

EDITORIAL ESSAYS

COMMITMENT TO ONE—OPENNESS TO OTHERS: A CHALLENGE FOR CHRISTIANS

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I. Introduction

As we so often hear, Christians of every new generation, or in any new cultural context, have to answer for themselves the question Jesus posed for the first generation of disciples: “Who do you say I am?” (Mk 8:27)¹ This is a question that can be answered only in the light of other questions—that is, the personal, social, political, scientific questions we find ourselves grappling with in our own age and experience. The meaning of Jesus “becomes flesh” again in the meaning and direction we struggle for in our own times.

Among the questions that most stir the minds and feelings of Christians today, perhaps one of the most rankling and challenging is that of other religions traditions and other religious believers—the issue of religious pluralism. To answer the question “Who do you say I am?”, we have to connect it to the question “Who do you say they are?” How do we understand Jesus—his person and his work—in view of so many other religious persons and their words and works of wisdom? As Roger Haight has perceptively pointed out, the reality of other religions is not a question we take up *after* we have worked out our Christology. It enters into, and directs and determines, how we do our Christology from the very start.²

If I can try to formulate how “Who do you say I am?” translates into the context of religious pluralism, it might be something like: “How can I be truly committed to Christ and at the same time be truly open to other religions?” That, I think, captures the questions and the struggles many Christians are feeling as they try to understand themselves as Christians in a world of many religions. They feel they have to do both: be faithful to their following of Jesus but at the same time be open to, in dialogue with, what God may have to say to them through other

¹This essay is an abbreviated version of a more extensive paper delivered at a symposium on “Faith and the Religious Imagination” organized by Terrence Merrigan at the Department of Theology, Catholic University of Leuven, March 8-9, 2001. The papers of this conference will soon be published.

²Roger Haight, *Jesus the Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 395-98.

religious persons and traditions. Discipleship, in other words, requires dialogue. This the Second Vatican Council said clearly. And official statements from the Vatican have repeated, clarified, and intensified interreligious dialogue as an essential part of what it means to be a Christian and a church.³ But how to bring it off? How can a Christian be fully committed to the unique Jesus of Nazareth and really open to what is unique, but often so very different, in Buddha, or Krishna, or the Holy Qu'ran? That is the question I want to explore in the following reflections.

I begin with commitment to Jesus and ask what goes on in a person, when she or he feels called, and then decides, to be a disciple of Jesus? What are the “conditions for the possibility” of commitment to Christ and his Gospel? To try to look into that question, I can turn to someone else who wrestled with it—John Henry Newman. For Newman, you cannot understand the commitment of faith without understanding the role of the *religious imagination* in the genesis of faith.

II. *The Role of the Imagination in the Genesis of Faith-Commitment*

Using traditional terminology, Newman called the religious imagination a “faculty”—something real, an ability that religious believers find and feel within themselves, an ability that both identifies and then empowers the very act and content of faith. The imagination, in other words, is what is working within us when a doctrine or belief takes on life, fire, power, reality and calls forth from us an act of faith, an act of commitment. We can say, therefore, that the religious imagination is the instrument or the vehicle by which the Spirit touches or invades us. Once our minds have understood the content of a particular doctrine or story, the Spirit uses the imagination to connect that meaning to our own lives, to our own needs or searchings.⁴

Through the imagination, the particular meaning in a belief, comprehensible in itself, becomes under the power of the Spirit meaning *for me*, meaning that illumines the path of *my* life. The content of a particular image—for example, the cross, the resurrection, the transfiguration—becomes a light by which we suddenly understand the particular pains or confusions or hopes of our own journey. Speaking more generally, we can say that through the Spirit working in and through the story of Jesus, this story becomes *our own story*. What Jesus

³*Nostra Aetate*, #2. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, #55. *Dialogue and Proclamation* (of the Vatican Commission on Interreligious Dialogue), #2, 6, 77.

⁴For an excellent review and analysis of Newman’s understanding of the role of the imagination in the genesis of faith, see Terrence Merrigan, *Clear Heads and Holy Hearts: The Religious and Theological Ideal of John Henry Newman* (Louvain: Peeters Press/W.B.Eerdmans, 1991), esp. chapters 2 and 6.

said and did, how he is portrayed in the Gospels and liturgy, springs to life for us and becomes the “Master-Story” by which we can now understand and plot and risk our own still unfinished story. All this happens through the way that our imagination, filled with the Spirit, hears and feels the story of Jesus—or, the way the Gospel story, illumined by the Spirit, touches and activates our imagination. What was just a story becomes a revelation and invitation. The story calls forth faith and becomes belief.

