme disintegrates. There are ways of getting around this obstacle such as bilingualism (to borrow a suggestion from Aladsair MacIntyre to which we shall return), but genuine bilingualism (not to mention the mastery of

[40] George Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine* 49.

[41] About using "incommensurable" and "untranslatable," Lindbeck explains, "My use of the term [untranslatability] does not refer to the strong sense of untranslatability [Donald] Davidson has in mind, but to what Charles Peirce would perhaps call a 'vague' sign determinable only by its context and use. Alasdair MacIntyre has suggested that what is untranslatable in language or tradition of inquiry is recognizable even without a common communicative system to the degree interpreters acquire competence in the alien tongue" ("Gospel's Uniqueness" 428).

[42] Gary Dorrien, "A Third Way in Theology? The Origins of Postliberalism," *Christian Century* 118.20 (2001) 18–19.

many religious languages) is so rare and difficult as to leave basically intact the barrier to extramural communication posed by untranslatability in religious matters. Those for whom conversation is key to solving interreligious problems are likely to be disappointed.[43]

Because of the comprehensiveness, depth, and richness of distinctive religious outlooks, an incommensurability exists that makes translation across traditions virtually impossible except for the rare individual. Lindbeck encourages us to see the radical distinctiveness of religious outlooks and experiences, and to come to terms with the difficulty of understanding across religious traditions.[44]

The practical incommensurability of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic approach to religious difference is indeed a challenge to any facile notion of dialogue that would claim easy understanding across religious traditions. But the difficulty does not preclude learning the language of the other and, through life-long study, acquiring the rare bilingualism that Lindbeck allows. The work of Francis Clooney is an example of such rare and remarkable effort and achievement. Through his work as a comparative theologian in both Christian and Hindu traditions, Clooney demonstrates that understanding another tradition is not an absolute impossibility. In a recent essay, he invites readers to participate in the comparative project by considering the texts of another tradition (in translation). He introduces the process concretely by leading the reader of his essay through the content and structure of a medieval Hindu text as part of a broader invitation to become a reader of that text as well. The text under discussion is one aimed at transforming the reader to surrender to God in the Srivaisnava Hindu

[43] Lindbeck, "Gospel's Uniqueness" 427.

[44] It should be noted that Lindbeck argues a "double-claim" of comprehensiveness in discussing why translation across traditions is not possible. First, each framework provides a comprehensive outlook that is different from the others. Such comprehensiveness does not allow one to step outside the framework. Second, only one outlook can be truly, completely, or most comprehensive; for Lindbeck it is the biblical lens that provides this superior comprehensiveness. While I agree with Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic assessment of the difficulties of translation, I do not agree that the argument of comprehensiveness as superiority is a logical necessity and do not, in fact, admit it in my constructive project. Further, by his own cultural-linguistic method, Lindbeck has no basis for asserting that the Bible is the most comprehensive framework. As Kevin Schilbrack put it—discussing the work of David Basinger, "Those who make a comparative claim must actually compare" ("Religious Diversity and the Closed Mind," *Journal of Religion* 83 (2003) 100–107, at 104). Having argued for the inability to compare across religious traditions, Lindbeck's assertion that the Christian framework is comparatively more comprehensive than any other framework seems to lack foundation. At least in the assessment through the methodology of this essay, Lindbeck has not undertaken the comparative project sufficiently to ground this claim; in fact, it is unlikely that any one person could.

tradition. But, Clooney suggests, "a modern reader from outside the Srivaisnava tradition is not entirely exempt from this process; beginning to understand, she or he also begins to feel and respond 'as if' from within the tradition."[45] Resonating nicely with Lindbeck's postliberal narrative theology of how religious texts shape their readers, Clooney explains how the text might call for transformation from insider and outsider alike:

> Religious literature . . . aims for the affective transformation of the reader who pays attention to the cues available in the text. Read attentively, the religious classic produces and renders legible a particular instance—a situation, opportunity, challenge, etc.—that begs for and provokes interpretive and affective responses that enable the reader to fit intelligently and affectively into the religious situation that has been presented. Again, all of this seems true whether the reader is a member of an intended religious audience, or is rather an outsider who finds her or his way to that tradition through texts.[46]

Clooney's life-work recommends him as a trustworthy authority on the possibilities of new experiences and understandings across religious difference. But his process and explanation do not escape the concerns raised in Lindbeck's exploration; for, in Clooney's explanation of Vedanta Desika's text, his very many references to ideas outside the text make it is easy to see that understanding the Hindu perspective comes only after a very long process.

