



# OPENNESS AND COMMITMENT

A constructive and critical engagement between  
a theological debate and the practice of  
intentional interreligious encounter in Malaysia.

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## Preface

In June 2018 I visited the Seminari Theologi Malaysia (STM) for the first time and during this visit an enthusiasm arose to come back for a longer time to conduct my research and write my thesis there. Now more than a year later, this master thesis on *openness and commitment in the interreligious dialogue* is the result of a systematic theological reflection on the theological debate and an empirical research into the practice of intentional interreligious encounter in Malaysia.

This research could not have happened without the help of many people. First of all, I want to thank my interviewees, who took time to answer my questions and to share their experiences with and reflections on interreligious engagement. I would also like to thank my supervisors who have been of enormous help and guidance in this process. Prof. Dr. Benno van den Toren, for his help and inspiration in the initial stage of my research in finding a direction and focus. Dr. Sivin Kit who has been of vital help in introducing me to the interviewees, the Malaysian context, and to doing empirical research. And finally, Dr. Klaas Bom who has further guided me in my research by provided me time and again with new advice and feedback and who encouraged me to think critically. Last but not least, I am thankful to God for his blessings and strength and for the community of STM for welcoming me in their midst, for supporting me during the process of writing this thesis, and for providing me with advice, information, and especially with a lot of great food.

## 1. Introduction

“Being in all this interreligious encounter helped me to see God as a God that is truly God for all (...) God is not to be monopolized by just my own religion. I mean, I subscribe to Christianity, I believe in God and I think that Jesus is the perfect revelation, but having and knowing the truth, shouldn't negate my respect for other religions who also believe that God has revealed certain things to them”.

These are the words of Alexa Ho, one of the Malaysian Christians I interviewed as part of this research, expressing here how she wishes to combine her Christian faith with an open and respectful attitude in the interreligious encounter. However, the combination of a faithful commitment and deep openness in the interreligious dialogue is not necessarily considered to be self-evident. Speaking about the requirements for a fruitful interreligious dialogue, Catherine Cornille indicates that dialogue is neither possible when we are unwilling to listen or learn from the religious other, nor when we enter dialogue without something to contribute or witness to. Yet, as a result, Marianne Moyaert states that ‘every believer who engages in interreligious dialogue finds himself in a somewhat difficult situation, given that there appears to be no precise balance in the tense relationship between openness and faith commitment’.<sup>1</sup>

In this research, I wish to reflect on this, possible tense, relationship. While it would be possible to reflect on the relationship between openness and commitment in the interreligious dialogue from a purely systematic theological perspective, I wish to include the experiences and reflections of people who are regularly involved in practices of intentional interreligious encounter. For interreligious dialogue is above all, not something that happens in the mind, or only on a theoretical level, but in the real encounter with the religious other. In this research, I focus specifically on the experiences of Malaysian Christians. This leads to the following research question “*How does the practice of intentional interreligious encounter in Malaysia critically and constructively contribute to the theological debate on openness and commitment in the interreligious dialogue?*”. I believe that the relevance of this question is both found in the question of openness and commitment in the interreligious dialogue as well as in the conversation between the theological debate and the practice of intentional interreligious encounter in Malaysia.

First of all, I believe that due to globalization Christians, even in the West, can no longer avoid the question of how to relate to people of other faiths and more specifically how to be open to the religious other while being committed to their faith and/or bearing witness of Christ. Moreover, I

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<sup>1</sup> C. Cornille (ed.) *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013), xii-xiii; Marianne Moyaert. *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2011), 277.

believe that the question of openness and commitment relates to some central Christian convictions and values. As Christians we are called to love our God and to love our neighbour, to give witness and to open ourselves to the wider work of God in this world. Interreligious encounters may provide an important opportunity to do so. But while these encounters can become a source of blessing and enrichment, helping us to reflect on our faith and to deepen interpersonal relationships, they may also confront us with new or strange ideas about God or the world, raising important theological or practical questions, including the question how to relate our faith commitment to an openness to the religious other. As such, I believe it to be both relevant and meaningful to further reflect on the relationship between openness and commitment in the interreligious encounter.

Personally, I am also convinced of the relevance of this question. Growing up in a Christian Dutch bubble, interreligious encounters have for a long time not been really part of my life. However, in a more theoretical way, the knowledge of religious plurality posed the question how my Christian faith and my conviction that in Christ something unique and decisive has happened – that in Christ we meet God incarnate – relates to the faith and practices of the religious other. While I experienced this question as challenging, it was only after studying in India for five months that religious plurality became more a reality for me and the question more concrete and pressing. Here I met active Christians who wanted to live out and share their faith, and relate to and learn from their neighbours of a different faith. Sometimes with a clear priority on either witness or mutual learning but often searching for a way to combine them on a very practical level. This made me in a new way enthusiastic about interreligious dialogue but also hopeful and confident that honest commitment and genuine openness do not need to exclude each other. Besides that, it made me aware of the lived reality of interreligious encounter which takes place in a particular context and in concrete situations and relations, and which involves specific challenges, motivations, and experiences. This indicates something of my positionality but also shows why I am convinced of the added value of including the practical experiences and reflections of Malaysian Christians. The fact that the Malaysian context is so very different from the Dutch or Western context makes it even more interesting and may also offer new and surprising insights. The combination of a more theoretical theological discussion which is mainly based on the reflections of Western authors and an empirical research among Malaysian Christians leads not only to an interdisciplinary dialogue but also to an intercultural dialogue. Here, I am aware of my own Western context and background which influences my reflections and convictions, and which necessitates me to be constantly open to be confronted with my own presuppositions and blind spots.

The choice to reflect on the question of openness and commitment through a combination and conversation between a systematic and empirical research is thus a conscious one. As I already pointed out, one of the reasons to combine these two methods follows from the practical nature of

interreligious dialogue itself. Moreover, I believe that theologizing as 'faith seeking understanding' happens at different levels and is influenced by the context in which it takes place. In our theological reflection, we should thus take into account these different levels and their context.<sup>2</sup> Helen Cameron e.a. speak in their book 'Talking about God in practice' about the four voices of theology, which they introduce as a model for theological reflection. They distinguish 'normative theology' as the normative theological texts of a religious community, 'formal theology' as the theological reflection of the theologians, 'operant theology' as the theology that becomes visible in the practice of the faith community, and 'espoused theology' as the theological understanding of the faith community about what they believe and do.<sup>3</sup> Based on their own experiences with Theological Action Research, they state that research done into faith practices is 'theological all the way through'. Christian practices and the reflections of the practitioners bear theology and can be seen as an ongoing dynamic of God's revealing life. Therefore Cameron e.a. argue that we need to pay proper attention to these practices and reflections. Only in a genuine openness to hear these voices and in the conversation between voices 'an authentic practical insight can be disclosed'.<sup>4</sup>

In this thesis, I wish to contribute to the systematic theological reflection on openness and commitment in the interreligious dialogue by incorporating the insights derived from the experiences and reflections of those who are engaged in interreligious dialogue themselves. Or, in other words, to engage the 'espoused theology', arising from the interviews with ten Malaysian Christians, with the 'formal theology' represented by the theological reflections of the authors in chapter 3, in a mutual enriching way. First of all, because our academical and systematic reflection should and can only take place in relation to the Christian community. Secondly, because the experiences and reflections that are part of the operant and espoused theology also seek to respond to God's revelation and have a revealing function. And, finally, because the focus and form of our academical reflection is also shaped by a certain context.<sup>5</sup>

Bringing the different theological voices or levels together may help us to see more concrete where our academical reflection proves helpful and how it can guide and inform the faith and practice of the Christian community. Yet, more than that, I wish to focus in this thesis on how the espoused theology of the faith community, as brought forward in the results of my empirical research,

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel L. Migliore. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014), 9; Robert J. Schreiter. *Constructing Local Theologies* (Orbis Books, 1985), 75; Sarah Coakley. *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 48.

<sup>3</sup> Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti e.a. *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (Londen: SCM Press, 2010), 53-56.

<sup>4</sup> Cameron, *Talking About God in Practice*, 51-57.

<sup>5</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 16-18 and 75.

contributes to the academical reflection, by offering new, challenging, or contributing insights and by making us aware of how the academical reflection also takes place in and is shaped by a cultural context. Rather than just studying or describing the experiences and reflections of Malaysian Christians with openness and commitment in interreligious dialogue, I wish to truly incorporate their voice and take them serious as true partners in the dialogue. Jennifer Mason points out that a good way to uncover and explore lived faith, and to construct contextual, situated and insightful knowledge is through conscious listening and empirical research.<sup>6</sup> This is why I wish to combine a systematic and empirical approach in my reflection on openness and commitment in the interreligious dialogue, convinced that the practice of intentional interreligious encounter by Malaysian Christian indeed contributes to and enriches our systematic theological reflection. However, this requires me to pay deep and genuine attention for the insights that arise from my empirical research and to do justice to the particular nature of the different theological voices, by paying close and individual attention to their contributions. By first separately paying deep attention to the theoretical discussion and the empirical research, I wish to present both of them as equal contributors to the dialogue on openness and commitment in the interreligious encounter.