To say that a particular belief becomes enflamed by the imagination under the workings of the Spirit and so becomes an act of faith—this is to say that this belief or ritual or ingredient of the tradition is functioning for the imagination as a *symbol*. When a story becomes my story, when an image takes hold of my soul, then that story has become, in the technical language of theology and anthropology, a *myth*; then that image is working as a *symbol*.⁵ As is commonly understood in Christian, especially Catholic, theology, a symbol is that which *mediates* Something greater or more than itself, but Something in which it (the symbol) participates and is rooted. As the Scholastics put it: *symbolizando causant*. By symbolizing the Divine, they cause the Divine to be present. The Catholic word for symbols is *sacrament*. To talk about the role of the imagination in the genesis of faith, then, is to talk about sacraments.

III. What the Religious Imagination Communicates

But how does an understanding of the imagination in Christian faith-commitment help us respond to our problem of balancing commitment to Christ with openness to others? To take this next step, we have to explore what the religious imagination has to “feel” or “know” in a particular belief in order for it to evoke from that belief the power of faith. How must a symbol or sacrament affect us, what does it have to tell us, in order for it to really be a sacrament and effectively stir our imagination? In trying to answer those questions, I must confess (or warn) that I am drawing not only on my training as a theologian but also, and especially, on my experience as a Christian. In what follows, I want to enter into the psychology of coming to believe, the personal experience of sensing and feeling my imagination fired by the Spirit and so enabled to identify Jesus as my Way, Truth, and Life. Though these reflections are rooted in my own experience, I trust that they mirror what takes place in the heart, or imagination, of others who chose to become followers of Jesus in the Christian community.

⁵I understand a religious myth to be a revelatory narrative that makes use of symbols—whether the narrative is historical or not, whether the symbols are taken literally or not.

I am asking: what is felt or known about Jesus that is essential in order for the Jesus story to become my story? Let me offer what I think are three such essential qualities of what Christians must imagine and feel about Jesus in order for him to effectively be for them the Symbol or Sacrament of God.

1. *Universally True.* When the religious imagination works, when it creates and evokes the movement of trust and commitment in a person's heart, it is telling the person that what he or she is feeling and knowing is *really so*. It is true. This is who God is, or how God acts, or what God does. What the imagination tells the Christian about the God revealed in Jesus, and about Jesus the revealer of God, is really so, truly part of the way things work in the universe; it comes from the Source of all Truth.

But more: What is communicated through the imagination and affirmed or trusted by the believer is felt to be true not just for me or for my community. If it were "just for us," it could not really be so. "*Really*" therefore contains "*universally*." I am saying this not only or primarily because of the missionary mandate delivered in the New Testament. I say it because of what I feel, because of what the religious imagination tells me as it calls forth my act of faith. In knowing the truth that is given in Jesus, I feel called to share that truth with others, for I feel that all people can and should know and feel what I have known and felt. The lives of all can be so enlightened and transformed as has my life. I want to tell them about Jesus; I want to share what I have found. Yes, I want to preach and proclaim. As Paul put it, "the love of Christ urges me" to share that love with others (2 Cor 5:14).

2. *Decisively Empowering.* Furthermore, for the image and story of Jesus as delivered in the proclamation and celebration of the Christian community to inspire my imagination, it must also effectively call me, and enable me, to *follow after him*. It must bring about change in my life—or at least the effort to change. Here we are touching on the New Testament notion of *metanoia*, of turning one's life around, of not only knowing the truth but doing it—or of knowing it truly by doing it actually. Such conversion, of course, implies decision. And decision, in its very etymological content, means that I "cut off" a previous direction and set out in a new one. Thus, the religious imagination, in the way it works, has a *decisive* quality about it. It sets me moving in a very clear direction, which usually implies turning from a previous direction. But what I feel in what the imagination evokes from me is not only the clarity of a direction but also, and usually more astonishingly, the power or energy to actually move in that direction. I am not only given

a new map, but the energy to use it—an energy I never thought I had. Here I believe I am pointing out something that all Christians can identify in their own experience: the story of Jesus, as presented to them in their religious imagination, is *decisive* and it is *empowering*.