Vedanta Desika's text centers on God as Narayana who, with the Goddess Sri, constitutes the "divine couple realized as both transcendent and embodied in our world."[47] Vedanta Desika invites the reader to recite the holy mantras—*Aum namo Narayanaya* or "OM, reverence for Narayana"—in which are encoded further truths in each of the syllables.[48] Vedanta Desika cites 13 Tamil and Sanskrit texts (which, Clooney admits, are "adduced out of context, and only erudite Srivaisnavas will recall more of the context").[49] Describing the emotive strategies this medieval Hindu author employs to draw the reader into the narrative, Clooney writes:

> Vedānta Deśika reinforces the value of [certain] dispositions and makes them more accessible by recalling exemplary persons who adopted them in the past. First, he draws on the celebrated *Rāmāyana* epic, particularly the scene where Sītā, kidnapped by King Rāvana and separated from her beloved husband Rāma, is held captive on Śrī Lankā and guarded by demonesses. He recounts briefly how Sītā's gracious demeanor softens the demoness in charge, Trijaṭā, who then exhorts her guards to take refuge with Sītā even if she is their prisoner. . . . By recollecting and

[45] Francis X. Clooney, "Passionate Comparison: The Intensification of Affect in Interreligious Reading of Hindu and Christian Texts," *Harvard Theological Review* 98 (2005) 370.
[46] Ibid. 385.
[47] Ibid. 370.
[48] Ibid. 372.
[49] Ibid. 373.

appropriating these familiar narratives that are taken to reveal lucidly the five dispositions, readers become inspired to act that way themselves and, by modeling, learn how to do it.[50]

The "familiar narrative," the Sanskrit and Tamil texts, the meditative mantra, and the "divine couple" are not at all part of the Christian (for example) framework and thus to understand how one is being invited to be shaped by the narrative, it would seem that one would need to become familiar with all these elements. Here I am convinced by Lindbeck's words: "genuine bilingualism (not to mention the mastery of many religious languages) is so rare and difficult as to leave basically intact the barrier to extramural communication posed by untranslatability in religious matters."[51] I am awed by the ongoing explorations of Clooney and others, and affirm that the process may be theologically transformative for many. But, for most persons, the cultural-linguistic challenges to genuine understanding mean that theological understanding is not the first fruit of interreligious encounter and dialogue.

For his part, Clooney encourages the affective dimension of this cross-religious engagement and allows that the first fruits of such encounter may not be primarily in intellectual comprehension governed by faculties of reason. Instead, he describes interreligious textual encounter as creating "living interconnections even while reason is busy pondering whether such affective exchange across religious boundaries is possible at all."[52] He admits that the process may raise to the surface the "irreconcilable commitments" between religious outlooks and that such a process may be "received skeptically, its meaning and value doubted" from some theological perspectives.[53] Perhaps Clooney might join me in seeking a new theological possibility in the challenging reality of interreligious dialogue.

POSSIBILITIES IN THE IMPOSSIBLE: NEW AIM FOR DIALOGUE

One reason why I am convinced by Lindbeck's assessment of the real differences in our religious traditions is that most people experience the encounter with other faiths as radically disorienting, as something that cannot be fully incorporated into their own realm of understanding. For example, last year my sister and I were browsing in an open-air market in New York City when I came upon an image of Krishna among the Gopis. Something about it drew me in. I knew some of the stories of Krishna and the milkmaids, and the portrait symbolized for me the gaze between lover and beloved that is the gaze between humanity and the divine. Wanting to

[50] Ibid. 377–78.
[51] Lindbeck, "Gospel's Uniqueness" 427.
[52] Clooney, "Passionate Comparison" 389.
[53] Ibid. 389.

