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PETER C. PHAN
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2010

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Evangelization and Interreligious Dialogue: Compatible Parts of Christian Mission?

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TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2010

The question mark in the subtitle of my essay serves to indicate the ambivalence of not a few Christians regarding the two activities of the church under consideration, namely, evangelization and interreligious dialogue. For some Christians such as the traditionalist Catholic followers of Archbishop Marcel-François Lefebvre (1905-91)[1] and the majority of Evangelicals,[2] the main if not only task of the church, which is the exclusive depository of divine revelation, is evangelization, that is, preaching the Gospel to convert the heathens. Hence, interreligious dialogue is to be rejected since it erroneously implies that the church does not already possess the fullness of truth and therefore still needs to learn from other religions.

On the other side of the theological spectrum are those who hold that mission directed toward converting non-Christians is no longer appropriate in our

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[1] One of the many reasons why Lefebvre and his followers (e.g., the members of Saint Pius X Society) rejected Vatican II is its positive teachings on non-Christian religions, especially Judaism, and its promotion of interreligious dialogue, as contained in its dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 16 and its declaration *Nostra Aetate*. After his schism, Lefebvre claimed that he wanted to protect the Catholic Church from the council's perfidies, among them the approval of interreligious dialogue, and from Pope John Paul II's activities in favor of interfaith understanding, in particular his prayer for peace with leaders of other religions at Assisi in October 1986. For an English translation of Vatican II's documents, see *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co., 1996).

[2] Not all Evangelicals are opposed to interreligious dialogue of course. See the works of, e.g., Clark Pinnock, Charles E. Van Engen, Harold Netland, David Hesselgrave, Carl Braaten, S. Mark Heim, J. Andrew Kirk, Ajith Fernando, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Amos Yong and many others.

age of religious pluralism in which all religions are to be considered simply as alternative and equally valid ways that lead to God and salvation. For them, only interreligious dialogue, in which people of different faiths share their religious experiences and doctrines as equals, is theologically justified.

Between these two extremes there are some who maintain that evangelization remains the church's primary mission but also acknowledge that dialogue with people of different faiths is useful and even necessary. Such dialogue however must not be conducted among religions (interreligious or interfaith dialogue) but must be restricted to cultures or the cultural consequences of religions (intercultural dialogue). Finally, a number of theologians maintain that both evangelization and interreligious dialogue are constitutive and irreplaceable, yet distinct elements of the church's mission. However, they hold that the intimate conjunction of these two activities is only possible if they are radically re-envisioned in both their nature and method. I place myself among this last group, and the main purpose of this essay is to explore the ways in which evangelization and interreligious dialogue can be radically re-conceived as part of the church's mission.[3]

It can safely be presumed that for the Roman Catholic Church the first two views are not (or at least, any longer) theologically acceptable and that they are not widely held today. Following the Christian Tradition, Vatican II repeatedly affirmed the necessity of evangelization, principally in its dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* and its decree *Ad Gentes*. In addition, as part of its reform program, the council promoted, officially for the first time, dialogue with other religions, especially in its declaration *Nostra Aetate*. It declares that interreligious dialogue belongs to the mission of the church, a move that was considered theologically objectionable by a number of bishops at the time, and, as we have seen above, later rejected as heretical by Archbishop Lefebvre. Institutionally, these two activities are now fostered and directed by two dicasteries of the Roman Curia, the former by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (the new name of the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, founded in1622) and the latter by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (established in 1966) and the Pontifical Commission of the Holy See for Religious Relations with the Jews (established in 1974 as part of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity).

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[3] Here I use the term 'mission' to refer to the overall work of the church to be "a sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race" (*Lumen Gentium*, 1). Such mission, which is a participation and prolongation of the *missio Dei*, is carried out by means of different and distinct activities, one of which is evangelization. By 'evangelization' is meant a set of activities the goal of which is to make known God's saving action in Christ and by the power of the Spirit. Its connotation is therefore narrower than 'mission.' The question of my essay is whether evangelization and interreligious dialogue can and should be seen as two constitutive and related yet distinct activities of the church's mission.

In the post-conciliar period, Pope Paul VI and especially Pope John Paul II, by activity as well as by teaching, have repeatedly affirmed the necessity of both evangelization and interreligious dialogue.[4] For our present purposes, then, it would be sufficient to examine the third and fourth views. I begin with a discussion of intercultural and interreligious dialogues in the New Testament. Secondly, I discuss the views of those who hold that only intercultural dialogue, as opposed to interreligious dialogue, is theologically justified. Thirdly, taking a cue from the experiences and teachings of Asian Catholicism, I lay out the ways in which both evangelization and interreligious dialogue can and should be seen as essential yet distinct activities of the church's mission.

INTERCULTURAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN THE EARLY CHURCH

That Christianity — and indeed the Bible as a whole — bears all the marks of its constant and manifold encounters with both diverse cultures and religions need neither elaboration nor defense. Of the two dialogues under consideration, no doubt, the first, that is, *intercultural dialogue* is the older and more easily observable activity in Christian history. Today it is designated by words such as accommodation, adaptation, indigenization, localization, contextualization, interculturation, and inculturation (the last being favored by Roman Catholics).[5]

Encounter with The Surrounding Cultures

Though these terms are new coinages, the activity they connote is as old as Christianity itself.[6] The very fact that the New Testament comes to us in Greek,

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[4] For Paul VI, see especially his encyclical *Ecclesian Suam* (August 16, 1964) and his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (December 8, 1975). Of John Paul II's many writings on mission, the most important is his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (December 7, 1990), henceforth RM. The English text is available in *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading* Redemptoris Missio *and* Dialogue and Proclamation, ed. William R. Burrows (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993). On John Paul II's teaching on mission and interdialogue as well as his most significant interreligious activities, see Peter C. Phan, "John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue: Reality and Promise," in *The Vision of John Paul II: Assessing His Thought and Influence*, ed. Gerard Mannion (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 235-57.

[5] It is important to note that the dialogue between faith and culture is not between a naked, culture-free faith and another culture. Rather it is always an encounter between an already inculturated faith and another culture. Hence, it is more accurate to speak of 'interculturation' rather than 'inculturation.' Henceforth I will use 'interculturation' and 'contextualization' as a shorthand for intercultural dialogue

[6] For a collection of primary documents dealing with inculturation in Christian history, see Robert Hunt, *The Gospel Among The Nations: A Documentary History of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010). For a brief summary of the theology of inculturation in official Catholic and Protestant documents, see Peter C. Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 4-10. The Jesuit General Pedro Arrupe popularized the term 'inculturation' in his 1978 "Letter to the Whole Society on Inculturation," in *Other Apostolates Today: Selected Letters and Addresses of Pedro Arrupe*, ed. J. Aixala, vol. 3 (St. Louis: 1978), 172-81. Arrupe defines inculturation as "the incarnation of the Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about 'a new creation'." While Arrupe's emphasis on the transformation of the local culture as the result of inculturation is well taken, I would also, and with equal force, emphasize the transformation of the Christian understanding and living of the Christian faith. In other words, the transformation and enrichment is *mutual*.

and not in Hebrew or Aramaic, is an irrefutable witness to the attempt at interculturation by the first Jewish Christians to convey the Christian message in a language and culture vastly different from those of Jesus and his immediate followers.[7] In fact, this practice of interculturation can be defended by appealing to Jesus himself. The world in which Jesus lived was already multiethnic and multicultural, particularly in the wake of the Hellenistic and Roman occupations. It is in and to this culturally variegated and complex world that Jesus carried out his ministry, preaching the good news of the reign of God and performing miracles as signs of the incipient presence of this kingdom, precisely as a Jew to his fellow Jews, women and men.[8] Indeed, the very enfleshment of the Word of God in this particular Jew named Jesus—the Christian "scandal of particularity," which Paul describes as the "self-emptying," "self-abasement," "self-enslavement" of Jesus, though he was "in the form of God" (Phil 2:6-8)—is the event of divine 'inculturation' in human history par excellence.[9] Consequently, the incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus of Nazareth functions as the theological paradigm and norm for subsequent contextualizations of the Christian faith.[10]