The main concepts, themes, theological ideas, and questions derived from the theoretical and systematic discussion on openness and commitment in Chapter 3, will provide the initial guidelines and the lens through which I look at the reflections and experiences that are brought forward by my empirical research. In the last paragraph of chapter 3 I will more deeply describe and indicate these concepts and ideas. A clear understanding of these concepts, ideas, questions and the debates between the authors, as well as a serious attentive and close listening to the interviewees, will allow me to see whether and how these ideas and questions connect to the experiences of the interviewees. However, I also wish to bring back the insights of the empirical research to the theory, so that they may sharpen or even adapt my theoretical lens and participate as true contributors to the theological dialogue. In an important way I will, therefore, use myself as a bridge or research tool to facilitate this dialogue. This requires me to remain alert, to reflect continuously, and to be open to reconsider certain assumptions, ideas or convictions, including my own. Therefore, I will constantly ask if the contributions of the authors are helpful for the practice of interreligious dialogue, if their questions or discussion are recognized or rather challenged by the reflections the interviewees, and where the reflections of the interviewees may offer insights that are lacking in the theological debate between the authors. Besides that, I will reflect on how these connections or difference are informed by contextual factors or theological foundations. This is only possible by close listening, by taking both

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<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Mason. *Qualitative Researching* (Sage Publications Ltd, third edition, 2017), 112-113 and 123-126.



contributions equally seriously, and by continuously checking or adapting provisional ideas, interpretations, and conclusions.

After an introductory chapter on the interreligious dialogue and the question of openness and commitment, I specifically focus, in the third chapter of this thesis, on four different authors who reflect on the question of openness and commitment. The authors who will be discussed are Catherine Cornille, Marianne Moyaert, Lesslie Newbigin, and Benno van den Toren. I have selected these authors because of their in-depth reflection on openness and commitment in the interreligious dialogue and their mutual differences, which make them interesting conversation partners. Limiting myself to four authors allows me to reflect deeper on their views and theological ideas. In the reflection on and comparison between the different authors, I focus on their understanding of openness and commitment and their interrelationship. More than that, I also reflect on their understanding is informed by underlying theological views and their cultural background and context.

In chapter 4, I concentrate on the Malaysian context, to gain a better understanding of the context in which the interviewees engage in interreligious dialogue. I believe this to be necessary mainly because of the big difference between the Malaysian and the Dutch or Western context. This also raises the interesting question of how context and background inform the reflection of both the interviewees, the authors discussed in chapter 3, and myself. I realized that, because of my own positionality, it often felt easier to reflect on the contextuality of the interviewees than on that of the authors. The latter required more effort from my side and especially close attention to the revealing and challenging contributions of the interviewees. Finally, chapter 4 will introduce the interviewees and explain why and how I have selected them. Although the group of interviewees is rather small, and as such not able to develop a definitive or comprehensive theory or argument, the interviewees and their reflections are diverse and rich enough to play an evocative function, generating 'telling' examples and new or deeper insights.

Chapter 5 gives an overview and analysis of the main experiences and reflections of Malaysian Christians concerning the practice of intentional interreligious encounter, based on ten in-depth semi-structured interviews of an hour on average, with ten different Malaysian Christians. Choosing in-depth interviews as my research methodology gives me, considering the limited time of this research, the best opportunity to hear their personal stories and experiences, and their reflections on the interreligious encounter – specifically the question of openness and commitment. Moreover, it allows me to be more flexible and sensitive, to ask more in-depth and exploring questions, and to check some of my reflections and initial conclusions in the following interviews. Because of the limited amount of interviews and my own limited experience with qualitative research, I choose to interview people who are mostly involved in interreligious dialogue in a more reflective way.

The interviews have a semi-structured character. I started my interviews with a question about the interviewees' personal experiences with interreligious dialogue. These stories provided the foundation for subsequent deeper questions. Besides that, I have more specifically asked questions about the interviewees' reasons to engage in dialogue, the results of dialogue, and their reflections about openness and commitment.<sup>7</sup> For my analysis I have transcribed the interviews. Because of the small amount of interviews and my limited knowledge of Atlas.ti, I chose to manually label and encode the interviews. Based on my transcripts I have selected all the relevant material and placed this, in separate short quotes, in a table. These quotes I have numbered and connected to one or a few keywords. Based on these keywords and some of the central points of the theological debate, I have limited myself to a few codes, like openness, commitment, purpose, and relationship to the other. Subsequently, I have connected the quotes to one or more codes. This has been the basis for my further analysis and has helped me to become aware of important and recurring themes, and to get a clear overview of people's reasons to engage in dialogue, their reflections about openness and so on.

In the interviews and the subsequent analysis, I use myself as a research tool to move between the theory and the experiences of the interviewees. The theory offering an initial framework and focus for my interviews. Thereafter, through the interviews, I became aware of certain differences, illustrations, or new insights that provide an enriching and challenging contribution to the theory. In doing so my positionality plays a role as well, which is not only formed by my context, ideas, and experiences, as described above, but also by what I have been reading about the subject. I expected for example that the experience with interreligious encounter must have raised theological challenges for the interviewees, not only about openness and commitment but also about how to understand religious plurality. Besides that, I assumed that people would be either having a very missional, dialogical, or social focus in the interreligious encounter, at the expense of each other. Through the literature but especially through the interviews some of these assumptions were challenged.

Finally, in the last chapter, the theory and the results of the interviews are brought together in conversation. The focus in this chapter is on how the insights and "telling" examples, that arise from the interviews, might critically and constructively contribute to the more theoretic, and theological debate on openness and commitment.<sup>8</sup> In this conversation, I wish to take both the theory and the empirical data seriously as mutual enriching conversation partners. In bringing both voices together, I have tried to be alert to where both reflections differ from or challenge each other, but also where they confirm, enrich, or enlighten each other. By paying attention to the theological and cultural context of the reflections, I wish to deepen the conversation, not only theologically but also interculturally.

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<sup>7</sup> The guideline for my interviews can be found in Appendix 1.

<sup>8</sup> Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, 63.

## 2. Interreligious Dialogue

### 2.1 The History, Nature, and Purpose of Interreligious Dialogue

Today religious diversity has for most people become an inescapable reality, being present in our daily lives. Nicholas J. Wood, director of the Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture, describes this as “conscious plurality”, ‘a genuine awareness of different faiths, cultures, and ethnicities’.<sup>9</sup> According to Paul F. Knitter, this knowledge of religious diversity, and especially the personal encounter with people of other faiths raises troubling or even painful questions for those who take their faith seriously.<sup>10</sup> These questions are not only theologically in nature but also concern more practical questions on how to live and interact with people of other faiths. While religious pluralism nor the practice of interreligious dialogue is not an entirely new phenomenon, one can say that the growing awareness of religious diversity has led to a growing attention for dialogue since the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> Moyaert speaks about a shift from the age of monologue to the age of dialogue, due to the modern ideal of equality, freedom of religion, respect for otherness, and tolerance. Other factors that, according to her, have contributed to this shift are the ecumenical movement, the process of decolonization, the horrors of the Holocaust, and globalization.<sup>12</sup> Even our definition of religion is, according to Van den Toren, part of interreligious dialogue. Definitions of religion are developed in particular religious traditions and reflect certain theological presuppositions.<sup>13</sup> We should thus prevent ourselves from imposing a notion of religion to a certain religious tradition that does not do justice to this tradition.<sup>14</sup> This makes it also difficult to give a general reflection on interreligious dialogue, for this is closely connected to the theological self-understanding of a religion and its understanding of its relationship to other religions.

Dialogue is thus increasingly regarded as a constructive and proper way for religions to relate to each other. This is illustrated by the fact that even the Lausanne Movement, in their Cape Town Commitment, chooses to affirm the proper place of dialogue with people of other faiths.<sup>15</sup> Earlier, the

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<sup>9</sup> Nicholas J. Wood. *Faith and Faithfulness: Pluralism, Dialogue, and Mission in the Work of Kenneth Cragg and Lesslie Newbigin* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 189.

<sup>10</sup> Paul F. Knitter. *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Cornille, *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion*, xii.

<sup>12</sup> David Cheetham, Douglass Pratt, and David Thomas (eds.). *Understanding Interreligious Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 195-198.

<sup>13</sup> Benno van den Toren. ‘Religion’. Lemma for the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Private Document, February 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Christoph Auffarth. ‘Religion’. *The Brill Dictionary of Religion* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2006), 1607-1619.

<sup>15</sup> Lausanne Congress. *The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith a Call to Action*. The Third Lausanne Congress, Lausanne Movement (2011). Saying, ‘we affirm the proper place of dialogue with people of other faiths (...) such dialogue combines confidence in the uniqueness of Christ and the truth of the gospel with respectful listening to the others’.