absorb as much of the symbolic imagery as I could, I asked the man who was selling these images why Krishna's skin is always depicted as blue; he replied that it reflects the eternity of the most beautiful color of the heavens. I was captivated and could not tear myself away from the portrait. When my sister noticed I was absent, she returned to my side and considered the image as well. She looked at it for a minute, leaned toward me and whispered in my ear, "I don't get it."[54]

My sister's confession hints at the impossibility of dialogue. And yet, it also shows an alternative to the extremes of rejecting difference out of hand (as exclusivists tend to do) or too easily erasing the differences (as inclusivists or pluralists might do). In her confession, my sister reflects the untranslatability and unsubstitutability of religious symbols. She recognized religious difference as something that confronted her and challenged her way of thinking. She neither dismissed it with a negative assessment, nor did she try to erase it by drawing some parallel to her own religious experience or tradition. Her response was honest, and it is important for two reasons.

First, it is realistic. In the process of encountering people of other faiths in our lived contexts (and even in the more structured setting of interreligious dialogues), it is important to be willing to admit all that we do not know. The encounter with otherness that gives rise to incomprehension is, to follow the thought of Lindbeck, an experience rooted in the reality of diverse cultural-linguistic schemes. Unless one is part of a tradition and shares in its unsubstitutable memories and community-shaping practices, one cannot understand the discrete elements of the faith as one encounters them. They are not easily translated from one context to another. There is no smooth exchange between Jesus and Krishna, for example, although each is understood in their respective traditions as an incarnation of the divine.[55] This is because each figure is understood only insofar as the narrative account and lived history of each is taken into consideration. Further, to really explain Jesus or Krishna, one would also have to take into account the faith assertions made about these individuals in the creeds, prayers, and theological reflections through which each respective religious community has added meaning to the individual's story. To really understand what it means to have a devotion to Krishna, one would need to have

[54] For a scholarly treatment of the symbolism of Radha and Krishna, see the various essays in *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (Berkeley, Calif.: Berkeley Religious Studies Series, 1982).

[55] The argument of similarity between these two figures is put forward by Ovey N. Mohammed in "Jesus and Krishna," in *Asian Faces of Jesus*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 13.

a devotion to Krishna. Easy translation is not possible. Thus, to be confronted by religious difference and to honestly admit that it does not make sense from one's own perspective is simply to acknowledge that we inhabit different cultural-linguistic schemes.

Most people do not have the expertise or leisure to engage in the kind of discourse necessary for real understanding when they encounter religious difference. And yet, people of differing faiths encounter one another and "dialogue" on a daily basis in many parts of our world where the global has become local. In these everyday encounters, the "Muslim" and "Christian" do not compare notes on religious abstractions. Instead, Muslim and Christian co-workers might collaborate on a project that requires accommodation for a Friday mosque visit. Or, the Hindu, Jewish, and Christian caregivers share snacks at their child's playgroup and embarrassingly realize that the food cannot be eaten by some members of the group. Such encounters take diverse forms around the globe. In the Gujarat region of India, where sectarian violence has left deep scars, Muslim tradesmen dialogue with Hindu women as they procure wares for a sacred festival.[56] In Taiwan, Buddhist and Catholic nuns strategize together in building compassionate and well-run hospitals.[57] These "dialogues" are not aimed at expert comparison in the hopes of theological "understanding," and they are possible only because we meet the other in dialogue about practical realities and not as expert theologians in rarified spaces. In the messy complexity of the everyday world, individuals with multiple sites of identity (or what Homi Bhabha and others have called "hybridity") encounter each other with a broad range of stories through which to make possible connections—as Bhabha put it: "Mutuality may be at only one point of identification."[58] While postmodern sensibilities allow us to assent to something like the real differences that arise from distinct stories or frameworks, the multiplicity of our stories gives us many features of who we are. With this multiplicity, our everyday dialogues allow us to find sites of mutuality even if at only one point of identification. The hybridity of our identities provides sites of overlap that do not erase the complexity of our differences. In Bhabha's words again, the hybrid "breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside."[59] In recognizing hybridity, there

[56] The research of Neelima Shukla-Bhatt scrutinizes these on-the-ground exchanges. Shukla-Bhatt presented her research at a panel discussion entitled, "Why Do Women's Voices Matter in the Dialogue of Religions?" Fordham University, March 23, 2006.