In the footsteps of their Lord and Master who had drawn on the language, thought categories, rhetorical strategies, cultural practices and everyday experiences of his audience to convey his message about the kingdom of God, the first Christians, both "Hebrews" (i.e., Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians) and "Hellenists" (i.e., Greek-speaking Jewish Christians of the diaspora), quickly adapted to the changing contexts of their mission. The Book of Acts narrates some key moments of this contextualization process, such as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, by which the apostles' preaching was understood by the devout Jews "from every nation under heaven" living in Jerusalem, each in his or her own tongue (2:8-11); the conversion of the "God-fearing" Cornelius to the Christian faith and that of Peter to the belief that "God shows no partiality" and that God's grace is given to all, Jews and Gentiles alike (10:1-11:18); and the

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[7] Helpful studies of interculturation in the New Testament include Graydon F. Snyder, *Inculturation of the Jesus Tradition: The Impact of Jesus on Jewish and Roman Cultures* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999) and Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

[8] For a recent study of the historical Jesus, with special focus on his relation to Judaism, see John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 4, *Law and Love* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

[9] Here the word 'inculturation' is more theologically appropriate than 'interculturation' to describe the incarnation of the Word. The incarnation is not an encounter between an already culture-laden Logos and human history, but rather the taking on of a particular culture, that is, the Jewish, by the eternal, hitherto culture-free Logos. Hence, though often presented as a paradigm for interculturation, the incarnation is a misleading model for understanding what occurs in the encounter between the Christian faith and another culture. It unwittingly confers superiority and even normativity to the cultures in which the Gospel has already been contextualized (e.g., Hebrew, Greek, Roman, etc.), with regard to the other cultures (e.g., Vietnamese) in which it must still be contextualized. That this privileging of European cultures has sometimes happened in the history of Christian missions, especially in the colonial context, is beyond dispute.

[10] The English translation of the Bible used here is the New Revised Standard Version.

so-called Jerusalem Council, in which the "intercultural" conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christians was resolved in favor of cultural diversity (15:1-29).[11]

Among the New Testament writers, no doubt Paul, the self-described apostle to the Gentiles (Gal 1:16), is the foremost proponent and practitioner of interculturation.[12] More than anyone Paul was equipped to carry out this task, being a Jew by birth, a Greek by education, a Roman by citizenship, and a Christian by faith. Thus, for him, to cross cultural boundaries was something he did not as an outsider but as an insider. As reported in Acts, Paul's three missionary speeches are models of contextualization.[13] The first (13:13-52) was directed to the diaspora Jews and God-fearing Gentiles in Psidian Antioch; the second (14:8-20) to the pagan Gentiles in Lystra; and the third (17:16-34) to the Epicurean and Stoic Greek philosophers in Athens. While announcing the same good news about God's salvation in Christ to these three different audiences Paul made use of appropriately diverse cultural resources, rhetorical techniques, and logical arguments to win them over to the Christian faith.

Paul's deep sensitivity to cultural differences and consistent efforts at contextualizing his message about God's saving work in Jesus is also amply demonstrated in all his letters. His approach to interculturation is eloquently synthesized in his declaration: "To the Jews I became as a Jew …. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law…. I have become all things to all people … I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings" (1Cor 9:20-22). Paul's cultural flexibility and willingness to interculturate the gospel should not taken to imply an uncritical acceptance of each and every cultural practice. As Dean Flemming points out, Paul's method of contextualization is fourfold: affirming, relativizing, confronting, and transforming cultures, all at once.[14]

Finally, the fact that there are four gospels rather than one is also an incontrovertible indication of the early church's attempt to tell the one story of Jesus to four "target audiences."[15] Rather than seeing the gospels simply as arising from and mirroring the historical conditions of four different Christian "communities," which scholars can reconstruct by means of the historical-critical method, we should view them as four literary narratives using context-specific rhetorical strategies and contextualization methods to persuade four types of

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[11] On inculturation in Acts, see *Contextualization in the New Testament*, 25-55.

[12] For a massive study of early Christian mission and its contextualization methods, especially those of Paul, see the two-volume work, Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, *Jesus and the Twelve* and vol. 2. *Paul and the Early Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

[13] For a helpful exposition of these three speeches, see *Contextualization in the New Testament*, 56-88.

[14] Ibid., 126-151.

[15] For the concept of "target audience," Flemming refers to *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998).

listeners and readers of different cultural contexts to accept the good news of salvation. That there was an intercultural dialogue or contextualization of the Christian faith into diverse cultures in the New Testament and in the early church (and, we may add, in the last two millennia) is thus beyond doubt.[16]

Encounter with Other Religions

With regard to *interreligious dialogue*, however, the situation is rather complex and murky. Was there a dialogue between the early Christians and other "religions" (in addition to Judaism)? In other words, was there an interreligious dialogue, as distinct from the intercultural dialogue? This is a loaded question and an unambiguous answer to it is hard to come by. It begs the question that the ancients made a clear distinction between what is called today 'culture' and 'religion' and that we can easily and neatly discern the lines separating them.

There were of course at the time of Jesus and the early church sets of beliefs and practices different from those of Jews and Christians that are today usually associated the four Cs of 'religion' (i.e., creed, cult, code, and community). These include belief in God or gods, goddesses, spirits, demons and in the afterlife, prophecy and priesthood, sacrifices and prayers, scriptures and rituals, magic and divination, moral norms and ascetical practices, symbols and artistic representations, statues and temples, etc. Among the many religious traditions that were widespread in the first century A.D. the most notable were the worship of a syncretistic combination of numerous Egyptian, Greek and Roman gods and goddesses (e.g. the mystery religions of Cybele, Isis and Mithras), the fertility cult of Canaan/Phoenicia, Zoroastrianism of Persia, and emperor worship and domestic religion of imperial Rome.[17] It is highly likely that Jesus was knew or heard about most if not all of these religions.[18] Furthermore, while Jesus' ministry was limited to the "lost sheep of Israel" (Mt 10:6) he did extend his mission to the Samaritans and to the *goim* such as the Romans, Greeks, Syro-Phoenicians and others. Though Jesus told his disciples "to enter no town of the Samaritans," he himself singled out for praise the Samaritan leper's gratitude for his miraculous

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[16] It is interesting to note that according to Graydon F. Snyder, the Fourth Gospel, in contrast to the Synoptic Gospels and Paul, represents an attempt to "deculturize" the Jesus tradition so as to make him universally valid and relevant to all cultures: "Faced with separation from Judaism and an audience that did not know the Jewish culture, John deculturized Jesus. In what might appear as antagonism to some readers, John, with consummate literary skill, took Jesus out of his specific culture and made him available to any culture" (*Inculturation of the Jesus Tradition*, 53). Even if Snyder's thesis is granted, the point of "deculturizing" the Jesus tradition is to make it, to use Snyder's metaphor, "a true 'virus,' capable of entering any culture without destroying it" (39). Thus deculturization is but a step in the process of inculturation itself!

[17] For a helpful survey of religions at the time of the New Testament, see David Aune, "Religion, Greco-Roman," *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 917-26, with ample bibliography.

[18] Several historians of religion have pointed out similarities, albeit not historical connections and mutual influences, between the gospels and Buddhist writings and between the Buddha and Jesus. There is also fanciful accounts of Jesus' travels to India during his so-called "lost years," that is, years before his public ministry.

cure (Lk 17:11-19), held up the Samaritan as an example of a true "neighbor" (Lk 10:25-37), and conversed with a Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1-42).

Though mentioned each only once by name in the gospels, 'Rome' and the 'Roman people' were present throughout Jesus' life, literally from his birth to his death. He was born during the emperor Tiberius's census and his execution was carried out by Roman soldiers. During his ministry, Jesus praised the faith of a centurion, whose servant he healed (Mt 8:5-13). It was the Roman centurion overseeing Jesus' crucifixion who declared Jesus' innocence and his being truly the "Son of God" (Lk 23:47). We are also told that some Greeks sought to speak with Jesus (Jn 12:20-22). Finally, Jesus cast out the unclean spirit from the daughter of a Syro-Phoenician woman, even though he had told her that "it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Mk 7:27). In general, Jesus' attitude toward the Gentiles reflected that of his contemporaries, for whom Gentiles were sinners. But all the four gospels present Jesus as foretelling a future time, after his rejection by the Jews and his death and resurrection, in which the good news of salvation would be announced to the Gentiles who would accept it.