To experience Jesus and his presence in the church in this way, as decisively empowering, is to say that “Jesus is Savior.” What gives new direction to our lives, as well as the ability to follow in that direction, brings meaning, purpose, wholeness, vitality to our lives: we are saved. Thus the religious imagination, in portraying Jesus as decisive and powerful, both fills all our creedal language about Jesus as Savior with meaning and at the same calls for such language in order to articulate what it so deeply feels. If the imagination does not so “save” us—that is, if it does not decisively empower us to trust that our individual lives and our world can be made whole—it cannot be called, in Newman’s sense, the religious imagination.

3. *Overwhelmingly Wonderful and Mysterious.* I offer a further quality of how the religious imagination affects us Christians. In revealing to us in the Jesus story what is universally true and what decisively takes hold of our lives, the Christian religious imagination also elicits the awareness that we stand in the presence of—better, are embraced by—*Mystery*, for which we sense a profound *gratitude*. What we have discovered through our imagination’s unpacking of the Christ event is as powerful and true as it is utterly beyond our comprehension. It is as mysterious as it is real. In the immanent reality of it, we also sense its ineffable transcendence. We feel we have been given a gift from a Giver we cannot comprehend, and this feeling brings forth the need to acknowledge the Giver and say “thank you.”

This is the stuff of liturgy. Such recognition of Mystery present, and of gratitude for it, is what brings people together to sing and shout and dance. But in saying this, we must be careful not to imply a chronological, causal order here—as if we are first moved by the imagination and then we celebrate. The movement is, rather, circular. For it is *generally in and through* the liturgical life of the community that the religious imagination takes hold of us and shows its power. This is why the role of liturgy cannot be limited to *worship* and *gratitude*. It is also an act of *remembering*. In the repeating of the story in the liturgy of the word, in the embodying of the story in the official sacraments, we keep alive the past in our present. In remembering, we share in the story. So in stating that the religious imagination leads to liturgy, we must immediately add that liturgy is the energy field in which the imagination does its work.

*IV. What the Religious Imagination Does Not Communicate
or Require*

So far we have explored how the religious imagination grounds commitment to Christ. Now we must examine how it enables openness to others. To do this, we have to ask not only what the imagination tells us about Christ but also what it *does not*, or what it *need not*, tell us.

I suggest two claims which, though they may be givens in traditional Christian doctrine, do not seem to be given by the religious imagination.

1. *Not the Only Story.* Although I have no doubts about the truth and importance of the Jesus story, I do not know, in the experience of my own Christian imagination, that it is the only story. In knowing that Jesus is *truly* God's revelation for all humankind, I do not know that he is the *only* such revelation. I do not know that because of two reasons: I cannot and I need not know it.

I *cannot* know that the Jesus story is the only saving story that God has told simply because of the evident fact that my imagination is only my imagination. My experience is limited. To venture the claim that the Christ event is the only saving act of God, I would have to know about other religious stories and traditions; I would have to somehow enter into the imaginations of other religious persons. Or I would have to enter into the very mind and being of God to know that, indeed, God has chosen to act and reveal and save, here and only here. As is evident, finite creature than I am, all such experiences, and all such knowledge resulting from such experiences, is beyond me.

Note that the assertions I am making are intended to report *on what the religious imagination* reveals to me, what I feel in my own Christian experience of coming to believe. Admittedly, Christian belief and doctrine *have* made such claims about Jesus as the *only* Savior and the *only* Son of God. What I am suggesting is that such claims are not inherently confirmed and verified by what my religious imagination or my Christian faith-experience tells me. Their truth value is not *immediately mediated* in the Christian personal religious experience; it would have to be *subsequently mediated*.⁶

But if my Christian religious imagination cannot, in the way it works, tell me that Jesus is the only saving act of God, it also *does not need to*. As I try to look into what is going on in the way the Spirit fills

⁶Just how and why this subsequent mediation of the claim that Jesus is the ontologically sole source of salvation took place is a complex and ambiguous issue. I have offered some suggestions why the early communities of the New Testament made their "one and only" claims about Jesus in *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 182-86.

and moves my imagination, I realize that what moves me to take the step of faith and make the commitment of discipleship is the assurance I feel that Jesus is *truly* the Son of God. I really do not need to know whether he is the *only* Son of God. In a sense, that question is irrelevant. It is not part of what *moves* me to believe. What does move me is the ability of Jesus to be a Sacrament of salvation for me—a symbol that in its content and Spirit-infused power—excites my imagination and so, to use Newman’s word, *evokes* faith. The content of the symbol that so stirs me has to do with the message of Jesus, with his life and mission, with his parables, his compassion, his devotion to the God he called Father, his concern for the marginalized. That he embodies all of this is what moves me—not that he is the *only one* who so embodies all this.