Second Vatican Council and the World Council of Churches (WCC) already stressed the importance of dialogue as a part of our Christian faith and life, the latter writing in their Aljaltoun Memorandum:

It is because of faith in God through Jesus Christ and because of our belief in the reality of Creation, the offer of Redemption, and the love of God shown in the Incarnation that we seek a positive relationship with men of other faiths.<sup>16</sup>

The quote points out that dialogue is not just an option, nor just a biblical task, but that it can be seen as indispensable in living by faith in today's world. The fact that we are sent into the world means that we cannot separate ourselves from the beliefs and practices of the world we live in.<sup>17</sup> Theological professor Notto R. Thelle, who worked and lived both in Norway and Japan, even claims that dialogue is fundamental to who we are as human beings, 'being human is to be in dialogue'.<sup>18</sup>

In his article '*Who, with, whom, about what? Exploring the Landscape of Inter-Religious Dialogue*', Volker Küster, professor of comparative religion and missiology, also argues for the need of dialogue, making a clear distinction between the theology of religions and the theology of dialogue. According to him, the theology of religions argues and takes place within the framework of a certain religion, while the theology of dialogue evolves out of the concrete encounter with the religious other and tries to integrate the different positions that are brought forward in the encounter. At the same time, he states that the theology of dialogue presupposes the theology of religions.<sup>19</sup> Moyaert points to the same when she says that 'the "theory" of the theology of religions has consequences for the "practice" of interreligious dialogue and for the tense dialogical relationship' between openness and identity.<sup>20</sup> In critique to the pluralist approach, Küster argues that every theology of religions that wishes to take seriously the claims and self-understanding of a religion will encounter the exclusivism-inclusivism dilemma. This raises the necessity and possibility of a theology of dialogue that takes into consideration the position of the other.<sup>21</sup> Dialogue creates, according to Küster a "third space", an "in-between", in which we can cross the boundaries of our own religious system to relate to the religious

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<sup>16</sup> WCC. Christians in Dialogue with Men of Other Faiths: the Aide-Mémoire of the Zürich Consultation. In *Living Faiths and the Ecumenical Movement*, Stanley J. Samartha (ed.) (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1971), 38.

<sup>17</sup> Timothy C. Tennent. *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002), 12.

<sup>18</sup> Notto R. Thelle. Interreligious Dialogue: Theory and Experience. In *Theology and the Religions: A Dialogue*, Viggo Mortensen (ed.) (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003), 130.

<sup>19</sup> Volker Küster. 'Who, with Whom, about What? Exploring the Landscape of Inter-Religious Dialogue' *Exchange* Vol 33, nr. 1 (2004), 74.

<sup>20</sup> Marianne Moyaert. "Recent Developments in the Theology of Interreligious Dialogue: From Soteriological Openness to Hermeneutical Openness". *Modern Theology* Vol. 28 (2012), 27.

<sup>21</sup> Küster, *Who, with Whom, about What?*, 76-77.

other in an open and respectful attitude, without giving up our loyalty to our own religion. It is a place in which we will bring something of our own religion but through the encounter it also becomes a place from which we can bring something back to our own religion.<sup>22</sup>

The third space is, according to Küster, 'a meeting place for the dialogue of life, a place of wisdom for the dialogue of the mind, and a place of spiritual experiences for the dialogue of heart'.<sup>23</sup> In pointing to the different ways in which the third space takes shape, he takes seriously the different forms and purposes of dialogue and how they relate to the participants and the context in which dialogue takes place. Dialogue in Malaysia, – a context where religion is clearly present in society but also causes different sensitivities – may, for example, take a different form or focus than dialogue in the Netherlands, where religion is not self-evident and the secular is often considered to be the neutral. The different types of dialogue all point to a meeting between people and Küster's understanding of the third space may actually create the space and opportunity for these various forms of encounter, relationship, and enrichment.

The different types of dialogue show us something of the different purposes that interreligious dialogue may have. First of all, interreligious dialogue wishes to contribute to peaceful and harmonious relationships between people of different faiths. Dialogue contributes to such relationships by helping the dialogue partners to grow in mutual understanding and respect, or as Thelle notes 'when I use the word "dialogue" here, I want to reserve it for the meaningful dialogue, the way of relating that aims at establishing trust, mutual respect, tolerance, or – one might hope – love'.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, dialogue gives the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of one's own religion and to learn from the teachings and practices of other religions.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, in dialogue, we share in our common experiences and struggles and are able to work together towards social change, justice, peace, and a hopeful future.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, as the WCC points out in its *Guidelines for Dialogue* (2002), 'as witnesses, we approach interreligious relations and dialogue in commitment to our faith'. In humility and integrity, we witness to God's reconciling work in Christ and simultaneously acknowledge the possibility of God's presence and work in other religions.<sup>27</sup> This points to the question of the relationship between dialogue and mission. Is dialogue a betrayal of mission or a tool for mission? And does dialogue require mission or

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<sup>22</sup> Küster, *Who, with Whom, about What?*, 90-92.

<sup>23</sup> Küster, *Who, with Whom, about What?*, 92.

<sup>24</sup> Thelle, *Interreligious Dialogue*, 130.

<sup>25</sup> Catherine Cornille (ed.). *Criteria of Discernment in Interreligious Dialogue* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2009) xix.

<sup>26</sup> WCC, *Christians in Dialogue*, 382.

<sup>27</sup> WCC. *Guidelines for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions*. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002). <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/2002/guidelines-for-dialogue-and-relations-with-people-of-other-religions>

makes a missional approach an open dialogue actually impossible? I believe that Küster makes a valuable point when he says that we shouldn't try to separate dialogue and mission or oppose them to each other, first of all, because mission has shown us that we need to take into account the perspectives of others and secondly because we can only enter into dialogue if we have a position to represent.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, their exact relationship in practice may remain open and a continuing search. Closely related to this is the question of the relationship between openness and commitment in dialogue, to which we will turn in the next paragraph.

## 2.2 Openness and Commitment in the Interreligious Dialogue

As we saw in the last paragraph, dialogue has been increasingly regarded as an important and enriching way to relate to people of other faith. In 1970 the WCC organized the Ajaltoun Consultation during which Buddhist, Christians, Hindus, and Muslims came together to discuss dialogue and the relations between people of different faith. Central to the consultation was the understanding that full and loyal commitment to one's own faith did not stand in the way of dialogue.<sup>29</sup> A few months later the Zürich consultation came together to reflect on the position of Christians in dialogue. One of the main questions during the consultation was about the proper relationship between dialogue and mission, or in the words of the aide-mémoire of the consultation 'What is the relation of God's economy of salvation in Jesus Christ to the economy of his presence and activity in the world, and in particular in the lives and traditions of men of other living faiths?'<sup>30</sup>

In his theological reflection on the consultation, professor in theology, David Jenkins responds to this question from the perspective of openness and commitment. According to him, commitment to one's own faith and openness to that of the other are necessary conditions for genuine dialogue.<sup>31</sup> This does not only apply to Christians but to everyone who engages in dialogue. Even though openness and commitment are not necessarily the only terms that are or can be used to describe the relationship between the role of one's own faith and one's attitude towards the religious other in dialogue, they function as quite general and useful terms to describe and reflect on this relationship.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Küster, *Who, with Whom, about What?*, 77-78.

<sup>29</sup> WCC. Dialogue between Men of Living Faiths: the Ajaltoun Memorandum. In *Living Faiths and the Ecumenical Movement*, Stanley J. Samartha (ed.) (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1971), 16.

<sup>30</sup> WCC, *Christians in Dialogue*, 36.

<sup>31</sup> David Jenkins. 'Commitment and Openness: a Theological Reflection' *International Review of Mission* IX, no. 236 (1970), 404-413. Jenkins claims that our Christian mission is to follow, proclaim, and find Christ. However, he argues that it is only together and in dialogue with people of other faiths that we come to discover the fullness of Christ. Mission thus needs to include a searching encounter between people of different faiths and commitment

<sup>32</sup> While openness and commitment are not the only terms that are used, or not always in this combination, to describe the relationship between one's own faith and that of the other in dialogue, the terms appear quite regularly in the literature on the interreligious dialogue. Besides that, they are often used in the reflection on the classical typologies of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.

However, this does not mean that the relationship between openness and commitment is by everyone interpreted in the same way. While Jenkins claims that our Christian commitment necessarily leads to an openness for the religious other, someone like Cornille also points to the tension that can be experienced between openness and commitment. According to her, interreligious dialogue involves 'a delicate and often difficult balance between commitment to one's own tradition and openness to the other'.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the various interpretations of openness and commitment and what they refer to are quite diverse. This is also the case for the theologians discussed in the next chapter. While they all agree that we should not oppose openness and commitment against one another but rather acknowledge that we need both in the interreligious encounter, they differ, however, in their ideas on how both should be interpreted and related.