Paul, as we have seen above, was well cognizant of the various religious backgrounds of the converts, particularly those in Corinth and Colossae. To the Corinthians he addressed the issue of whether it would be permissible for Christians to participate in meals within the temple precincts and to eat food that is being offered to pagan gods (8:1-13). He declared this practice to be forbidden since it implies communion with demons. Clearly, for Paul participating in meals within the temple precincts and eating food there was a religious act in nature, and no interreligious dialogue, if we may use this expression here, was to be tolerated. Secondly, to the question of whether it would be permissible to eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols and now was sold in the market or served by a host (10:1-22) Paul answered affirmatively, since "an idol is nothing at all" (8:4). But he cautioned that one must not eat the meat that has been offered to idols if this caused a stumbling block for the "weak" (8:9). For Paul, eating this meat in itself has no religious but only cultural significance, and therefore an 'intercultural dialogue' on this issue is permissible. Writing to the Christians in Colossae Paul condemned a hybrid version of Christianity practiced there, a syncretistic brew of Christian faith, early Gnosticism, Greek philosophy, Jewish mysticism, and indigenous Phrygian folk beliefs in evil spirits, gods and goddesses, and astral powers. Paul obviously regarded this form of New Age *avant la lettre* as a religious phenomenon and condemned it as an implicit denial of the supreme lordship of Jesus. Lastly, when in Athens, Paul was distressed by the ubiquitous presence of idols in the city, though he praised the Athenians for being "extremely religious in every way" (Acts 17:22) and for having an altar dedicated to "an unknown god" (Acts 17:23).

In sum, Jesus was aware of religions other than his own but confined his ministry to his fellow Jews. Furthermore, like other Jews, he regarded Gentiles as sinners, but unlike them, he perceived the presence of genuine faith in some of the Gentiles and foretold a day when the Gentiles would convert to him as a result of his fellow Jews' rejection of his message. His occasional contacts with the Gentiles, albeit positive, cannot of course be regarded as interreligious dialogue. Paul, on the other hand, saw himself as called to proclaim the good news to the Gentiles. Of their practices, some he saw as having religious significance and condemned them because they obscured the Christian faith in the universal and absolute lordship of Christ; others he saw as possessing only a cultural significance and regarded them as religiously harmless and permissible. Thus, at least in Paul, there is an incipient distinction between culturally significant practices and religiously significant practices. The difference between the two does not lie in the material things and physical acts themselves but in the contexts of their performance which give them a certain meaning. The decisive criterion for Paul's acceptance or rejection of such practices is whether they have anything to do with the confession of Jesus as the only Lord and Savior. For Paul, if a practice in any way denies this Christian faith, it is understood as 'religious' and must be rejected; otherwise, it is cultural and acceptable, provided that it does not give scandal to the "weak."

INTERCULTURAL VS. INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

As a whole, however, both Jesus and his immediate followers did not consider 'culture' and 'religion' as two full-fledged, separate and different systems of human thought and behavior, with clearly defined boundaries, social functions, and human artifacts. Indeed, they could not. A watertight separation between religion and culture is a modern invention, the child of the European Enlightenment, a concomitant of which is the doctrine of the separation of church and state. Together with the triad of politics, economics, and sociology as newfangled sciences, the academic study of culture—anthropology—and the academic study of religion—comparative religion—were born in the nineteenth century, as twins but separated at birth.[19] This separation between culture and religion became more pronounced with the emergence of secularization, which results from the tendency of modernity to expand rational organization, structural and social differentiation, functional specialization, and technological expertise. Thus secularization inevitably reduces the influence of religion and confines it to the

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[19] For a study of the emergence of the discourse on 'world religions' since the nineteenth century, see Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

individual and private sphere, apart from the socio-political, economic, and cultural realms of society.

It is this separation between culture and religion, I submit, that undergirds the distinction and eventually the separation between intercultural dialogue and interreligious dialogue. As described above, intercultural dialogue was practiced by Jesus and the early Christians, especially Paul. It was used as an instrument for effective evangelization. Indigenous practices were deemed cultural so long as they were not antithetical to the supreme lordship of Jesus, and their use was encouraged (or at least, tolerated) to serve the proclamation of the Gospel. On the other hand, interreligious dialogue, in the sense of adopting practices that were judged to belong to the non-Christian religious traditions, was forbidden. Such was, as we have seen above, the case with participating in meals within the pagan temple precincts in Corinth and mixing Christian faith and practices with those of non-Christian religions in Colossae. This mostly positive receptivity toward culture and uniformly and overwhelmingly negative attitude toward non-Christian religions continued down the centuries until the Second Vatican Council. As will be shown below, there was a sea change at the council with regard to interreligious dialogue.

Vatican II on Non-Christian Believers and Non-Christian Religions
It is common knowledge that Vatican II marked a significant evolution—some would argue, revolution—in the Catholic Church's attitude toward non-Christian religions and the related theology of salvation. It is of vital importance to distinguish between the council's teaching with regard to non-Christians as individuals and its teaching on non-Christian religions as corporate institutions. With regard to non-Christians, whom the council calls "those who have not yet received the Gospel," Vatican II first of all affirms that they are "oriented [*ordinantur*] in various ways to the People of God." The council goes on to list five groups of non-Christians, apparently in the descending order of relationship to the church: Jews, Muslims, "those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God," those who "seek God with a sincere heart," and those who "have not yet reached an explicit knowledge of God." The council affirms the possibility of salvation for all these non-Christians, though always by the grace of Christ and in some kind of relationship to the church, and with various conditions (e.g., "invincible ignorance" and living a good moral life according to their conscience).[20]

It is to be noted that the pivotal paragraph 16 of *Lumen Gentium* focuses only on non-Christians as individuals, though of course in so doing it also refers, albeit obliquely, to their religions, especially with regard to Jews and Muslims. On non-

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[20] See *Lumen Gentium*, 16.

Christian religions as such, *Lumen Gentium* merely says that through the church's missionary activities "whatever good is found sown in people's hearts and minds, or in the rites and customs of peoples, is not only saved from destruction, but is purified, raised up, and perfected for the glory of God, the confusion of the devil, and the happiness of humanity."[21]

Vatican II's fullest teaching on non-Christian religions qua religions is found in its Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*). The council begins by noting the unity of all humankind by virtue of its common origin and destiny, namely, God. It sees religions as diverse attempts at answering fundamental questions concerning the meaning of human existence. It goes on to expound briefly on different non-Christian religions, from the so-called primitive religions to world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism. In this context, the council declares that "the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. It has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women."[22] In addition to sincere respect, Vatican II exhorts Catholics "to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions" and "while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, together with their social life and culture."[23]

Intercultural or Interreligious Dialogue?
In the decades following the council, the Catholic Church engaged in numerous and extensive dialogues, both intercultural and interreligious (not to mention ecumenical), at the local, national and international levels, officially and unofficially, in many parts of the world. This was true especially in Asia, simply because the continent is the cradle of all the so-called world religions. At the same time, in the West, confronted with the phenomenon of religious pluralism after the collapse of Christendom, various theologians have developed theologies of religion. These are now widely known under the three rubrics of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.[24]

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[21] *Lumen Gentium*, 17. The same idea is repeated in the council's decree on mission, *Ad Gentes*: "It [missionary activity] purges of evil associations those elements of truth and grace which are found among peoples, and which are, as it were, a secret presence of God and it restores them to Christ their source who overthrows the rule of the devil and limits the manifold malice of evil. So whatever goodness is found in people's minds and hearts, or in the particular customs and cultures of peoples, far from being lost is purified, raised to a higher level and reaches its perfection, for the glory of God, the confusion of the demon, and the happiness of humankind" (ADG, 9).
[22] *Nostra Aetate*, 2. For a clear exposition of Vatican II's teaching on non-Christian religions, see Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 161-70 and *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 59-66.
[23] *Nostra Aetate*, 2.
[24] I will come back to these theologies below.