I know the analogy of marriage is imperfect and has been misunderstood, but I do think it is appropriate in this context. What inspired and moved me to commit myself and marry my wife was the conviction that what my experience and imagination told me about her was indeed true: that she was the good, the caring, the challenging person I felt her to be. It was not because I know she was the only such good, caring, challenging woman in the world. I very well knew that there were other such wonderful women whom other men were marrying. Yes, in my cold, rational moments, I even knew that it would be theoretically possible for me to marry one of those other wonderful women. But I knew who this woman was; and I trusted what my imagination told me could be a life with her. And that was enough to fire and launch my trust and commitment.⁷ Something similar takes place in the process by which Christians come to realize that indeed Jesus is the Christ for them, whom they choose to embrace in discipleship. “I know in whom I have believed”(2 Tim 1:12). They know, because they have so experienced, that Jesus is God’s Sacrament of salvation. Whether there are other such sacraments is a question that does not, or need not, interfere with the “yes” they pronounce to Jesus their Savior.⁸

⁷Where my analogy of marriage “limps” (“omnis analogia claudicat”—every analogy limps in some way) is on the issue of universality. While my relationship with Jesus is something that I feel is universally relevant and that I would want others to share in, the same is not true of my relationship with my wife. While the relationship between spouses has an intimacy that cannot be shared (expressed in part in their sexual relationship), the intimacy that I have with the Christ-living-in-me can be shared.

⁸Another question might be posed to this marriage analogy: If Christians know that there might be “other saviors” besides Jesus, would this not jeopardize their commitment to him? Would they not be unsettled by the possibility that if they would ever meet such an other savior, they would have to change their commitment to Jesus? I think not. Again, the analogy with marriage helps: The depth and quality of my relationship with my wife—based on what I know to be true of her—is such that though there is the possibility of my meeting and marrying another woman, this possibility is, for my imagination, *not*

2. *Not the Final and Full Story.* I would suggest that if we look further into how the religious imagination works, we can discover that it does *not* inform us that the truth we have experienced in Jesus is necessarily the final and full truth that God has in store for humanity. So if in our previous reflections I suggested that the Christian religious imagination does not rule out the possibility of there being other saving stories, now I am suggesting further that neither does the imagination inform us that Jesus is necessarily the last, the definitive, story for all the others.

Here we have to distinguish between *decisive* on the one hand, and *final* or *definitive* on the other. I stated earlier that the Christian imagination does present Jesus as decisive—in the sense that his message and the Spirit working through it calls me to decision, to cut off previous paths and follow that of Jesus and his community. The Jesus path becomes for me a new path, or a clearer path, or a now-possible path. That is different from it being the *final* or the *definitive* path. In following Jesus, I know where I stand, yes. But I also know that in following after him, I may be standing somewhere else tomorrow. The truth and the vision in his message and being that excite my imagination is, as they say, open-ended. There is more to come.

My experience of Jesus contains this sense of more to come not only because, as one might argue, openness is inherent in the very nature of truth. More so, this openness is contained in an ingredient of Jesus' message itself—an ingredient that New Testament scholars tell us was essential to Jesus' experience and proclamation: his *eschatological* vision. In him, the Reign of God was *already* present, but at the very same time, it was *not yet* present.⁹ Expressed more philosophically, futurity is part of the warp and woof of the Gospel. And if the very message of the Gospel tells us that we must expect more, that clearly means that the present content of the Gospel cannot say it all. It cannot be "final" or "definitive." Here we feel the paradox contained in what our imagination senses when it leads us to faith in Jesus: as *certain* as we are that he is God's Word for us, just as *uncertain* are we about what that Word will lead us to. To continue the paradox, the truth of Jesus

real. I am happy and fulfilled—"saved"—in the relationship I have. Indeed, the depth and peace that I find in this relationship opens and frees me to meet other women, enjoy their friendship, learn from them—and so deepen my relationship with my wife. Analogously, the depth of my commitment to Jesus the Christ, frees me, even encourages, me to explore and learn from what God may have revealed in other religions and their saviors.