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<sup>33</sup> Cornille, *Criteria of Discernment*, xiii.

### 3. The Theological Debate on Openness and Commitment in the Interreligious Dialogue

In the last chapter I concluded that there are various interpretations of openness and commitment and of their role and value in the interreligious dialogue. In this chapter I will reflect more specifically on four theologians, Catherine Cornille, Marianne Moyaert, Lesslie Newbigin, and Benno van den Toren, to see how they interpret and value openness and commitment and how they relate these to each other. Moreover, I want to recover how their views and reflections are informed by their theological convictions and the context in which they work and think. By bringing their views and ideas into conversation with each other, I hope to gain a deeper understanding of how we can or should understand openness and commitment, their role and/or value in dialogue and their proper relationship. The central notions or the important differences that arise in the conversation between the different authors will be used to sharpen my interview questions and my analysis of the interviews.

#### 3.1 Commitment

##### 3.1.1. Catherine Cornille

A fruitful interreligious dialogue should seek openness in commitment, and commitment in openness, according to the catholic theologian Catharine Cornille. Only then dialogue will be able to function as ‘a constructive engagement between religious texts, teachings, and practices’ in search for mutual growth and transformation.<sup>34</sup> In her argument for openness and commitment in dialogue, she follows the comparative theology approach, which argues for deep interreligious learning while staying rooted in a particular tradition. Cornille states that, in order to have a true dialogue through which growth and transformation become possible, participants should speak as representatives of their particular tradition and bring back the lessons and fruits from dialogue to their tradition.<sup>35</sup> More than that, she believes that it is important to search in our own tradition for reasons to engage in dialogue.

As a point of departure, tradition forms the foundation from which we engage in dialogue with other religions.<sup>36</sup> This foundation includes commitments; the both voluntary and involuntary assents to the truth-claims of a particular tradition.<sup>37</sup> According to Cornille, these commitments are mostly not only unavoidable in dialogue but they are also needed in order to prevent total relativism. Our tradition

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<sup>34</sup> Catherine Cornille. Conditions for the Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue on God. In *The Concept of God in Global Dialogue*, Werner J. Jeanrond and Ausulv Lande (eds.) (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 4; Cornille, *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion*, 20.

<sup>35</sup> Cornille, *Conditions*, 8.

<sup>36</sup> Catherine Cornille. *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2008), 60-61.

<sup>37</sup> Cornille, *The Im-Possibility*, 66.



works as a normative lens that provides focus and understanding in the interreligious dialogue, and our commitment encourages us to attest to the truth and validity of the beliefs and practices of our own tradition.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, our religious commitments function as normative criteria by which we evaluate and judge the truth and validity of the beliefs and practices of another religious tradition.<sup>39</sup> This is vital for an authentic and fruitful dialogue, for it makes true mutual enrichment possible. According to Cornille, our normative criteria do not need to limit the recognition of truth and validity in other religions either, if we approach them as a minimal standard – only excluding contradicting beliefs and practices. Dialogue may actually often helps us to become aware of our confessional criteria or reshape their content and interpretation.<sup>40</sup> Normative judgments need to be combined with an openness to correction and change.<sup>41</sup>

Cornille states that dialogue is always a dynamic two-way process, in which we not only proclaim but also seek; open to listen and learn. For we engage in dialogue to grow in our understanding of truth and the ultimate reality.<sup>42</sup> Based on a historical and dynamic understanding of truth, she argues for the de-absolutization of truth claims and a more humble attitude towards our commitments.<sup>43</sup> According to Cornille, this humility follows from an awareness of the transcendence and ineffability of the ultimate reality. Here she exemplifies what it means to find reasons to engage in dialogue in your own tradition. Referring to the catholic/Christian tradition of apophatic theology, she claims that if we understand the ultimate truth as being beyond our grasp, all doctrinal categories are at best regarded as approximate reflections of that truth.<sup>44</sup> Combined with the idea that what is truly ultimate is unified, she believes that this forms a strong base and reason to engage in dialogue.<sup>45</sup>

Interreligious dialogue thus becomes, according to Cornille, an important way to grow in our understanding of truth. However, this requires us to acknowledge the particularity of our religious expressions and that they can only approximate the truth. Consequently, we can only grow in our understanding of truth if we are open to include other perspectives in this search.<sup>46</sup> Although we need to acknowledge the relativity of our religious expression, this shouldn't lead to relativism. According to Cornille, relativism does not only do injustice to how we see and value our religious commitments, but it also makes dialogue impossible. Cornille argues that, although aware of the provisional, partial, and historical nature of truth, based on the Christian tradition we may believe and hope in the

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<sup>38</sup> Cheetham, *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, 332-333; Cornille, *The Im-Possibility*, 64 and 71.

<sup>39</sup> Cheetham, *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, 332-333.

<sup>40</sup> Cornille, *Criteria of Discernment*, x-xi; Cheetham, *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, 333-334.

<sup>41</sup> Cornille, *The Im-Possibility*, 73; Cornille, *Conditions*, 11.

<sup>42</sup> Cornille, *The Im-Possibility*, 71-73.

<sup>43</sup> Cornille, *Conditions*, 9-11; Cornille, *The Im-Possibility*, 31-33.

<sup>44</sup> Cornille, *The Im-Possibility*, 26.

<sup>45</sup> Cornille, *Conditions*, 13-14. Cornille believes that the idea of a unified reality is also in line with the Christian commitment to one God. God can then be seen as the unifying ground in which the truth of all religions meet.

<sup>46</sup> Cornille, *Conditions*, 14-15.

eschatological fulfillment of all goodness and truth. This can save us from a total relativization of truth while showing us that we need others to grow in our understanding of truth.<sup>47</sup>

In conclusion, if dialogue is done with religious commitment and in openness to the truth of other religions, it is able to preserve ‘the integrity and truth of one’s own fundamental religious conviction’, while offering ‘a privileged occasion for religious change and growth through the encounter with new ideas, images, practices, and principles’.<sup>48</sup>

### 3.1.2. Marianne Moyaert

According to Marianne Moyaert, professor of comparative theology at the VU in Amsterdam, the question of the ‘right’ balance between openness and commitment is about the relation between openness for the other and preservation of identity. This encourages her to reflect more deeply on the nature of identity and the relation between the self and the other.<sup>49</sup> In her reflection, she makes use of a comparative theological approach and of Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutical circle and the notions of fragility and vulnerability in his philosophical anthropology. As a catholic theologian, she argues that a comparative theological approach is a properly ecclesial exercise of *fides quaerens intellectum* in a pluralist context.<sup>50</sup>

In a reflection on the traditional approaches of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, Moyaert criticizes their soteriological approach and their failure to see and honour the particularity of other religious traditions.<sup>51</sup> According to Moyaert, this is taken more seriously in the particularist approach, that wishes to take seriously the role of faith commitments that form the identity of the believer. As an expression of the particularist model, Moyaert believes that comparative theology offers the possibility to understand the other in his or her otherness and to enrich and deepen our theological reflection.<sup>52</sup> This is possible through a hermeneutical openness, which, according to Moyaert, shows and openness for God’s transcendence by not determining a priori what is and what is not theologically meaningful.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Cornille, *The Im-Possibility*, 36 and 40.

<sup>48</sup> Cornille, *The Im-Possibility*, 92.

<sup>49</sup> Marianne Moyaert. *In Response to the Religious Other: Ricoeur and the Fragility of Interreligious Encounters* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2014), 88.

<sup>50</sup> Marianne Moyaert. ‘Theology Today: Comparative Theology as a Catholic Theological Approach’. *Theological Studies* Vol. 76, nr. 1 (2015), 49.

<sup>51</sup> Moyaert, *Recent Developments*, 26-27; Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 84, 86 and 100.

<sup>52</sup> Moyaert, *Recent Developments*, 26, 34-35 and 37-38. While Moyaert describes comparative theology as an expression of the particularist model she contrasts it with a postliberal particularism, that she connects to the cultural-linguistic theory of Lindbeck. According to her, the postliberal claim of the incommensurability and translatability of religions leads to a dichotomy and alienation between insiders and outsider.

<sup>53</sup> Cheetham, *Understanding*, 213; Moyaert, *Recent Developments*, 45.

However, Moyaert also underscores that comparative theology is based on a commitment to God and serves a theological interest, which means that the question of God must be posed.<sup>54</sup> The same holds for the interreligious dialogue, where ‘we gropingly ask where God comes into view and do so with an open attitude of hospitality’.<sup>55</sup> Hermeneutical openness for the other is “alternated” with theological reflection on the Christian faith commitment to God in a never-ending process.<sup>56</sup> Based on the work Paul Ricoeur, she explains the relationship between openness and commitment in the interreligious dialogue as a hermeneutical circle in which we constantly move back and forth between the familiar and the strange; between commitment and critical distancing.<sup>57</sup> While openness and deep learning should precede judgment, it is only through the appropriation of these newly discovered meanings in dialogue that we can be transformed and come to new understanding. This appropriation takes place when we ask what these new meanings tell us about God and how they affect our Christian thinking and living.<sup>58</sup>

Moyaert points out that we can never completely solve the tension between openness and commitment but that this is something that we need to continue to wrestle with. In this way, dialogue can actually become most fruitful and transformative.<sup>59</sup> However, this tension also evokes questions and feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability. In her book ‘Fragile Identities’ she relates this to the restlessness and vulnerability of our own human identity, notions that she derives from Ricoeur.<sup>60</sup> He describes how our identity or selfhood is a hermeneutical project; a never-ending journey, in which we depend on others to grow in wisdom and wholeness, to flourish, and to be transformed.<sup>61</sup> Dialogue is thus closely related to our personal self-understanding.