Recently, however, under Ratzinger as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, interreligious dialogue seems to have suffered a serious eclipse.[25] There are indications for this—at least perceived— reversal of fortune. Without enmeshing in ecclesiastical politics, one could mention Ratzinger's 1990 warning against Eastern forms of meditation; his description of Buddhism as a sort of "a spiritual auto-eroticism";[26] the declaration *Dominus Iesus* on the "Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church" (August 6, 2000); the marginalization of Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, former President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue; the absorption of this council into the Pontifical Council for Culture (later re-instated as a separate council); Pope Benedict's 2006 speech at the University of Regensburg, with offensive remarks on the Prophet Muhammad; the admonitions against theological works dealing with religious pluralism (e.g. those of Jacques Dupuis and others); statements on the necessity of "reciprocity" in interreligious dialogue (coded words to the effect that unless non-Christians, especially Muslims, change their policies toward and treatments of Christians, dialogue with them should be suspended); the 2009 lifting of excommunication for a Lefebvrite bishop who has denied the Holocaust; and statements that seem to question the permanent validity of God's covenant with the Jews and reiterate the necessity of mission toward them.[27]

Ratzinger's position on interreligious dialogue is not entirely unambiguous. In several of his writings he did affirm the necessity of interreligious dialogue. On the other hand, he was quite critical of many of the activities of interreligious dialogue, especially those carried out in the Asian churches, in particular interreligious prayer. Furthermore, in his more recent statements as cardinal and now as pope, he seems to argue that interreligious dialogue is theologically suspect since it requires that partners-in-dialogue suspend or bracket their faith convictions (the epistemological *epoche*). In a letter dated September 4, 2008 to the Italian philosopher Marcello Pera, senator and president of the Italian senate, on his book *Perchè dobbiamo definirci cristiani. Europa, liberalismo e etica* [*Why We Should Call Ourselves Christians: Europe, Liberalism and Ethics*], Benedict writes:

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[25] I refer to 'Ratzinger' when discussing his writings before he was elected Pope in 2005.

[26] In an interview with the French L'Express in Paris on March 20, 1997, when asked about interreligious dialogue, Ratzinger said: "If Buddhism is attractive, it is because it appears as a possibility of touching the infinite and obtaining happiness without having any concrete religious obligations. A spiritual auto-eroticism (*un autoérotisme spirituel*) of some sort. Someone had rightly predicted in the 1950s that the challenge to the Church in the twentieth century would not be Marxism, but Buddhism." It is amazing that Ratzinger's offensive remark about Buddhism characterizing it as a kind of spiritual masturbation without "any concrete religious obligations" did not cause violent reactions on the part of Buddhists as his remark about the Prophet Muhammad would some ten years later, with the murder of an Italian nun in Somalia as a retaliation for it.

[27] Note that in this essay, though mentioning some events in the Jewish-Catholic dialogue, I refer only to the dialogue between the Catholic Church and Asian religions and prescind from the former dialogue.

In recent days I had the chance to read your new book, *Why We Should Call Ourselves Christians.* For me it made for fascinating reading. With a remarkable knowledge of the sources and cogent logic you analyze the essence of liberalism....Nor was I less impressed by your analysis of freedom and your analysis of multiculturalism.... Particularly significant for me is also your analysis of the concepts of interreligious and intercultural dialogue. You explain with great clarity that an interreligious dialogue in the strict sense of the word is not possible, although the intercultural dialogue on the cultural consequences of the basic religious decision has become all the more urgent. While a true dialogue on the latter is not possible without setting one's own faith aside, it is necessary to address in a public debate the cultural consequences of basic religious decisions. Here dialogue, mutual correction and reciprocal enrichment are possible and necessary.[28]

For Pope Benedict then interreligious dialogue "in the strict sense of the word"—that is, dialogue on different "basic religious decision[s]"—is impossible because it demands "setting one's faith aside." Though not explicitly advocating the abolition of interreligious dialogue, Benedict appears to recommend that the church only engage in intercultural dialogue, that is, on "the cultural consequences of the basic religious decision."[29]

The reasons for Benedict's recent opposition to interreligious dialogue can be summarized in his well-publicized slogan describing the contemporary intellectual ethos as "the dictatorship of relativism." In his various writings most relevant to interreligious dialogue while still a cardinal, later collected together and published in book form,[30] Ratzinger saw the specter of relativism—the denial of the possibility of objective knowledge of the truth—lurking behind the entire modern and especially postmodern culture and infiltrating virus-like into almost every sector of church life, from liturgy to ethics, spirituality, ecclesiastical reform, and theology. In his analysis, this denial of truth has been perpetrated by liberation theology, and especially by the theology of religion

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[28] Benedict's letter is reprinted as a preface to Pera's book (Milan: Mondadori, 2008). For a pope to write a letter of this kind to an individual writer is quite unusual, and it is not clear that Benedict intended it to be used as preface to the published book. At any rate Pera understandably wasted no time to have the letter publicized on his website: http://www.marcellopera.it/index. Pera met Ratzinger in 2001, and later they collaborated in a book *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam,* trans. Michael F. Moore (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

[29] As with most papal documents and actions, the interpretation of their exact intentions and meanings is extremely difficult; partisans of one theological position or another can always find in these documents and actions some support for it. Whatever Benedict's precise view of interreligious dialogue, there is no question that both his actions and words have been perceived by a number of Christians and non-Christians as putting a brake on interreligious dialogue.

[30] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions,* trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004). The entire book is a polemic against relativism in various guises. Of special relevance to interreligious dialogue, see pp. 80-109; 115-37; 203-07. Note that on page 49, line 10 from the bottom up, "personalism" should read "pluralism." The same is true on p.102, line 3 from the top.

(in particular, the pluralistic theology espoused by the Presbyterian theologian John Hick and the Catholic theologian Paul Knitter). In Ratzinger's eyes, this epistemological skepticism necessarily leads to the denial of the necessity of mission and conversion.[31] Interreligious dialogue seems to operate under this theological framework, especially in Asia (India in particular).[32] Consequently it must be replaced by intercultural dialogue, even though Ratzinger is well aware that culture and religion can never be separated.[33] To put it sharply, for Ratzinger/Benedict, intercultural dialogue, yes; interreligious dialogue, no.[34]

INTERCULTURAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUES AS NECESSARY AND DISTINCT TASKS OF CHRISTIAN MISSION

For many Christians today interfaith dialogue—dialogue on "basic religious decision"—is not only a theological imperative but also a strategy for survival. The challenge for us is to develop an understanding and practice of interreligious dialogue that remains an essential task of the church's mission and yet is an alternative to neither evangelization nor intercultural dialogue. Arguably, nowhere is this challenge more pressing and difficult than in Asia, where Christians constitute a tiny minority, perhaps somewhere between 3 to 10 per cent of the Asian population. (Statistics of the Asian Christian population are for various reasons extremely unreliable.) The difficulty of this challenge arises not only from demographics but also, and perhaps more crucially, from philosophical and religious ideologies, as Ratzinger himself has pointed out.[35] It is helpful then to turn to the Asian Catholic churches to examine how they have tried to meet this challenge of uniting evangelization, intercultural dialogue and interreligious dialogue as intrinsic parts of the one mission of the church.[36]

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[31] Ratzinger writes: "On that basis [relativism], finally, we should understand two other fundamental concepts of the Christian faith, which have become unmentionable nowadays: conversion (*conversio*) and mission" (*Truth and Tolerance*, 105).

[32] Ratzinger sharply criticizes the final statement of the consultation on "interreligious prayer" in Bangalore, India (1996), which recommends interreligious prayer as an act of hospitality on the basis of Lk 10:7, as guilty of "superficiality and dilettantism" (*Truth and Tolerance*, 100).

[33] Ratzinger states peremptorily: "There is no such thing as a culture-free faith ... and there is no such thing as religion-free culture" (*Truth and Tolerance*, 64).

[34] Ratzinger's negative attitude toward interreligious dialogue was also expressed in his ambivalence toward Pope John Paul's meeting with leaders of other religions on the World Day of Prayer for Peace held in Assisi in 1986 and 2002 (*Truth and Tolerance*, 106-09).

[35] Ratzinger contrasts the Christian (and Jewish and Islamic) faith in a personal God with what he terms the impersonal "mysticism of identity" espoused by Asian religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. The former accepts a revelation of God from above or outside and consequently insists on the "otherness" of God, to whom religious obedience is owed, whereas the latter relies on the discovery of one's identity with the divine from within through meditation. As a consequence, for Ratzinger, adherents of different Asian religions tend to see religions simply as different and equally valid articulations of this self-discovery and are liable to relativism (*Truth and Tolerance*, 121-123).

[36] I have discussed these issues at great length in my trilogy: *Christianity with an Asian Face* (2003); *In Our Own Tongues* (2003); and *Being Religious Interreligiously* (2004), all published by Orbis Books.