⁹Norman Perrin, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 158-206; Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 47-96; John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God: The Message of Jesus Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 79-100.

that stirs us is, therefore, as firm in its *commitment* to Jesus as it is radical in its *openness* to the future that we meet when we meet others.

This lack—I can say this *happy* lack—of finality in the way the religious imagination presents Jesus to the Christian believer is also an outflow of another quality of the imagination's picture of Jesus that we have already looked at: the Truth and Power that we experience in him are as *mysterious* as they are real. Again, here I am making not a doctrinal but an experiential claim: in the way the Spirit in Jesus-the-Sacrament overwhelms our imagination, we feel that what we are encountering in him is as powerful as it is ineffable. Or, more philosophically: the Mystery we feel in Jesus is as transcendent as it is immanent, just as much beyond us as it is given to us. That is part of the experience of Mystery. We would not use the word "mystery" if we had a final or a full grasp of it. To experience Mystery in Jesus, as we feel and say we do, is to implicitly but truly say that Jesus has not said it all, that there is more to Mystery than what we have committed ourselves to in Jesus. This requires that we be open to other ways in which this Mystery may be at work in history and in others.

V. *We Need a Sacramental Christology*

If this personal exploration of how the Christian religious imagination brings us to commitment to Jesus but allows us to be open to others has any validity, then I think the Christian churches need to develop and preach more of a *sacramental Christology*. With such a Christology, we understand who Jesus was (Son of God) and what Jesus did (saved the world) by experiencing and reflecting on how he was really and truly God's *sacrament* for the world. Something is a sacrament when it mediates, embodies, transmits, symbolizes the reality of God for us. Understanding Jesus as God's sacrament, we can understand his divinity and his role as savior in such a way that we are truly committed to him but also open to other sacraments that God may be using throughout history.

Regarding Jesus' divinity, as Edward Schillebeeckx and, more recently, Roger Haight stress, the doctrine of Jesus as the Son of God is rooted in the experience of Jesus as Sacrament.¹⁰ Contemporary New Testament scholarship seems to agree: Christians did not come to proclaim that Jesus was the Son of God because he told them so but because they felt him to be so.¹¹ To meet Jesus was for them to meet God.

¹⁰Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus the Sacrament of Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963) and Haight, *Jesus the Symbol of God*, chapter 15.

¹¹I refer here to the general consensus that Jesus did not proclaim himself as the Son of God or preach his own divinity.

To talk about this, to try to make sense of it for themselves and for others, they realized that he had to be so identified with God as to be of God—to be of God more thoroughly and intimately than they had ever realized it to be possible for a human being. Jesus is truly divine, they came to understand, because he is so truly—that means so powerfully and effectively—the Symbol or Sacrament of God.

A sacramental Christology can also explain how Jesus is Savior in a much more engaging and freeing manner than traditional explanations using the satisfaction or substitution models. According to the satisfaction model, the saving role of Jesus is explained principally as an *efficient cause*. As an efficient cause, Jesus saves us because he *effected* something, or *did* something—often understood as an act that in some way “repaired” the rift between God and humanity. As a sacramental cause, Jesus saves because he *shows* or *reveals* something; as a sacrament (*sacramentum*), he *symbolizes* something that is already there (*res sacramenti*) but is not operative because we either cannot see it or trust it; this something is the saving love, presence, acceptance of the Divine.

The advantages of such a sacramental Christology for openness to others are evident. An efficient cause is intrinsically singular. Once something is fixed, it cannot be, or it does not need to be, fixed again. But a sacramental cause is at least potentially plural. What is revealed at one point in history might be revealed again in another. What is made known in one culture can be—we might even say, needs to be—made know differently in another. Or even more profoundly, when the content of what is being revealed is the illimitable and ever-dynamic Mystery of Divine Love and Presence, a multiplicity of exemplary causes or revelations—of saving sacraments—is not only intelligible but even necessary.¹²

VI. A Sacramental Christology is a Dialogical Christology

There are various ways in which theologians are elaborating *how* a sacramental Christology is, by its very nature, a *dialogical Christology*—that is, an understanding and following of Jesus that *requires* an encounter with others, that is in need of relationship and conversation with those who are walking on other religious paths. Perhaps the most fundamental reason is the most evident: if a sacramental Christology