Simultaneously, according to Moyaert, it is exactly the fragility and incompleteness of the self that also opens a dialogical space between the self and the other and makes real encounter, in which we both give and take, possible.<sup>62</sup> This is a vulnerable undertaking because the insights we receive in dialogue may be disturbing or challenging, or we may become extra aware of and the contingencies that mark our religious identity and commitments. However, it is only in being open and vulnerable,

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<sup>54</sup> Moyaert, *Recent Developments*, 40.

<sup>55</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 267.

<sup>56</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 233-236; Moyaert, *Recent Developments*, 41 and 45.

<sup>57</sup> Moyaert, *Recent Developments*, 45.

<sup>58</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 272-273; Moyaert, *Recent Development*, 44-45. In doing so we do not only take seriously the challenge of the other but also our own faith commitment.

<sup>59</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 276; Moyaert, *Recent Developments*, 47.

<sup>60</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 279.

<sup>61</sup> Moyaert. *In Response to the Religious Other*, 19-22. Ricoeur states that our human identity can never be fully grasped and that as human beings we are never really complete or wholly at home within ourselves. This stands in contrast to René Descartes focus on the free, thinking subject. Instead, Ricoeur builds on, what Moyaert describes as the more tolerant, open-minded and dialogical spirit of the humanist tradition. A tradition that also embodied the wisdom of uncertainty and argued that wisdom comes from a variety of learning experiences. Diversity, relationality, and interdependence is part of what it means to be human.

<sup>62</sup> Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 13 and 22.

and by leaving our control and theological comfort zone behind that we can actually learn and grow.<sup>63</sup> The tension between what is absolute and what is relative in our commitments is something that may never be resolved, which gives our religious identity and testimony a sense of uncertainty and frailness. However, we also shouldn't resolve nor escape this uncertainty, because in doing so we risk absolutism or relativism.<sup>64</sup>

Based on Ricoeur, Moyaert concludes that we should accept this vulnerability in the interreligious encounter, for it is exactly in becoming vulnerable by opening ourselves to the other that we may receive fresh, challenging, and disturbing insights. When we choose to stand in the midst of the tensions between openness and commitment and appropriate the skill of hermeneutical openness we can be surprised by what we learn about God.<sup>65</sup>

### 3.1.3. Lesslie Newbigin

Lesslie Newbigin spent most of his working years in India. His experiences in this pluralistic context informed his reflections on the uniqueness of Christ in a pluralized world and the missional task of the church. After returning back to England, the contrast between these two contexts made him aware of the influence and dominance of the post-enlightenment culture in the West and the experienced crisis of Christian confidence. He argues that modern Western culture suffers from a loss of purpose and the rise of scepticism, due to a polarization between faith and reason, and objectivity and subjectivity. Like all other cultures, Western culture needs to be encountered by the gospel.<sup>66</sup> Based on his belief that the Christian mission rests upon a total and unconditional commitment to Jesus Christ – as the one in whom all authority arises – Newbigin puts forth the question how this commitment relates to all other unconditional commitments, whether they are religious or secular.<sup>67</sup> According to Newbigin, in the interreligious encounter, 'the Christian will meet his friend and neighbour of another faith as one who is committed to Jesus Christ as his ultimate authority'. We are called to bear witness in dialogue to the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, by which he has made himself present and known, and to the truth

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<sup>63</sup> Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 52, 55 and 84.

<sup>64</sup> Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 52-54 and 88; Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 284-291.

<sup>65</sup> Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 84; Moyaert, *Recent Development*, 47. Moyaert describes Ricoeur's perspective as a retrieval of the humanist traditions that seek wisdom in the midst of human diversity. Moyaert focuses on the learning and the vulnerability that we find in interreligious encounter reflects some of the notions that she describes as characteristic for the humanist tradition, for example, its appreciation of human limitation, the embracement of the diversity in ideas about the world, and man, and of the uncertainty that this may evoke.

<sup>66</sup> George R. Hunsberger. *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), 25.

<sup>67</sup> Lesslie Newbigin. *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 1978), 181; Lesslie Newbigin. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), 172. The sharp distinction between religious and secular affairs is according to Newbigin actually very Western. In most contexts, religious practice and thought are not separated from the rest of life.

that is found 'in a life of obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ'. Dialogue can only be integer and fruitful when we are open about our commitment.<sup>68</sup>

Newbigin argues that it is possible to have confidence in our faith claims and our commitment to Jesus Christ. Based on the work of Michael Polanyi, he argues that all knowledge requires personal commitments, just as all reasoning starts with an act of faith and develops in a certain historical tradition. As such he criticizes the sharp opposition in the West between observation and reason on the one hand and revelation and faith on the other.<sup>69</sup> While the Christian tradition takes its starting point for further reasoning in the events in which God made himself known, this does not make it less rational than a tradition that builds its reasoning on personal discovery. The distinction is not between reason and revelation – as something which is unreasonable – but between two traditions of rationality; between two plausibility structures.<sup>70</sup> As such, Newbigin points out that if we believe the Bible to be true and see God as the creator and sustainer of everything, he must be the object of our search for truth. More than that, if we believe that he has made himself known and present in the person and work of Jesus Christ, this gives us the confidence that truth is found in him.<sup>71</sup> Our commitment is thus an act of personal faith, of entrusting ourselves to the God who revealed himself in Christ. As such, our confidence is not based on our own knowledge but on God's faithfulness and grace.<sup>72</sup>

Newbigin acknowledges that this commitment may be rejected and that our claims may be challenged by other claims to universal validity. This means that we should engage in dialogue and explain and show how the Christian story enables us to understand and interpret our human existence and experience.<sup>73</sup> For if we believe our faith to be true, it can no longer be one opinion among others, instead, Gods revelation invites us to respond in belief and obedience.<sup>74</sup> Accordingly, Newbigin states

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<sup>68</sup> Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 185 and 187; Lesslie Newbigin. 'The Basis, Purpose and Manner of Inter-Faith Dialogue', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 30 nr. 3 (1977), 268; Lesslie Newbigin. 'Religion for the Market Place'. In *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*. Gavin D'Costa (ed.) (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 145.

<sup>69</sup> Lesslie Newbigin. *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 39, 43 and 46-47; Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 19-20 and 57. Newbigin criticizes the idea that doubt is more intellectually respectable than the assent to a creed. If we want to make contact with reality we should actually be confident to make claims that can be doubted. Moreover, he claims that while all forms of rationality are socially embodied, this does not need to lead to a total relativism (which is actually also a claim about reality).

<sup>70</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 57-63.

<sup>71</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 28 and 62-63. Newbigin further argues that we can only know that the cosmos and human life has a purpose and meaning when this is revealed to it. From a Christian perspective, this can only be found God the creator and sustainer of life, who has revealed himself in Christ.

<sup>72</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 65-67 and 95; Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 62. Based on Karl Barth, Newbigin argues that the possibility of knowing God is actualized in the fact that God does reveal himself and has revealed himself.

<sup>73</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 94-96; Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 65

<sup>74</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 65; Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 9.

that the starting point for meeting with people of other faith is that we have been laid hold by Jesus Christ to be his witness.<sup>75</sup> The grace of God's self-revelation should govern our witness, by informing our attitude and manner, by giving us the confidence to speak, and by reminding us that the purpose of witness is to glorify God.<sup>76</sup> Consequently, we cannot enter dialogue with the claim that we possess all truth and have nothing to learn. In the affirmation that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, we can only claim to be on the way that leads to the fullness of truth and we invite others to join.<sup>77</sup> We should enter dialogue with the openness to receive and to be challenged, yet this can never be separated from a confidence and commitment to the truth we find in Christ.<sup>78</sup>

#### 3.1.4. Benno van den Toren

In his article *'The Relationship between Christ and the Spirit in a Christian Theology'* Benno van den Toren, professor intercultural theology and previously a lecturer in systematic theology in the Central-African Republic, wishes to contribute to a specifically Christian theology of religions.<sup>79</sup> He argues for a dialogue in which commitment to God's supreme revelation in Christ can be combined with an openness for the wider work of the Spirit in other religious traditions.<sup>80</sup> He acknowledges that commitment to God's supreme revelation in Christ may often be a stumbling block for our dialogue partners and states that Christians, therefore, need to explain their conviction that this is essential to their understanding of God.<sup>81</sup> He himself attempts to do this in his book *Christian Apologetics as Cross-Cultural Dialogue*, where he argues for the need of apologetic witness and responds extensively to the challenges raised by a multicultural world as well as a western modern-postmodern culture.