"A New Way of Being Church": Being Churches of Asia

A quick historical glance at the history of Asian Christianity will show that it has ancient roots, going back to the apostolic age. If we include West Asia or the Middle East in our map of Asia, then Jesus himself and hence Christianity were born in Asia. As it was spreading to the west thanks to the mission of Peter, Paul and many others, Christianity also moved east, to Syria, India (we cannot discount the historical evidence of the coming of the apostle Thomas to India), and the Persian empire. From the Persian capital, the church expanded further east along the Silk Road that led from Northern Iran through Afghanistan and Central Asia to China. The famous stele erected near Xi'an in 781 records the arrival of a Syriac-speaking, so-called "Nestorian" (i.e., Church of the East) mission led by Alopen at the ancient Chinese imperial capital in 635 during the T'ang dynasty. In the thirteenth century, the Good News was announced to the Mongols, the Turks and the Chinese once more. Missions were taken up again in the sixteenth century by the new religious orders such as the Franciscans, the Dominicans, and especially the Jesuits. In the nineteenth century Protestant missionaries arrived in great numbers, especially from Germany, Denmark, and the United States.

While these facts should not be downplayed, it is still true that by historical circumstances, Christianity was and continues to be regarded by Asians as a foreign religion. Pope John Paul II himself points out the paradoxical fact that "most Asians tend to regard Jesus—born on Asian soil—as a Western rather than an Asian figure."[37] One of the reasons for this persistent impression of Christianity's foreignness is the Asian churches' past connections with colonial powers. Despite the enormous positive contributions of western missionaries to not only the religious but also educational, medical, and social advancement in mission lands, Christian missions in Asia were spiritually compromised by the fact that they were financially underwritten by colonialist countries such as Spain and Portugal in the seventeenth century through the *padroado* system. At times missionaries colluded with their governments in subjugating the indigenous peoples, making Christianity appear to be the handmaid of colonial powers. Indeed, in seventeenth-century Vietnam, Christianity was known in Vietnamese as the "religion of the Portuguese."[38] Given this historical legacy, the most urgent

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[37] John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, 20, (1999). For an English translation, see *The Asian Synod: Text and Commentaries*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 286-340. The document is cited hereafter as *EA*, followed by the number of the paragraph.

[38] See Peter C. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis: Alexandre de Rhodes and Inculturation in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), xv. The Jesuit missionary Alexandre de Rhodes felt it necessary to protest that even though Christianity might have come from countries in Europe, it belongs to all countries. Comparing it to the sun, he says: "For example, when the suns sends its rays on a kingdom, it illuminates it, though the other kingdoms on which it has not sent its rays still remain in darkness. Nevertheless, no one would say that the sun belongs to that kingdom upon which it sends its rays first, because the sun is common to the whole world and exists before the kingdom it illuminates" (Ibid., 223).

task for the Asian churches is to become churches not only *in* but also *of* Asia, in other words, to become local churches.

This movement to contextualize the Catholic Church into Asia is encapsulated in the oft-cited expression "A New Way of Being Church." It is part of the Vatican II-inspired ecclesiology, one that de-centers the church by making the reign of God and not the church the center of the Christian life and worship.[39] This Copernican revolution in ecclesiology takes the goal and purpose of the mission of the church to be neither the salvation of souls (*salus animarum*) nor the geographical and institutional expansion of the church (*plantatio ecclesiae*). Rather the church is to be a transparent sign of and effective instrument for the saving presence of the reign of God, the reign of justice, peace, and love, of which the church is a seed and which is already in Asia under various forms.

This theme has been repeatedly emphasized by the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC),[40] especially in its first and fifth plenary assemblies in Taipei, Taiwan, 1974, and Bandung, Indonesia, 1990 respectively.[41] In Taipei, the FABC affirmed categorically: "To preach the Gospel in Asia today we must make the message and life of Christ truly incarnate in the minds and lives of our peoples. The primary focus of our task of evangelization then, at this time in our history, is the building up of a truly local church."[42] In Bandung, the FABC spoke of "alternative ways of being Church in Asia in 1990s" and envisioned four specific ways. The Church in Asia, it said, must be a "*communion of communities*, where laity, Religious and clergy recognize and accept each other as sisters and brothers," "a participatory Church where the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to all the faithful – lay, Religious, and clerics alike – are recognized and activated," "a Church that faithfully and lovingly *witnesses* to the Risen Lord Jesus and reaches out to the people of other faiths and persuasions in a dialogue of life towards the integral liberation of all," and a Church that "serves as a prophetic sign daring to point beyond this world to the ineffable Kingdom that is yet fully to come."[43]

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[39] For a reflection on the concept of the reign of God for Asia, see *Christianity with an Asian Face*, 75-97.

[40] The FABC was founded in 1970, on the occasion of Pope Paul VI's visit to Manila, Philippines. Its statutes, approved by the Holy See *ad experimentum* in 1972, were amended several times and were also approved again each time by the Holy See. For the documents of the FABC and its various institutes, see *For All The Peoples of Asia*, vol. 1, *Documents from 1970 to 1991*, ed. Gaudencio Rosales and C. G. Arévalo (Maryknoll/Quezon City: Orbis Books/Claretian Publications, 1992); *For All the Peoples of Asia*, vol. 2, *Documents from 1992 to1996*, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997); *For All The Peoples of Asia*, vol. 3, *Documents from 1997 to 2002*, Idem (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2002); and *For All The Peoples of Asia*, vol. 4, *Documents from 2002-2006*, Idem (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2007). These will be cited as *For All Peoples*, followed by their years of publication in parentheses.

[41] *For All Peoples* (1992), 12-25; 53-61 and 274-289.

[42] Ibid., 14. It says further: "The local church is a church incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions – in brief , with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own."

[43] Ibid., 287-88. For a development of this ecclesiology, see Peter C. Phan, "*Ecclesia in Asia*: Challenges for Asian Christianity," *East Asian Pastoral Review* [EAPR] 37, no. 3 (2000): 215-32. See also S. J. Emmanuel, "Asian Churches for a New Evangelization: Chances and Challenges," EAPR 36, no. 3 (1999): 252-75.

The necessity to be local churches was reiterated by the FABC's Seventh Plenary Assembly (Samphran, Thailand, January 3-12, 2000). Coming right after the Asian Synod (April 19-May 9, 1998) and the promulgation of the apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* (November 6, 1999) and celebrating the Great Jubilee, with the general theme of "A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service," this assembly is of particular significance for the future of the mission of the Asian churches. In the first place, the FABC takes a retrospective glance over a quarter of a century of its life and activities and summarizes its "Asian vision of a renewed Church." It sees it as composed of eight movements which constitute a sort of Asian ecclesiology. Given its central importance, the text deserves to be quoted in full:

1. A movement towards a Church of the Poor and a Church of the Young. "If we are to place ourselves at the side of the multitudes in our continent, we must in our way of life share something of their poverty," "speak out for the rights of the disadvantaged and powerless, against all forms of injustice." In this continent of the young, we must become "in them and for them, the Church of the young" (Meeting of Asian Bishops, Manila, Philippines, 1970).

2. A movement toward a "truly local Church," toward a Church "incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated" (2 FABC Plenary Assembly, Calcutta, 1978).

3. A movement toward deep interiority so that the Church becomes a "deeply praying community whose contemplation is inserted in the context of our time and the cultures of our peoples today. Integrated into everyday life, "authentic prayer has to engender in Christians a clear witness of service and love" (2 FABC Plenary Assembly, Calcutta, 1978).

4. A movement toward an authentic community of faith. Fully rooted in the life of the Trinity, the Church in Asia has to be a communion of communities of authentic participation and co-responsibility, one with its pastors, and linked "to other communities of faith and to the one and universal communion" of the holy Church of the Lord. The movement in Asia toward Basic Ecclesial Communities expresses the deep desire to be such a community of faith, love and service and to be truly a "community of communities" and open to building up Basic Human Communities (3 FABC Plenary Assembly, Bangkok, 1982).

5. A movement toward active integral evangelization, toward a new sense of mission (5 FABC Plenary Assembly, Bandung, Indonesia, 1990). We evangelize because we believe Jesus is the Lord and Savior, "the goal of human history, ... the joy of all hearts, and the fulfillment of all aspirations" (Gaudium et Spes, 45). In this mission, the Church has to be a compassionate companion and partner of all Asians, a servant of the Lord and of all Asian peoples in the journey toward full life in God's Kingdom.