[57] Chun-fang Yu, paper presented at ibid.

[58] Homi K. Bhabha, keynote address at a conference on "Sex and Religion in Migration," Yale University, September 15, 2005.

[59] Homi K. Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders," in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 116.

is a sense that new forms of "dialogue" are taking place despite its "impossibility."

In the complex meeting of hybrid individuals, while overlapping points of intersection provide a place for "dialogue," they afford only a glimpse of how the world (reality, ultimate reality, God) looks when lived out of a different religion's paradigm. They never afford real understanding, and so Lindbeck is right in thinking that dialogue and conversation are not the theological resource they have been held up to be. Yet, while Lindbeck sees the inability to understand as the breakdown in dialogue, I wish to see it as theologically fruitful. (And this is the second reason why my sister's confession before Krishna is important.) Disorientation occurs when one looks upon the religious imagery from a tradition not one's own; or when one encounters forms of dress, worship practices, dietary practices, or ritual utterances that do not correspond with one's own faith tradition; or when, in encounters and dialogue, an impasse in understanding is reached. The experience of unknowing in the encounter with otherness offers an immediate theological wellspring because, prior to the endeavor to learn from other faiths, there can be a moment of profound wonder, a moment that comes *before* understanding. It is a moment more immediate to the encounter. The moment in which I "don't get it" is the moment of encounter when all one's orientations and understandings are no longer useful for making sense of the reality encountered. And in this moment of disorientation, what if the "strangeness" of the other gave one pause simply to wonder? The moment of wonder in the presence of a tradition one does not understand can be a moment that brings one to the awareness of the incomprehensible mystery of God. Contemporary Christians might be encouraged to see religious differences and one's inability to explain or control them as functioning to bring one back to the incomprehensible mystery of God.

WONDER, CHRISTIAN TRADITION, AND NEW POSSIBILITIES

In the classic texts of the Christian tradition, a fundamental characteristic of God is that God remains beyond the powers of human control and understanding. No human speech can adequately express the mystery of God. As Gregory of Nyssa explains, the reality of God is "incapable of being grasped by any term, or any idea, or any other conception."[60] In Pseudo-Dionysius's words:

> the inscrutable One is out of the reach of every rational process. Nor can any words come up to the inexpressible Good, this One, this Source of all unity, this supra-

[60] Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomius,* vol. 1, 682, p. 222 (18–24), as quoted in Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena* (Grand Rapids. Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995) 241.

existent Being. Mind beyond mind, word beyond speech, it is gathered up by no discourse, by no intuition, by no name. It is and it is as no other being is. Cause of all existence, and therefore itself transcending existence, it alone could give an authoritative account of what it really is.[61]

Such expressions from the Christian tradition remind 21st-century Christians of the incomprehensible mystery of God. But there are both helpful and unhelpful ways of employing "mystery" as a theological theme. The facile answer, "it is mystery," can close off theological thinking; it suggests to the seeker to give up any search because what is not understood simply cannot be understood because it is "mystery." There is, however, a more helpful way to use the concept of mystery. There are strands in the Christian tradition that do not see "mystery" as the giant question mark that stifles all questions; rather, they see "mystery" more like a complex puzzle that the mind tries to wrap itself around; they see "mystery" as intriguing precisely because it is beyond the easy grasp, and as engaging because it encourages the mind to probe "mystery" more deeply. This fruitful way of understanding "mystery" will be useful in seeing the possibilities in the impossibility of dialogue. Rooted in God as mystery, the theme is developed in the language of God's overabundance.