The commitment to God's supreme revelation in Christ is, according to van den Toren, in line with the particular nature of the Christian faith, which believes that the one God – who is the Creator and Lord of the entire universe – has revealed himself in Jesus Christ in a particular time and context, yet as a blessing for all.<sup>82</sup> This revelation cannot be placed on par with other religious experiences. While this doesn't exclude the possibility of growth or deepening of our understanding, this has to be

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<sup>75</sup> Newbigin, *The Basis, Purpose and Manner*, 260.

<sup>76</sup> Newbigin, *The Basis, Purpose and Manner*, 265-266; Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 78.

<sup>77</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 12.

<sup>78</sup> Newbigin, *The Basis, Purpose and Manner*, 266-270.

<sup>79</sup> Benno van den Toren. 'The Relationship between Christ and the Spirit in a Christian Theology' *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XL, no. 3 (2012), 264. He argues that this is a legitimate starting point because all theologies of religions develop in the end from a particular tradition.

<sup>80</sup> Toren, *The Relationship between Christ and the Spirit*, 263.

<sup>81</sup> Toren, *The Relationship between Christ and the Spirit*, 270.

<sup>82</sup> Benno van den Toren. *Christian Apologetics as Cross-Cultural Dialogue* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 5.

always in correspondence with Gods revelation in Jesus Christ, in whom God made himself decisively present and active.<sup>83</sup>

Van den Toren acknowledges that faith in and commitment to God's supreme revelation in Jesus Christ is not an obvious choice in light of the postmodern conviction that our knowledge is embedded in a particular culture and language.<sup>84</sup> Although van den Toren agrees with this, he argues that this does not necessarily mean that the religious affirmations of a community cannot yield true and universal knowledge or that we cannot be in touch with a reality beyond our cultural and historical conditioning.<sup>85</sup> While we are not able to outline his whole thesis here, van den Toren's main argument is that we should replace the modern subject-object divide by a more biblical and realistic understanding in which 'the human being is seen as created in the image of God and part of the creation he indwells'. As such, we do not know the world as detached or neutral onlookers but by indwelling it. This implies that it is possible to have a valid understanding of reality but also that we need to start with a basic trust if we want to engage with and relate to reality.<sup>86</sup> Only in accepting our place within a wider network of relationships with God, the world, and the people around us, we are able to critically reflect further on the knowledge we have. According to van den Toren, 'we cannot understand the nature of our knowledge without considering both poles of the knowledge relationship'.<sup>87</sup>

Based on Karl Barth, he argues that this is especially true for theology because, in the words of Barth, 'it is only when we know God by his own grace and revelation that we can say something about the way in which this knowledge is possible'.<sup>88</sup> Only through God's self-revelation, we can have knowledge of God. According to van den Toren, God's revelation is sovereign, this means that it is God who decides how he makes himself known – it is a gift of grace. Moreover, God's revelation is particular and personal, it an invitation for a personal relationship and this cannot leave us unaffected but instead asks for a response and obedience.<sup>89</sup> This response should also characterize our commitment in

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<sup>83</sup> Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 205-206; Toren, *The Relationship between Christ and the Spirit*, 264, 272 and 274. Van den Toren further argues that Christ is not only the norm for discernment but also the goal of the work of the Spirit in other religions.

<sup>84</sup> Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 120 and 228.

<sup>85</sup> Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 17-18 and 60. Van den Toren argues for a critical realist understanding of the knowledge of God; which is according to him crucial to the Christian faith. It points to the conviction that, while being culturally embedded, it is not impossible to be in touch with reality itself, with the reality of God. According to van den Toren, this follows first of all from the nature of the reality under consideration; it is because of God's self-revelation that he can be known. Besides that he builds his claim on different arguments for a critical realist understanding of science (see p. 120-126).

<sup>86</sup> Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 118 and 127.

<sup>87</sup> Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 131-132 and 205.

<sup>88</sup> Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 131-132 and 138.

<sup>89</sup> Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 139-141.

dialogue, for as van den Toren says ‘their commitment to Christ and the desire to share what they have received in Him invites Christians to share what is most dear to them’.<sup>90</sup>

Besides that, van den Toren points out that Gods revelation is also an invitation to entrust ourselves to him. The finality of the knowledge of God in Christ is not based on our own knowledge or understanding but only on the God in whom we trust. God’s faithfulness provides a proper base for a confident faith, empowering us to give witness. At the same time, it also humbles us because truth is not found in our own knowledge.<sup>91</sup> Therefore, we should remain open for the broader work of the Spirit, while constantly redirecting and aligning our understanding of God with the reality that we find in the scriptures and specifically in Christ.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, we need to continually reflect critically on our faith and be willing to give (apologetic) witness of its truth and relevance.<sup>93</sup> Because of what we have received in Christ this witness should be profoundly part of our inter-religious encounters.<sup>94</sup>

## 3.2. Openness

### 3.2.1. Catherine Cornille

We already saw how Cornille describes the goal of dialogue as growth in our understanding of truth and the ultimate reality. This growth is only possible when we are open to other perspectives and to the possibility of change and transformation within our own tradition. We should recognize other religions as possible means of revelation and truth. In that way, truth may manifest itself in new and unexpected ways.<sup>95</sup> According to Cornille, participants in dialogue should search in their own religion for reasons to engage in dialogue or for a sense of interconnectedness with the religious other.<sup>96</sup> Openness to the truth in other religions asks for a spiritual and doctrinal or epistemic humility. This humility follows from the acknowledgement that we can only approximately know the truth, and it removes pride and preoccupation with our own thoughts and feelings but instead brings about an interest in and love towards the other and an openness to dialogue, listen, and learn.<sup>97</sup>

According to Cornille, dialogue needs an attitude of hospitality, which does not welcome the other in spite of religious differences but acknowledges and welcomes these differences as a source of truth.<sup>98</sup> According to Cornille, openness and hospitality follow in general from the ineffable and transcendent nature of the ultimate reality but more specific reasons for openness should also be

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<sup>90</sup> Toren, *The Relationship between Christ and the Spirit*, 276.

<sup>91</sup> Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 205-207 and 227.

<sup>92</sup> Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 207; Toren, *The Relationship between Christ and the Spirit*, 276.

<sup>93</sup> Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 27.

<sup>94</sup> Toren, *The Relationship between Christ and the Spirit*, 276.

<sup>95</sup> Cornille, *Conditions*, 14-16.

<sup>96</sup> Cornille, *The Im-possibility*, 97.

<sup>97</sup> Cornille, *The Im-possibility*, 13, 21-27 and 57.

<sup>98</sup> Cornille, *The Im-possibility*, 177.



sought in one's own particular religion. Interreligious dialogue is only possible when religions develop a self-understanding in which the 'teachings of other religions are somehow related or relevant for one's own religious conception of truth'. In this way, openness and commitment can both be effectively part of dialogue.<sup>99</sup>

### 3.2.2. Marianne Moyaert

According to Moyaert, the relationship between openness and commitment in the interreligious dialogue can be understood as a hermeneutical circle. We saw how this hermeneutical circle is characterized by a continuing 'alternation' between hermeneutical openness towards the religious other and theological reflection on the Christian faith commitment to God. According to Moyaert, hermeneutical openness is 'the *conditio sine qua non* of real dialogue'.<sup>100</sup> Through hermeneutical openness, we welcome the difference and we wish to understand the other in his or her otherness and self-understanding.<sup>101</sup> In the words of Moyaert, 'before judging, before assessing, before appreciating – either positively or negatively – the religious other deserves to be heard and understood'.<sup>102</sup> In order to genuinely and deeply learn from the other, we need to let go, listen, and imagine other ways of being in the world. As such, we may hope and expect to find new meanings.<sup>103</sup>

However, exactly these new meanings and insights may also challenge and disturb us because of their otherness and the possible friction they may evoke.<sup>104</sup> In opening ourselves to the religious other and in giving up our tendency to master the encounter, we are left in a vulnerable yet fruitful learning state. By appropriating the skill of hermeneutical openness and through the appropriation of newly discovered meanings in dialogue, we can be transformed, come to a new understanding, and be surprised by what we learn about God.<sup>105</sup>

According to Moyaert, openness to the other and to dialogue is actually a basic principle of theology. The Trinitarian character of the Christian faith, 'the dynamic and continuing character of Gods revelation and Gods involvement with creation and humankind', invites us to engage in dialogue and to not limit his revelation a priori. Discovering meaning is a dialogical event.<sup>106</sup> Finally, Moyaerts points out that we are called to hospitality and to welcome the stranger because we ourselves are

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<sup>99</sup> Cornille, *The Im-possibility*, 26 and 133; Cornille, *Conditions*, 14-16; Cornille, *Inter-religious Dialogue*, 25 and 30.