6. A movement toward empowerment of men and women. We must evolve participative Church structures in order to use the personal talents and skills of lay women and men. Empowered by the Spirit and through the sacraments, lay men and women should be involved in the life and mission of the Church by bringing the Good News of Jesus to bear upon the fields of business and politics, of education and health, of mass media and the world of work. This requires a spirituality of discipleship enabling both the clergy and laity to work together in their own specific roles in the common mission of the Church (4 FABC Plenary Assembly, Tokyo, 1986). The Church cannot be a sign of the Kingdom and of the eschatological community if the fruits of the Spirit to women are not given due recognition, and if women do not share in the "freedom of the children of God" (4 FABC Plenary Assembly, Tokyo, 1986).

7. A movement toward active involvement in generating and serving life. The Church has to respond to the death-dealing forces in Asia. By authentic discipleship, it has to share its vision of full life as promised by Jesus. It is a vision of life with integrity and dignity, with compassion and sensitive care of the earth; a vision of participation and mutuality, with a reverential sense of the sacred, of peace, harmony, and solidarity (6 FABC Plenary Assembly, Manila, Philippines, 1995).

8. A movement toward the triple dialogue with other faiths, with the poor and with the cultures, a Church "in dialogue with the great religious traditions of our peoples," in fact, a dialogue with all people, especially the poor.[44]

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[44] FABC Paper No. 93, *For All Peoples* (2002), 3-4.

This eightfold movement describes in a nutshell a new way of being church in Asia. Essentially, it aims at transforming the churches in Asia into the churches *of* Asia. Interculturation, understood in its widest sense, is the way to achieve this goal of becoming local churches. This need for intercultural dialogue in the church's mission of "love and service," according to the FABC's Seventh Plenary Assembly, has grown even more insistent in light of the challenges facing Christianity in Asia in the next millennium, such as the increasing marginalization and exclusion of many people by globalization, widespread fundamentalism, dictatorship and corruption in governments, ecological destruction, and growing militarization. The FABC sees these challenges affecting special groups of people in a particular way, namely, youth, women, the family, indigenous people, and sea-based and land-based migrants and refugees.[45] To meet these challenges fully, the FABC believes that it is urgent to promote the "Asianness" of the church which it sees as "a special gift the world is waiting": "This means that the Church has to be an embodiment of the Asian vision and values of life, especially interiority, harmony, a holistic and inclusive approach to every area of life."[46]

In terms of ecclesiology, the church is defined primarily as a "communion of communities." Hence, this Asian way of being church places the highest priority on communion and collegiality at all the levels of church life and activities. At the vertical level, communion is realized with the trinitarian God whose *perichoresis* the church is commissioned to reflect in history. On the horizontal level, communion is achieved with other local churches, and within each local church, communion is realized through collegiality, by which all members, especially lay women and men, are truly and effectively empowered to use of their gifts to make the church an authentically local church. Externally, this communion is realized with the believers of other religions and indeed with all Asian peoples through dialogue.

Dialogue as the Modality of Mission
The modality in which this process of becoming the local church is dialogue. It is important to note that dialogue is understood here not as a separate activity, e.g., ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, but as the *modality* in which everything is to be done by and in the church in Asia, including liberation, interculturation, and interreligious dialogue. It is through this triple dialogue—with the Asian peoples, especially the poor, their cultures, and their religions—that the church in Asia carries out its evangelizing mission and thus becomes the church *of* Asia. Hence, dialogue is not a substitution for proclamation or evangelization, as Asian theologians have sometimes been accused of doing; rather, it is the way and

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[45] Ibid., 6-12.
[46] Ibid., 9.

indeed the most effective way in which the proclamation of the Good News is done in Asia.

The reason for this dialogical modality is the presence in Asia of the many living religions and rich cultures, among whom Christians are, as mentioned above, but a tiny minority and therefore must, even on the purely human level, enter into dialogue with other believers, in an attitude of respect and friendship, for survival. But, more than pragmatic considerations, there is the theological doctrine today, at least in the Roman Catholic Church, that, as John Paul II says, "the Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions. Indeed, the Spirit is at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history."[47] In light of this divine presence in people's cultures and religions, and not just in individuals, and in view of the socio-historical nature of human existence, it is possible to say, as some Asian theologians have done, that the followers of other religions are saved not in spite of them but in and through them, though it is always God who saves, and Christians will add, in and through Jesus.[48] At least in this restricted sense, then, religions are "ways of salvation."

It is important to note also that dialogue as a mode of being church in Asia does not refer primarily to the intellectual exchange among experts and officials of various religions, as the word 'dialogue' is often understood. Rather, it involves a fourfold presence:

> a. The *dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations. b. The *dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people. c. The *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values. d. The *dialogue of religious experience*, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance, with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute."[49]

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[47] John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 28.

[48] The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, in its response to the Lineamenta in preparation for the Special Synod of Bishops for Asia (1998), writes: "... salvation is seen as being channeled to them [followers of non-Christian religions] not in spite of but through and in their socio-cultural and religious traditions. We cannot, then, deny a priori a salvific role for these non-Christian religions." (See *The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries*, 22).

[49] The Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 42 (19 May, 1991). The English text is available in William Burrows' *Redemption and Dialogue*, 93-118. See also *For All Peoples* (1997), 21-26.

As noted above, the FABC suggests that this dialogue take place in three areas: dialogue with the Asian poor, their cultures, and their religions.[50] In other words, the three essential tasks of the Asian churches are liberation, interculturation, and interreligious dialogue.[51] It is vital to note that for the FABC these are not three distinct and separate activities of the church; rather they are three intertwined dimensions of the church's one mission of evangelization.[52] As the FABC's Seventh Plenary Assembly puts it concisely: "These issues are not separate topics to be discussed, but aspects of an integrated approach to our Mission of Love and Service. We need to feel and act 'integrally.' As we face the needs of the 21st century, we do so with Asian hearts, in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, in union with all our Christian brothers and sisters and by joining hands with all men and women of Asia of many different faiths. Inculturation, dialogue, justice and the option for the poor are aspects of whatever we do."[53]

Any satisfactory discussion of Christian mission in Asia must deal with these three dialogues altogether. However, since our focus here is on intercultural and interreligious dialogues I will omit consideration of the dialogue with the poor, or liberation, except noting its absolute necessity, given the desperate and deplorable socio-political and economic conditions of most Asian countries.

Intercultural Dialogue and Mission
From its very beginnings, as we have seen above, Christian mission has always sought to incarnate the Good News in the cultures of the peoples it evangelized. It did this not only by translating its sacred texts into their languages but also by "adapting" its message to their cultures. Popes such as Gregory the Great in the sixth century and Benedict XV in the twentieth century are well known for their instructions on how missionaries should behave with regard to local cultures. Also of extraordinary significance is the instruction given in 1659 by the Sacred Congregation *De Propaganda Fide* to the vicars apostolic of Tonkin and Cochinchina (Bishops François Pallu and Pierre Lambert de la Motte respectively). The instruction lists the qualities required of missionaries, especially the readiness to adapt themselves to the mentality and customs of others, and directs the bishops to prepare local clergy and even candidates for the episcopacy, to avoid introducing western customs, and to practice evangelical poverty. One passage deserves to be quoted:

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[50] See *For All Peoples* (1992), 14-16; 22-23; 34-35; 107; 135; 141-43; 281-82; 307-12; 328-34; 344; and *For All Peoples* (1997), 196-203.
[51] As Archbishop Oscar V. Cruz, Secretary General of the FABC, said at the Seventh Plenary Assembly: "The triple dialogue with the poor, with cultures, and with peoples of other religions, envisioned by FABC as a mode of evangelization, viz., human liberation, inculturation, interreligious dialogue." See FABC Paper No. 95, *A Renewed Church in Asia: Pastoral Directions for a New Decade.* (FABC: 16 Caine Road, Hong Kong, 2000), 17.
[52] For reflections on the connection between evangelization and liberation according to the FABC, see *Christianity with an Asian Face*, 184-201.
[53] FABC Paper No. 93, *For All Peoples* (2002), 8.