¹²As has been pointed out, even if we are working with a sacramental (or representative) Christology, it is still well possible that Jesus is held up as the *normative* revelation in a world of many revelations. That certainly is true. But it *need not be true*. And that spells the difference between what has been called a representative and a constitutive Christology: as a constitutive cause, Jesus *must be* singular and normative; as a representative or sacramental cause he *can be* one among others.

recognizes not only the possibility but the probability, even necessity, of other symbols or sacraments of the Divine throughout history, it will also feel the necessity of learning about and from those other sacraments. And this will not simply be out of curiosity about what God is up to in other times and cultures. Rather, if the religious imagination has realized that what it has felt in Jesus is and must be *universal*, then it will expect that other religious persons, whose imaginations have been touched by other symbols, will be making similar *universal claims*. If Christians are driven, as it were, to let others know and feel and be transformed by what they have been given in Jesus the Christ, they must be, and will want to be, open to learning from, perhaps being transformed by, what their brothers and sisters in other religious traditions feel driven to share. Symbols call unto other symbols. In feeling my own, I am open to feeling yours. This is because, as we have said, in revealing to us that which is *really true*, a symbol never delivers the *whole truth*. To step closer to the whole truth, I need to explore your symbol.

Stated in more explicitly Christian terms, if Jesus is understood as the Word of God within a sacramental Christology, then he is God's Word that can really be understood only if put into conversation with other of God's Words. No word can be really understood by itself. Words, either by their very nature or by the nature of the human mind, must be understood in sentences, in relation with other words. Even the most beautiful or powerful of the words in our vocabulary are inadequate if they stand by themselves.

This is a consideration that even more conservative or evangelical Christians might understand and accept: even if they feel compelled to hold up Jesus as God's final and full Word, they can also admit that they will never move closer to grasping and living what that "finality" or "fullness" mean if they are not relating God's Word in Jesus to God's Words among others. On this, conservative and so-called progressive Christians might agree: whatever the finality of Jesus means, it is a finality that cannot stand alone, that cannot function without conversation with others; it is a dialogical finality.¹³

Another way in which theologians are attempting to show that Jesus is God's Word open to other Words—or that an authentic Christology is necessarily a dialogical Christology—is through the symbol of *kenosis*. This perspective has been laid out extensively and powerfully in a recently published study by David H. Jensen. Unpacking the Pauline realization that Jesus' divinity and his role as savior is tied, tightly but mysteriously, to the act of emptying and letting go of himself in his

¹³See Paul Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 80-83, 98-101.

love for and reaching out to others, Jensen arrives at an image of Jesus and discipleship that is essentially dialogical. In Jensen's own words:

Jesus Christ is the *One who embodies openness to others* He is the One who goes *ahead* of all who would enclose him, manifesting himself throughout time whenever openness to others is embodied in love.

[Therefore:] "Christomonism"—the proclamation of Jesus Christ at the expense of everything else—is a distortion of the life of discipleship and not its faithful execution. Indeed, conformity to Christ involves *being claimed by others*, and not claiming others as our own In order to become more faithful disciples, Christians need the insights of persons who profess distinctly different religious commitments.¹⁴

A clarification is needed here: when we say that a kenotic Christology, or a sacramental Christology, is by its very nature a dialogical Christology, we really mean *dialogue* in the comprehensive, dialectical sense of that word. An openness to others and a conversation with them that is truly dialogical means that the relationship can be mutually (that is, for both sides) both fulfilling *and* disrupting. From my Christian side of the dialogue, that means that Christians will not only find themselves agreeing with others in so far as they discover new treasures in what God has been up to in other religions; they can also find themselves having to confront, even flat-out disagree, with others. This will happen whenever they encounter beliefs or practices that are contrary to the vision of God and the Kingdom that Jesus embodies and reveals. Certainly, as Roger Haight reminds us, what in the dialogue at first sight looks like a contradiction may often be an invitation to approach our own truth in an utterly different way; we must be careful not to confuse contradictions with paradoxes. Still, contradictions in an interreligious conversation, especially in ethical issues, can and do occur.¹⁵ In such cases, humble, compassionate, but at the same time clear and firm disagreement, even confrontation, may be part of the encounter. Dialogue can be both delightful and distressing, both mystically uplifting and prophetically messy.