<sup>100</sup> Moyaert, *Recent Developments*, 46.

<sup>101</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 47-48.

<sup>102</sup> Moyaert, *Recent Developments*, 38.

<sup>103</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 234 and 244-246.

<sup>104</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 234; Moyaert, *Recent Developments*, 46.

<sup>105</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 46-47.

<sup>106</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 188-193.

strangers, living by God's grace. Moreover, God reveals himself in the stranger and we can only receive him in the stranger when he is no longer fixed to the familiar.<sup>107</sup>

### 3.2.3. Lesslie Newbigin

Earlier, we saw how Newbigin argues that the starting point for interreligious encounter is our calling to witness to Jesus Christ and to glorify God. This conviction is also leading in his reflection on openness to the religious other. According to Newbigin, the Trinity provides us with the real grammar of dialogue. He points out that if we want to glorify God in the interreligious encounter, 'we shall expect, look for, and welcome all signs of the grace of God at work in the lives of those who do not know Jesus Christ as Lord'.<sup>108</sup> This follows from the fact that we share a common nature as those created by the one God. We meet as children of one Father, eager to see and hear what God has given to our partners in dialogue.<sup>109</sup> More importantly, however, Newbigin points to the work of the Spirit who guides the church in discovering and receiving these gifts. Which implies that the church has still much to learn. We need to be eager to listen, to learn, and to receive from our partners in dialogue what God has given and shown to them, even when that might be new or strange to us. As such, we may even expect to profoundly change in dialogue, for in dialogue we expose ourselves to 'the shattering and upbuilding power of God the Spirit'.<sup>110</sup>

However, the work of the Spirit will never lead us beyond or away from Christ. Newbigin points out that it is actually because of our indebtedness to God's gracious revelation that we need to acknowledge that there is still a lot that we don't know. Our understanding of truth should remain open to revision and growth but always within the commitment to Jesus, who is the Way that leads to the fullness of truth.<sup>111</sup> In dialogue, we, therefore, do not meet the other as exclusive possessors of knowledge and salvation but we meet the other at 'the foot of the cross', where we receive judgment, which may even come to us through the words or life of the religious other. Furthermore, it is at the foot of the cross that we give witness to Jesus who is the Judge and Saviour of both me and my partner in dialogue.<sup>112</sup>

Finally, Newbigin argues that we participate in dialogue as members in the body of Christ, continuing his mission and bearing witness. According to Newbigin, this calls us, after the example of Jesus himself, to enter into the world in 'complete self-emptying and with complete exposure'. If we really want to meet our partner in dialogue we have to be so open that we can be moved by the faith

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<sup>107</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 265

<sup>108</sup> Newbigin, *Basis, Purpose and Manner*, 266; Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 180.

<sup>109</sup> Newbigin, *Basis, Purpose and Manner*, 266.

<sup>110</sup> Newbigin, *Basis, Purpose and Manner*, 266-269.

<sup>111</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 70 and 104.

<sup>112</sup> Newbigin, *Basis, Purpose and Manner*, 264-268.

of the other and that his or her way of looking at the world becomes a real possibility for us. But this is only possible when we are deeply rooted in Christ.<sup>113</sup>

### 3.2.3. Benno van den Toren

According to van den Toren, true dialogue is only possible when we engage in the right balance between openness and commitment. He states that, when we are open to recognize God's wider presence in the world through his Spirit, a commitment to the uniqueness of Christ does not need to stand in the way of genuine openness towards the religious other. Genuine openness that recognizes the other as other, that looks for the presence of God in his or her life, and which is open to learn more and receive a deeper understanding of God.<sup>114</sup> In the encounter with people of other faiths we should 'look for a diversified presence of God as Spirit, of God who is already present and at work' in them, and in their cultures and religions. These encounters may help us to come to a deeper or even new knowledge of Christ.<sup>115</sup> At the same time, however, van den Toren points out that the work of the Spirit cannot be separated from the work of Christ, more than that the Spirit's work should always lead us back to Christ. For, Christ is not only the norm but also the goal of the work of the Spirit in other religions.<sup>116</sup> He argues for a Trinitarian theology that will not fall for a Christological reductionism, nor for a separation of Christ and Spirit.<sup>117</sup>

Furthermore, van den Toren describes how genuine openness should be characterized by careful listening and a search for real understanding of our dialogue partners. The latter he describes as a hermeneutical process in which we need to understand others on their own terms.<sup>118</sup> Our attitude in the inter-religious encounter should reflect the God of whom we testify, showing genuine love and respect for our dialogue partner, encouraging the other to share his or her deepest beliefs and doubts and being honest about our own.<sup>119</sup> Finally, we need to engage in the interreligious encounter with a

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<sup>113</sup> Newbigin, *Basis, Purpose and Manner*, 267-268.

<sup>114</sup> Toren, *The Relationship between Christ and the Spirit*, 269-270.

<sup>115</sup> Toren, *The Relationship between Christ and the Spirit*, 269.

<sup>116</sup> Toren, *The Relationship between Christ and the Spirit*, 271-276. Van den Toren points here to a difference between the presence of the Spirit in the creation as a whole, and the Spirit who has become present through the eschatological victory of Christ and who has been given to the church at Pentecost. According to van den Toren, this shows the indispensable role of witness in the interreligious encounter. While dialogue shows us that we have much to learn from the religious other and the work of the Spirit in his or her life, the fact that the work of the Spirit will always be directed to Christ means that people need to hear the witness of the Christian community to make sense of it.

<sup>117</sup> Benno van den Toren. Discerning the Spirit in World Religions: The Search for Criteria. In *The Spirit is Moving: New Pathways in Pneumatology*, Cornelis van der Kooi and Gijsbert van den Brink (eds.) (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019), 226. Van den Toren says 'just as Christ came in order to give the Spirit, so the Spirit was given in order to bring humanity together under Christ'. But he also explains that the work of the Spirit remains partial on this side of the eschaton, we may thus discern signs of the Spirit where the name of Christ is still unknown.

<sup>118</sup> Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 173 and 223.

<sup>119</sup> Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 224-225.

humble attitude because of our limited understanding, but above all, because the universal truth of God, that is revealed in Christ, is just as much a gift to us as it is to others.<sup>120</sup>

### 3.3. A Reflection on the Theological Interpretations of Commitment and Openness in Dialogue

In the paragraphs above we have outlined the contributions and ideas of four different authors about the place and nature of commitment and openness in dialogue. In this paragraph we will bring their contributions into conversation with each other, to discover some of their main ideas and possible differences, frictions, or questions. These ideas, concepts, questions, and points of discussion provide the initial guidelines and lens to look at and reflect on the empirical results. I have tried to make this as concrete as possible by connecting these concepts or points of discussion to a series of questions, indicated in the section below, that I have used in my interviews and especially in my analysis afterwards. Through these questions and by using myself as a research tool I want to discover whether important convictions and ideas of the authors are recognized or shared by the interviewees, if their questions or debates are equally considered to be relevant, and where the interviews may offer new or surprising insights and as such critically and constructively contribute to the theoretical discussion.

The previous reflections on the contributions of the authors make clear that they all experience openness and commitment as important characteristics of dialogue. Moreover, they all agree about the proper place of testimony in dialogue and about dialogue as a way to learn and grow in our understanding of God. However, there are also some clear differences in their ideas about the specific character and scope of openness and commitment and their precise relationship to each other.

These differences seem to be first of all related to their understanding of the goal of dialogue. According to Cornille, dialogue serves a growth in our understanding of truth and the ultimate reality.<sup>121</sup> Moyaert also asserts that we look for God in dialogue.<sup>122</sup> As such, the question ‘who is God?’ becomes an important part of dialogue and the religious other is considered to be of central importance in the reflection on this question. According to Moyaert, we learn about God through the encounter with the religious other.<sup>123</sup> This is shared by van den Toren and Newbigin, who present dialogue as an opportunity to grow in our understanding of God, yet they emphasize that this is always the Trinitarian God. In dialogue, we grow in our understanding of the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. According to Newbigin, the proper basis of every encounter with people of other faiths

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<sup>120</sup> Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 226-227.

<sup>121</sup> Cornille, *Conditions*, 4; Cornille, *The Im-Possibility*, 73.

<sup>122</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 268

<sup>123</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 264; Moyaert, *Recent Developments*, 47.

lies in the fact that we have been laid hold by Jesus Christ to be his witness.<sup>124</sup> Van den Toren, further argues that this is always an apologetic witness because by testifying to Gods self-revelation in Jesus Christ we point to what we consider to be the most decisive reality and to what gives us reason to believe what we believe.<sup>125</sup> For the interviews, this raises the question of what their reasons are to engage in dialogue. Do they experience dialogue as an opportunity to learn from the other about God? Do they consider witness to be part of dialogue? And how do they relate this to each other? Moreover, how do they expect to learn more about God?