Do not attempt in any way, and do not on any pretext persuade these people to change their rites, habits and customs, unless they are openly opposed to religion and good morals. For what could be more absurd than to bring France, Spain, Italy or any other European country over to China? It is not your country but the faith you must bring, that faith which does not reject or belittle the rites or customs of any nation as long as these rites are not evil, but rather desires that they be preserved in their integrity and fostered. It is, as it were, written in the nature of all men that the customs of their country and especially their country itself should be esteemed, loved and respected above anything else in the world.... Never make comparisons between the customs of these peoples and those of Europe; on the contrary show your anxiety to become used to them. Admire and praise whatever merits praise. As regards what is not praiseworthy, while it must not be extolled as is done by flatterers, you will be prudent enough not to pass judgment on it, or, in any case, not to condemn it rashly or exaggeratedly. As for what is evil, it should be dismissed by a nod of the head or by silence rather than by words, without losing the occasions, when souls have become disposed to receive the truth, to uproot it imperceptibly.[54]

These instructions are all the more remarkable as they were given at the height of colonialism. Sadly, the history of Catholic missions in East Asia shows that these instructions were not always followed, as is evidenced by what is known as the "Chinese Rites Controversy." Protestant missions were not much better on this score, even though theoretically there was talk of the "three-selfs" as the aim of mission, formulated by Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn, that is, the Asian churches' self-government, self-support, and self-propagation.

The need for inculturating the Gospel has been affirmed by recent popes. Pope Paul VI, who at first wavered between adaptation and inculturation, resolutely came down for the second alternative when he said: "Evangelization is to be achieved, not from without as though by adding some decoration or applying a coat of color, but in depth, going to the very center and roots of life. The Gospel must impregnate the culture and the whole way of life of man...."[55] John Paul II specifies further:

[54] Joseph Neuner and Jacques Dupuis, eds., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, rev. ed. (New York: Alba House, 1982), 309-10.

[55] *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 20. Also important is his earlier speech given to the African Bishops assembled in Kampala, Uganda in 1969 in which he says: "The expression, that is, the language and mode of manifesting this one Faith, may be manifold; hence, it may be original, suited to the tongue, the style, the genius, and the culture, of the one who professes this one Faith. From this point of view, a certain pluralism is not only legitimate, but desirable. An adaptation of the Christian life in the fields of pastoral, ritual, didactic and spiritual activities is not only possible, it is even favored by the Church. The liturgical renewal is a living example of this. And in this sense you may, and you must, have an African Christianity" *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 66 (1969), 57.

Through inculturation the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community. She transmits to them her own values, at the same time taking the good elements that already exist in them and renewing them from within. Through inculturation the Church, for her part, becomes a more intelligible sign of what she is, and a more effective instrument of mission.

Thanks to this action within the local Churches, the universal Church herself is enriched with forms of expression and values in the various sectors of Christian life, such as evangelization, worship, theology and charitable works....

Missionaries, who come from other Churches and countries, must immerse themselves in the cultural milieu of those to whom they are sent, moving beyond their cultural limitations.... It is not of course a matter of missionaries renouncing their own cultural identity, but of understanding, appreciating, fostering and evangelizing the culture of the environment in which they are working....[56]

There is little doubt that the FABC has made interculturation one of the central concerns of the Asian churches. Documents after documents vigorously stress the absolute necessity of a dialogue with Asian cultures as a way for the Christian churches to become local churches: "*True inculturation*, far from being a tactic for the propagation of the faith, belongs to the very core of evangelization, for it is the continuation in time and space of the dialogue of salvation initiated by God and brought to a culmination when he uttered his Word in a very concrete historical situation."[57]

The Asian churches' understanding of interculturation is crystalized in the Asian Synod and Pope John Paul II's ensuing apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*. Synthesizing the Asian bishops' discussion of this theme during the synod, the pope first of all emphasizes both the strict connection and distinction between evangelization and interculturation: "Evangelization and inculturation are naturally and intimately related to each other. The Gospel and evangelization are certainly not identical with culture; they are independent of it. Yet the Kingdom of God comes to people who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building of the Kingdom cannot avoid borrowing elements form human cultures."[58]

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[56] *RM*, 52-53.

[57] *For All Peoples* (1992), 94. See also "Dialogue Between Faith and Cultures in Asia: Towards Integral Human and Social Development," in *For All Peoples* (1997), 21-26.

[58] *EA*, 21.

Secondly, the pope reiterates a point that "was said repeatedly during the Synod: that the Holy Spirit is the prime agent of the interculturation of the Christian faith in Asia."[59] This emphasis on the agency of the Holy Spirit not only allows the necessary freedom to carry out the project of interculturation but also "the Spirit's presence ensures that the dialogue unfolds in truth, honesty, humility and respect."[60]

Thirdly, the Asian bishops and the pope envisage interculturation to be carried out in all areas of the church's life and activities, including theology, especially in the area of Christology, liturgy, biblical studies, and the formation of evangelizers. Here four criteria for an authentic interculturation are given: "compatibility with the Gospel," "communion with the faith of the universal Church," "full compliance with the Church's Tradition," and "with a view to strengthening people's faith."[61]

Finally, there is a strong emphasis on the necessity of the participation of all the people of God in the project of interculturation, in particular the laity: "A wider inculturation of the Gospel at every level of society in Asia will depend greatly on the appropriate formation which the local Churches succeed in giving to the laity."[62]

Interreligious Dialogue and Mission
In addition to interculturation, interreligious dialogue presents another, perhaps more difficult, challenge to evangelization, especially in Asia. This issue was not even discussed by Paul VI in his important apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975). John Paul II is the first pope to deal with this issue in his December 7, 1990 encyclical on mission *Redemptoris Missio* (nos. 55-57). Six months later, on June 20, 1991, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples issued a joint document entitled *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* [DP].[63] Because the draft of *Redemptoris Missio* was kept secret from the writers of the joint statement, there was no mutual enrichment between the two documents. The joint statement simply mentions the encyclical and says that it must be read in light of the encyclical (no. 4). Indeed, the statement offers a more detailed and nuanced treatment of interreligious dialogue than the encyclical.

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[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] *EA*, 22.
[62] Ibid.
[63] For the English text of *DP*, see *Redemption and Dialogue*, 93-118.

Vatican II's explicit acknowledgment of the presence of positive values in non-Christian religious traditions and attribution of these values to the active presence of God through his Word and Spirit inevitably raises the question of whether evangelization has not been replaced by interreligious dialogue. In answer to this question John Paul II unequivocally affirms:

> Interreligious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission. Understood as a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment, dialogue is not opposed to the mission *ad gentes*; indeed it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions.... Dialogue should be conducted and implemented with the conviction that *the Church is the ordinary means of salvation* and that *she alone* possesses the fullness of the means of salvation.[64]

Dialogue and Proclamation reinforces the same position:

> Interreligious dialogue and proclamation, though not on the same level, are both authentic elements of the Church's evangelizing mission. Both are legitimate and necessary. They are intimately related, but not interchangeable: true interreligious dialogue on the part of the Christian supposes the desire to make Jesus Christ better known, recognized and loved; proclaiming Jesus Christ is to be carried out in the Gospel spirit of dialogue. The two activities remain distinct but, as experience shows, one and the same local Church, one and the same person, can be diversely engaged in both.[65]

As briefly alluded to above, as part of interreligious dialogue, in recent decades a theology of religion has been elaborated by Western theologians in which the truth claim of various religions is categorized into three types: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.[66] With regard to Christianity, the exclusivist position, attributed to Karl Barth, affirms that only in Jesus can true revelation and salvation be found, the Christ event being constitutive of any authentic encounter with God, always and everywhere. The inclusivistic position, represented by Karl Rahner, affirms the uniqueness of Jesus without denying that God's saving presence may also be operative in other religions. Proponents

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[64] *RM*, 55.

[65] *DP*, 77.

[66] See, for example, Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983); Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985); and Galvin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986). In a recent work, Paul Knitter refines this threefold categorization by distinguishing four models of the theology of religions: the "replacement" model ("Only One True Religion"), the "fulfillment" model ("The One Fulfills the Many"), the "mutuality" model ("Many True Religions Called to Dialogue"), and the "acceptance" model ("Many True Religions: So Be It"). See his *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

of this view, however, insist that Christ includes other religions, either by being present in them anonymously or by fulfilling them as their goal. Jesus remains, if not constitutive of, at least normative for, all religious experience. Finally, the pluralistic position, proposed by John Hick, affirms that Jesus is unique, but his uniqueness includes and is included by other potentially equal religious founders. It views Jesus as neither constitutive of nor normative for authentic religious experience, but as theocentric, that is, as universally relevant manifestation, incarnation, and sacrament of God's revelation and salvation in history.[67]

While this typology, especially as further refined by Paul Knitter, can be a helpful guide in mapping various theological positions with regard to religious truth claims, it uncritically makes salvation the central, almost exclusive concern of religion. More problematically, it implicitly takes salvation, especially as understood by Christianity, as the norm to evaluate other religions. Despite their differences, the three typologies all assume that all religions intend salvation as their final goal and that salvation is ultimately the same in all religions, even though the means of realizing it may diverge, i.e., by only one way which excludes all other ways, or by one way which incorporates other ways, or by many, equally effective ways. But, of course, not all religious traditions intend transcendent salvation as the goal of life (e.g., Daoism, Confucianism and many so-called primal religions), nor do they understand transcendent salvation in the theistic sense as union with God (e.g., Buddhism and Jainism), nor, even when they understand salvation theistically, do they understand it in the way Christianity does (e.g., Hinduism and Sikhism).