¹⁴David H. Jensen, *In the Company of Others: A Dialogical Christology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001), xi-xv, passim.

¹⁵Haight, *Jesus the Symbol of God*, 407-08. In this context, Haight reminds us that in such openness to and dialogue with others, Jesus continues to be normative for Christians. But it is what he calls a negative, rather than a positive, normativity: what we encounter in other religious traditions can be something genuinely new and therefore add to what God is revealing to us; but it cannot really contradict what we have found to be true in Jesus (see *Jesus the Symbol of God*, 409-10).

VII. *A Dialogical Christology Is Fostering a Dialogical Church*

In these final comments, I would like to indicate how such a sacramental, dialogical understanding of Jesus *is* working in the life of the church, how it is actually functioning and enabling Christians to be thoroughly committed to Jesus but at the same time truly, eagerly, open to other religious believers.

Both in my own experience in the university classroom or in parish discussion groups, as well as in what I read about and have sometimes seen in both European and Asian churches, there is a growing number of Christians who are at least uneasy about, if not downright scandalized by, what they are told they have to believe about other religions. I think this uneasiness or scandal erupted in the widespread negative, sometimes even angry, response to the Congregation of the Faith's recent document *Dominus Jesus*. From various quarters of the Catholic community there came a resolute response: "This is not our faith." One might call this reaction an example of the "sense of the faithful" in tension with the sense of the official magisterium.

The tension, or scandal, revolves around the one word: *only*. Christians are finding it increasingly difficult—both in their own hearts and before their friends in other religious communities—to maintain that *only* in their religion does one find the final and full Truth about God and humanity because *only* in Jesus Christ has God made possible and so constituted the salvation of all. Increasingly, this "only" is making it difficult for the religious imagination to find in the story and sacrament of Jesus the message or power that truly enlightens their lives and excites their faith. This is why I have so often heard expressions of gratitude from Christians when I report to them how theologians are trying to grapple with the problem of this "only." They confess that this is a question that has long unsettled and pained them but one that they thought was simply "off-limits" for Christian consideration.

The reason why this pastoral problem is growing so acute today has to do, I suspect, with a widespread conflict or contradiction, especially in the Roman Catholic Church, between the *theory and practice* of dialogue with other religions. Vatican II, mainly in *Nostra Aetate*, opened the doors of dialogue for Catholics and not only allowed but "exhorted" them to pass through these doors and "prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, to acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these people . . ." ¹⁶ Well, Catholics, with other Christians, are doing just that. In parish discussion groups with Muslims, in collaborative

¹⁶Nostra Aetate, #2.

projects with Hindus and Jews, in meditation courses using Zen or Hindu methods, through reading and study in classrooms and study groups, Christians have come to realize that there are more “spiritual and moral goods” in other religions than they ever realized. Even more so, they have seen with their eyes and felt with their hearts the depth of spirituality in Hindus or Muslims who have become their friends, their neighbors, maybe even their sons or daughters in law. And from all these forms of dialogue—described by the Vatican as dialogues of spirituality, of study, or of life—Christians have found themselves not only impressed but enriched.¹⁷ They have realized, as Edward Schillebeeckx puts it, that there is more of God’s truth and presence in all the world religions together than there can be in any one of them, including Christianity!¹⁸

The fruits of such a practice of dialogue stand in tension with a theology of religions that insists that the fullness of revelation resides only in Christianity or that other believers, to find their true happiness, must be fulfilled in Christ and his church. Such theological claims seem to contradict what the practice of dialogue reveals. And this means that the church has a problem—a problem that it must take more seriously and creatively than it has in the past. Such a situation is nothing new in the history of the church. It reflects the same dynamic contained in the traditional recognition that there can be a dissonance between the practice of the *lex orandi* (or the rule of prayer/liturgy) and the theory of the *lex credendi* (the rule of creed/theology). In our case we might speak of a clash between the *lex dialogandi* and the *lex credendi*—the practice of interreligious dialogue and the theology of religions. Whenever the church finds herself in such situations of dissonance or clash between theory and practice, or between pastoral experience and creedal or theological formulation, we have not just a problem, but an opportunity. In wrestling with the tension, there is the need and the new possibility of both clarifying our practice of dialogue and expanding our theology of religions.¹⁹

Should this expansion follow the lines of a sacramental or dialogical Christology, such as I have been suggesting? That we cannot say. Such a question can be answered only through the process of theological reflection tested in pastoral application. Such a question can only be answered, in other words, within the life of the church—the interplay

¹⁷See the statement of the Vatican Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991), nos. 42-43.