This way of seeing God as incomprehensible mystery is aptly described by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa theologiae*. Aquinas begins his treatment of God's incomprehensibility with the counter-intuitive idea that God can be known. In fact, for Aquinas, God is "supremely knowable." And yet, because of the infinite abundance of what there is to know of God, humans are incapable of supremely knowing God. As Aquinas explains: "Every thing is knowable according to its actuality. But God, Whose being is infinite . . . is infinitely knowable. Now no created intellect can know God infinitely. . . . Hence it is impossible that [any created intellect] should comprehend God."[62] Thinking of the mystery of God in this way suggests that the term "God" represents a reality whose essence breaks the bounds of what the human mind can contain. As Aquinas puts it, "what is supremely knowable in itself may not be knowable to a particular intellect, because of the excess of the intelligible object above the intellect; as for example, the sun, which is supremely visible, cannot be seen by the bat by reason of its excess of light."[63] Just as the bat's sense of sight is overwhelmed by the excessive light of the sun, humanity's senses are overwhelmed by the reality of God. What there is to know of the ultimate

[61] Pseudo-Dionysius, "The Divine Names," chap, 1, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist, 1987) 49–50.

[62] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (hereafter, *ST*) 1–1, q. 2, A. 1, trans. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945) 19.

[63] *ST* 1–1, q. 12, a. 1 (Pegis trans. 92).

source of existence and force that courses through creation is so expansive, so overwhelming and truly awesome, that the mind cannot contain it. Continuing Aquinas's understanding of God's mystery, Karl Rahner explains that incomprehensibility "follows from the essential infinity of God which makes it impossible for a finite created intellect to exhaust the possibility of knowledge and truth contained in this absolute fullness of being."[64] God, as source of all existence and creative force that courses through creation, is unlimited being itself. It is overwhelming in its reality. Incomprehensibility is the result of the "infinity of [God's] unlimited and pure being"[65] that the finite human mind strives toward but cannot encompass. The conclusion that God is incomprehensible to the human mind need not lead to a sad reflection on human limitedness; rather, it can lead to the exuberant celebration of God's limitlessness, a limitlessness that calls the human person into ever new realizations of the awesome mystery of existence.

The human response to the mystery of God need not be to leave the mystery unexamined, but to strive always to know more, to experience the mystery ever more fully, and to orient oneself through what can be known. For Aquinas, this process of coming to know God was ultimately fulfilling for human beings, even though it was a process that never ends, either during one's time on earth or beyond the bounds of time and space. What there is to know of God is infinitely overabundant, and God's reality never-endingly sustains the human process of exploration. The inability to fully know God is not the source of eternal frustration; rather, the experience of eternal contemplation is fulfilling in itself. In Aquinas's words: "Nothing can be wearisome that is wonderful to him that looks on it, because as long as we wonder at it, it still moves our desire. Now the created intellect always looks with wonder on the divine substance, since no created intellect can comprehend it. Therefore, the intellectual substance cannot possibly become weary of that vision."[66] In Aquinas's description of the beatific vision, the human faculties remain active and find happiness in the unceasing activity of contemplating God. God's overabundant nature remains incomprehensible as it forever moves the intellect's desire to know it and satisfies the mind in the experience of wonder. Even in the eschaton—in "salvation" or "heaven"—humanity enjoys an ever-deepening coming-to-know-God that is never exhausted. The human posture toward the incomprehensible mystery of God does not aim to control or reach exhaustive comprehension; rather, the goal is wonder itself.

[64] Karl Rahner, "The Hiddenness of God," in *Theological Investigations* 16, trans. David Morland (New York: Seabury, 1979) 229.

[65] Karl Rahner, "An Investigation of the Incomprehensibility of God in St. Thomas Aquinas," in ibid. 247.

[66] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4 vols., trans. Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame) 2:110.

As an active process of both interest and joy, the sense of wonder is possible also as a posture toward the incomprehensible in our everyday lives. As Robert Fuller remarks, "It appears as though the brain triggers joy as an internally generated reward for sustained interest in the surrounding world. Our brains seem to have evolved in ways that reinforce the development of intelligence and creative engagement with the environment."[67] Linking joy and interest with the sense of "wonder," Fuller continues:

> Wonder is part of the organism's strategic capacity to imbue the world with an alluring quality. Affectively, it leads to increased openness and receptivity rather than utilitarian action. Cognitively, it promotes contemplation of how the parts of life fit into some larger whole rather than analysis of how they can be broken down into still smaller (and ostensibly more manipulable) parts. To this extent wonder functions in ways that express uniquely human potentials for growth and intelligence.[68]

In this passage, Fuller is exploring the everyday manifestations of wonder as a common human experience. Jewish theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel links this sense of wonder with the infinite when he writes:

> Awe is an intuition for the dignity of all things, a realization that things not only are what they are but also stand, however remotely, for something supreme. Awe is a sense for the transcendence, for the reference everywhere to mystery beyond all things. It enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, . . . to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal. What we cannot comprehend by analysis, we become aware of in awe.[69]

Drawing on Heschel and situating our everyday experience of wonder in relation to the theological posture of wonder envisioned by Aquinas, we might reframe the encounter with religious difference and see new possibilities in dialogue.