The second unintended but unfortunate effect of this theology of religion is that it focuses on and privileges the theological aspect of interreligious dialogue, which, albeit necessary, is perhaps the least important and spiritually transformative of the four forms of interreligious dialogue mentioned above.[68] The debate most often revolves around which of three theories is orthodox from the biblical and doctrinal point of view, or the most respectful of religious diversity and pluralism, or both. Currently the debate is at a stalemate, with no one argument fully persuasive, and those with power do not shrink from using it to silence contrary voices. Consequently, interreligious dialogue that takes on this debate, with the concomitant question of which religion is the only true one and the highest, inevitably runs into a dead end. Dialogue then turns to other more productive activities such as detailed comparisons between beliefs, texts, and

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[67] See my "Are There Other 'Saviors' for Other Peoples?" in *Christianity and the Wider Ecumenism*, ed. Peter C. Phan (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 163-80.
[68] To his credit, Paul Knitter has emphasized the task of liberation for justice, peace and the integrity of creation in his theology of religion.

practices of different religions with the goal to learn from each other.[69]

Thirdly, and more relevant to our theme, this theology of religion with its focus on soteriology preempts a serious discussion of the nature, purpose, and method of interreligious dialogue and its relationship to Christian mission. Both *Redemptoris Missio* and *Dialogue and Proclamation* teach that interreligious dialogue is an essential part of Christian mission, though the latter document is far more nuanced in its distinction between evangelization and interreligious dialogue.[70] *Dialogue and Proclamation*, in the quotation given above, affirms that both proclamation and interreligious dialogue are "authentic elements of the Church's evangelizing mission" and that both are "legitimate and necessary ... intimately related, but not interchangeable."[71] Again, the document asserts that "interreligious dialogue is truly part of the dialogue of salvation initiated by God."[72] On the other hand, proclamation is defined as aiming "at guiding people to explicit knowledge of what God has done for all men and women in Jesus Christ, and at inviting them to become disciples of Jesus through becoming members of the Church."[73]

Despite their various distinctions between proclamation and interreligious dialogue, both *Redemptoris Missio* and *Dialogue and Proclamation* remain ambiguous on the nature, purpose and method of interreligious dialogue and its relation to mission. Implicit in both documents is the assumption that interreligious dialogue and evangelization both aim at one and the same goal, namely, announcing Jesus Christ as the universal and unique Savior and bringing people to accepting faith in Christ (conversion). It is taken for granted by these magisterial documents that the primary task of Christian mission, of which both evangelization/proclamation and interreligious dialogue are essential components, is to proclaim Christ as Lord and Savior of all humanity and that conversion and baptism are its immediate goal.

While proclaiming Christ as the Savior of all and inviting people to become his disciples and join the church ("proclamation" as defined by *Dialogue and Proclamation*) is a legitimate enterprise, provided it is done in humility and with genuine respect for religious freedom, interreligious dialogue cannot be said to have the same nature, purpose and method as evangelization, even though it is part of Christian mission. If we Christians invite other believers to an interfaith dialogue, by sharing a common life with us, collaborating with us for peace and justice, reflecting theologically with us on beliefs and practices, and sharing with

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[69] This new academic discipline is known as "comparative theology," whose foremost exponents in the United States include Francis Clooney and James Fredericks.

[70] *DP* devotes two sections to the relationship between proclamation and interreligious dialogue (33-41 and 77-84).

[71] *DP*, 77.

[72] *DP*, 80.

[73] *DP*, 81.

each other spiritual experiences (the four modes of dialogue), our goal, overt or covert, cannot be to make them into disciples of Jesus and members of the church through conversion and baptism. Otherwise it is not possible to distinguish between proclamation and interreligious dialogue. If making the followers of other religions into disciples of Jesus and members of the church is indeed our goal in interreligious dialogue, honesty requires that we state it explicitly and clearly at the outset when inviting other believers to come to our interreligious dialogue. But then it may be doubted if any will and indeed should come. Nor, by the same token, will and should Christians be willing to come to interreligious dialogue when it is initiated by other believers with parallel aims.

What are then the nature, method, and goal of interreligious dialogue? Taking a cue from the FABC, I suggest that its nature is dialogue understood as a modality of human relationship. Its method is the fourfold form of life, action, exchange of theological reflections, and sharing of religious experiences. Its goal is exclusively *mutual correction and enrichment* in all these four types of dialogue. Note that I am not suggesting that the goal of interreligious dialogue is simply "mutual understanding and friendly relations," as *Dialogue and Proclamation* correctly points out.[74] More important, it also includes mutual correction and enrichment. In interreligious dialogue *both* Christians and other believers are invited to examine their religious beliefs and practices, to correct them when necessary (this is always necessary at least for Christians, since the church is "*semper reformanda*"), to deepen their commitment to *their own faiths* and to live them more fully.[75]

It must be pointed out that interreligious dialogue understood and practiced in this way by no means implies or leads to relativism, as Ratzinger implies. It does not espouse the view that all religions are 'equal' or 'alternative' ways to God or that one should bracket one's faith. On the contrary, in my decades-long experience, most if not all participants in interreligious dialogue, Christian and otherwise, are all deeply and passionately convinced of the truth of their religious traditions and often defend them with vigor and rigor. Each participant firmly believes that his or her religious way is the best, even the only, way to achieve the ultimate goal intended by his or her religion. Otherwise they would not be religiously what they are. But they also aware that their understanding and practice in matters religious always remain partial and distorted and is in constant need of correction and enrichment from other religious traditions. Thus the real

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[74] *DP*, 40.

[75] *DP*, 40 says: "It [interreligious dialogue] reaches a much deeper level, that of the spirit, where exchange and sharing consist in a mutual witness to one's beliefs and a common exploration of one's respective religious commitments. In dialogue Christians and others are invited to deepen their religious commitment, to respond with increasing sincerity to God's personal call and gracious self-gift which, as our faith tells us, always passes through the mediation of Jesus Christ and the work of his Spirit." Of course, other believers, e.g., Buddhists or Muslims, may and must claim that the way to liberation or salvation passes through the mediation of the Buddha or the Qur'an.

challenge in interreligious dialogue is not to retain one's religious convictions but to remain firmly rooted in one's religious tradition *and at the same time* be open to learn from as well as be challenged by other, often different, and at times contradictory traditions. *Dialogue and Proclamation* puts it well: "Christians may have also to challenge them [other religious traditions] in a peaceful spirit with regard to the content of their belief. But Christians, too, must allow themselves to be questioned. Notwithstanding the fullness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, the way Christians sometimes understand their religion and practice it may be in need of purification."[76]

With regard to conversion, participants in interreligious dialogue, Christian and otherwise, would of course be very pleased if others decide to "convert" and accept their religious tradition. But this applies both ways, that is, non-Christians may become Christian and *vice versa*. This is a possibility, some would say, risk, to which each participant must be vulnerable.[77] However, conversion is not and must not be made into the goal of the interreligious dialogue. Otherwise it corrupts its very nature and method.

If interreligious dialogue is understood and practiced in this way, it can and must be part of Christian mission, just as evangelization, liberation, and intercultural dialogue are, each with its own nature, goal, and method. Fortunately, one needs and must not choose between intercultural and interreligious dialogue, nor between interreligious dialogue and evangelization/proclamation.

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[76] *DP*, 32. Instead of "sometimes" and "may" I would say that the way Christians understand and practice their faith always and must be purified.

[77] Often participants in interreligious dialogue adopt some sort of "multiple religious belonging." On this, see my *Being Religious Interreligiously*, 60-81.

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