¹⁸See Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 166.

¹⁹I have tried to describe and analyze this clash between the practice of dialogue and the theology of religions in “Catholics and Other Religions: Bridging the Gap between Dialogue and Theology,” *Louvain Studies* 24 (1999): 319-54.

and intercommunications of pastoral leaders, theologians, and especially the sense of the faithful. It seems, however, that it is precisely this kind of exploration and evaluation within the life of the church that some Catholic pastors in Rome are trying to prevent, in declarations such as *Dominus Jesus*, and restrictions placed on theologians who are doing this kind of exploration, such as Jacques Dupuis, Roger Haight, and Tissa Balasuriya.

But the tension between the practice of dialogue and the theology of religions will not go away. This was and continues to be seen especially in the life of the Asian Catholic churches, as that life was expressed before, during, and after the 1999 Synod of Asian Bishops. The bishops stated clearly, before the Synod and afterwards, that traditional—or Western—formulations of the uniqueness of Christ and the place of Christianity among religions are simply not working, not appropriate, for their efforts to preach and live the Gospel in Asia.²⁰ What is so sharply and painfully focused in the Asian churches is present, perhaps in milder forms, in many other Christian communities: traditional theological understandings of the uniqueness of Jesus and the role of Christianity are not working well to ground, interpret and direct Christians' experience of and dialogue with followers of other religions.

Perhaps when the bishops of Vatican II recognized the “spiritual and moral goods” within other religions and then sounded their call to all Catholics to dialogue with these religions, this was another instance in which, as Karl Rahner has observed, they did not fully realize the implications of what they were doing. In opening, as it were, the floodgates of dialogue, they also opened a flood of new theological questions about Jesus and the church that require genuinely new answers.²¹ These questions, it seems, have not yet been sufficiently answered in order to sustain the life of the church and to nourish the Christian religious imagination. Theologians and pastors and bishops still have a lot of work to do.

²⁰For references, see Knitter, “Catholics and Other Religions,” 333-35. As Edmund Chia states in his paper to the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops, January 3-12, 2000: “. . . when the Curia bishops insist that the bishops of Asia address the issue of Jesus as the ‘one and only saviour,’ it is like a Vietnamese bishop insisting that the church in Italy address the issues of ancestor worship amongst Italian Catholics, or like an Indian bishop asking that the Italian bishops address the problem of the caste system or the dalit problem in their Italian parishes” (manuscript titled “Inter-religious Dialogue in Pursuit of Fullness of Life in Asia”).

²¹William Burrows indicates just how new these answers might be: “That contemporary interreligious interchange will do to the doctrine of soteriology what interchange with sciences such as paleontology and astrocosmology did to the doctrine of creation” (paper titled “A Catholic Perspective on What Evangelicals Have to Contribute to Inter-religious Interchange,” American Academy of Religion annual meeting, November 1999).

And as I have tried to show in this essay, it has been my experience—both personally and as a teacher/minister—that a sacramental, dialogical understanding of Jesus *is* inspiring the imagination and nourishing the faith of Christians who are as fully committed to Christ as they are open to and engaged with other religions. I saw this clearly and powerfully a few years ago in a workshop in Thailand with some ninety religious educators, ministers, pastors from all over Asia.²² I experienced it again in a recent graduate course with mainly Catholic high school teachers and ministers. I see and feel it in my fellow Christians who with me are working on the Interreligious Peace Council, seeking to bring an interreligious contribution to the nonviolent resolution of conflict in “hot spots” around the world.

In all these groups, I encountered Christians for whom an image of Jesus as *truly* God’s Sacrament of grace and truth but at the same time open to *other* Sacraments of grace and truth both inspires and sustains their commitment to Jesus and calls and guides them in dialogue with others. Christians are realizing, perhaps more than they ever have, that Christ is the Way that is open to other Ways.

²²The Second Formation Institute for Interreligious Affairs (FIRA II), July 8-13, 1999, Redemptoris Center, Pattaya, Thailand, organized by the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences, Office of Ecumenical and Religious Affairs. Report to be published in the book, *For All the Peoples of Asia*.