If Christians have affirmed something about the mystery of God through their particular tradition, and if God's mystery is the result of God's overabundance, then we might see other religious traditions as having other insights into this mysterious overabundance. Lindbeck allows this when he reflects:

> One can admit the unsubstitutable uniqueness of the God-willed missions of non-Christian religions when one thinks of these faiths, not as objectifying poorly what Christianity objectifies well (as Karl Rahner proposes), but as cultural-linguistic

[67] Robert C. Fuller, *Wonder: From Emotion to Spirituality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006) 37.

[68] Ibid. 37–38.

[69] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University, 1965) 88–89.

systems within which potentialities can be actualized and realities explored that are not within the direct purview of the peoples of the Messianic witness, but that are nevertheless God-willed and God-approved anticipations of aspects of the coming kingdom.[70]

In engaging with people of other faiths, Christians might be opened up to the never-ending possibilities that arise from the overabundant, incomprehensible mystery of God. Each tradition might be considered as a way of communicating something real about the mystery of existence that nonetheless does not capture the whole of this reality. The creative tension of ever new revelations of the incomprehensible mystery of God opens up infinitely to new ways of approaching and considering the mystery of our existence. But, even as God's overabundance sustains diverse understandings, God's being as infinite means that all human knowledge put together cannot exhaust or fully comprehend the mystery of God.

The persistent unknowability of our neighbors of other faiths reminds us of the limits of the human project in coming-to-know-God. Real disagreements, then, can be allowed as a reminder of our collective unknowing. God is beyond all human words, concepts, and affirmations. Through the continued alterity of the other, we glimpse the overabundance of God that surpasses all that we can understand.

If we posture ourselves toward difference in light of the overabundant, incomprehensible mystery of God, then we might be encouraged to value differences even before we can understand them, and even if we cannot understand them. The experience of looking at another's image of God and experiencing the moment of blank astonishment, the moment of "I don't get it" opens us up to the overabundant reality of God that the human mind cannot contain. The posture of wonder encourages an appreciation of differences for the way they open us up to the incomprehensible mystery of God. Thus wonder serves as a possibility within the impossible dialogue.

Simultaneously, we might develop this theological posture of wonder to inject it also with the ethical dimension of the necessity of dialogue, despite its impossibility. Robert Fuller argues that wonder can provide a crucial moment of transformation of action, that we might apply toward concerns of justice. Drawing on neurophysiological research, Fuller writes that one feature of wonder is "the temporary deactivation of our utilitarian striving and the creation of a sense of our participation in a more general order of life" and further sees in this function a way that wonder might guide "our adaptation to the wider interpersonal, moral and cultural environments we inhabit."[71] Fuller concludes his interdisciplinary study of "wonder" with the following remarks:

[70] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine* 54–55.
[71] Fuller, *Wonder* 41.

> Wonder, like joy and interest, is characterized by its rare ability to elicit prolonged engagement with life. Experiences of wonder succeed in motivating creative and constructive approaches to life by imbuing the surrounding world with an alluring luster. Experiences of wonder enable us to view the world independent of its relationships to our own immediate needs. They thereby foster empathy and compassion.[72]

In wonder, we might open ourselves to the awesome mystery of God and simultaneously see the opportunity to "pull into our own circle of concerns [realities] that would otherwise be of remote interest."[73] Ethically and theologically wonder provides possibilities in the impossibility of dialogue. At that open-air market, gazing at Krishna and the Gopis, when my sister leaned in and confessed, "I don't get it." I replied to her, "For me, theologically, that's the point."

[72] Ibid. 157.

[73] Ibid. 158.