On a deeper level, these different understandings about the goal of dialogue seem to relate to some important differences between the authors in their epistemology and understanding of God. Here, Cornille and Moyaert on the one hand and Newbigin and van den Toren on the other hand, present two different positions. Nonetheless, it is important to note that they also share a lot in common when it comes to the value of openness and commitment or the manner of interreligious dialogue. While being aware of the genderedness of these two positions, I believe that this does not point to a deeper or broader connection with gender, for both positions are shared by both male and female theologians.

Coming back to the authors understanding of Reality, we saw how Cornille considers the ineffability of the ultimate reality not only as the basis of dialogue but also as something we come to realize through dialogue. This leads to an awareness of the contingency and particularity of our own beliefs and practices and a doctrinal humility.<sup>126</sup> Moyaert points to something similar when she says that we can only do justice and remain open to the mystery and transcendence of God by not determining a-priori what is and what is not theologically meaningful. God will reveal himself in the strange and unknown and thus should not be fixed or reduced to the familiar.<sup>127</sup> Their ontological understanding that God is ultimately ineffable and a mystery leads to the epistemological conclusion that we can never really know God. This makes absolute commitments irresponsible or even impossible, for we can never say anything definitive. Although Moyaert also argues that God is not completely unknown, the question of how this relates to Gods transcendent and mysterious nature remains a question to wrestle with.<sup>128</sup> Both Cornille and Moyaert relate this to the apophatic tradition and the eschatological hope of the fulfillment of truth, which they place in the Catholic Christian

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<sup>124</sup> Newbigin, *Basis, Purpose and Manner*, 260.

<sup>125</sup> Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 27 and 145.

<sup>126</sup> Cornille, *Conditions*, 14-15; Cornille, *The Im-Possibility*, 26.

<sup>127</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 272-273.

<sup>128</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 273. God is according to her neither fully transcendent nor fully immanent, God comes to us through mediation and so also our faith commitment is mediated. This means that we need to accept the lack of the immediate and the restlessness of our own faith.

tradition. Moreover, their focus on the development of our self-understanding and understanding of God, seems to replace a focus on Gods self-revelation.

Here we touch upon an important difference with Newbigin and van den Toren. They also acknowledge that Gods is never completely known, yet emphasize the Christian conviction that God has made himself known to us in Jesus Christ. They state that only through God's self-revelation knowledge becomes possible and we start to understand God's incomprehensibility. Christ is not first of all a dogma but an event and a person, which radically changes the way we can know God.<sup>129</sup> From an epistemological perspective, this means that we do not engage in a search for truth but that knowledge is only possible in relationship to God. Consequently Newbigin and van den Toren, both describe commitment first of all as a faithful response to Gods self-revelation, as an act of entrusting ourselves to the faithfulness of God in which we find confidence.<sup>130</sup> In this, they differ from Cornille and Moyaert who describe commitment mainly as part of the hermeneutical process.<sup>131</sup>

Cornille mainly speaks about commitment to one's faith tradition, which might reflect something of her own Catholic background and thinking. Tradition does not only represent a point of departure but also of return. At the same time, her focus on tradition stresses the dependency of human rationality and thinking on tradition and culture. According to her, this necessitates a de-absolutization of our truth claims. In line with this, Moyaert argues that comparative theology can be seen as a properly ecclesial exercise of *fides quaerens intellectum*, seeking fresh insights into the familiar truths handed down by tradition.<sup>132</sup> At the same time, Moyaert connects commitment to one's identity, which is itself a hermeneutical project and depending on others. Interreligious openness is for Moyaert closely related to one's journey to selfhood and the willingness to receive new ways of being.<sup>133</sup> Although I believe that she rightly asks attention for the role of identity in interreligious dialogue, I wonder whether she does not connect the practice of dialogue too much to the individual and his or her search for identity. Consequently, paying less attention to other factors that play an important role in dialogue, like the broader faith community or the role of one's social and cultural context. Moyaert argues that in dialogue the question of God must be asked but by building on Ricoeur her reflection on what happens in dialogue often seems to mainly revolve around the participant and his or her identity and journey to selfhood. In doing so she may reflect a more Western focus on personal identity and identity formation. Based on what we have discussed above, I would like to know how this relates to the interviewees' understanding of commitment. How is this connected to their

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<sup>129</sup> Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 131-132 and 206-207; Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 63-65

<sup>130</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 65-67; Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 207.

<sup>131</sup> Cornille, *The Im-Possibility*, 59; Moyaert, *Recent Developments*, 25-26.

<sup>132</sup> Moyaert, *Theology Today*, 56.

<sup>133</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 261.

understanding of God and the possibility of knowing God? And what is the role of faith, tradition, trust, or identity in this commitment? Do they also point to the necessity of humility and why?

Next, to what we mentioned above, the epistemology of the authors informs their ideas on how we arrive at openness and what constitutes or characterizes real openness towards the religious other. According to Cornille and Moyaert, openness to the religious other and to God's transcendence urges us to acknowledge that we can never really know the truth. Only through a continuing awareness of the particularity and contingency of our commitments, we can arrive at an open space in which we are truly able to be open and learn from the other.<sup>134</sup> Therefore, Moyaert argues for a necessary initial distance from our starting point in order to enter the hermeneutical circle. Dialogue needs to be this dynamic, never-ending interpreting process if it wants to be fruitful and truly open to God's transcendence and the religious other. Where this hermeneutical and dynamic process will lead us needs to remain open and is something we only come to discover in the dialogue itself.<sup>135</sup> Besides that, Cornille argues that the realization that we need one another in our search for truth and the conviction that the beliefs of the other are somehow related to our own conception of the ultimate reality is an important foundation for a sense of interconnectedness in dialogue.<sup>136</sup>

Moyaert and Cornille's understanding of openness seems to criticize some of the central affirmations made by Newbigin and van den Tooren. Their Christological focus and starting point forms an example of what Cornille and Moyaert may see as an a-priori decision about what is or can be true and, consequently, as an impediment to hermeneutical openness and genuine and deep mutual learning. Moyaert, furthermore, fears that a-priori decisions may close us off to the dynamic nature of dialogue and to the surprising work and presence of God's Spirit.<sup>137</sup> In contrast, both van den Tooren and Newbigin argue that such an approach does not take fully serious the nature of Christian faith commitments, and more than that, that it shows just as much an a-priori decision about what can or cannot be. The conviction that no one revelation can function as a universal criterion shows, according to them, also a certain claim about the nature of God and the way we come to understanding.<sup>138</sup>

For Newbigin, this follows for an important part from his reflections on the particular challenges of the Western culture and worldview to the Gospel. He argues that the fear and reserve to build our life on or enter dialogue with certain faith commitments follows from the rationalism, scepticism, and objective-subjective dualism that characterizes the Western worldview. As such, he claims that the idea that we come to a deeper understanding of truth by reasoning and questioning

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<sup>134</sup> Cornille, *The Im-Possibility*, 33; Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 52-53.

<sup>135</sup> Moyaert, *Recent Developments*, 41-21 and 45-47.

<sup>136</sup> Cornille, *The Im-Possibility*, 134-135.

<sup>137</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 188-193.

<sup>138</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 37-39; Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 57-63; Tooren, *Christian Apologetics*, 120-121.

and/or that we are not able to know the truth at all is very much influenced by a Western mindset. This risks to prevail the claim, that truth and reality are known in entrusting oneself to God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, which he considers being more true to the Christian faith. Newbigin's view on the specific context and challenge of modernism and postmodernism is shared by van den Toren. While he also critically reflects on the Western post-modern context, his approach is more specifically influenced by Karl Barth and his reflections on revelation, knowledge, and faith and reason. I believe that van den Toren's statement that knowledge follows from God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ in whom we find truth offers a true and important contribution to our reflection on the interreligious dialogue and the place of openness and commitment. However, Cornille shows that his conviction and interpretation is not generally shared, for she rather chooses to stress the apophatic tradition, the ineffability of God, and the partiality of our understanding. Nevertheless, I believe that the approach of van den Toren and Newbigin deserves more attention in her reflection on how the ineffability of God relates to his self-revelation and what this means for our knowledge. Coming back to Newbigin's reflection and critique on the Western mindset, and specifically his view on how we come to truth, I think this also poses questions to the hermeneutical or comparative approach of Moyaert and Cornille. While Newbigin does not deny the positive contribution of these approaches, he argues that from a Christian perspective they alone will not bring us to a deeper understanding of reality. In my opinion, this critique deserves more serious attention from Cornille and Moyaert, and wonder if this critique also appears in or is supported by the reflections of the interviewees?

According to van den Toren and Newbigin, the faith claim that we find truth in Christ and in relationship with God does not close us off but actually opens us to the religious other. First of all, according to Newbigin, because we meet as children of one Father. And, secondly, because our confession of the truth is part of a continual indebtedness to grace, which should inform our attitude in dialogue. More important, however, this indicates that our proper meeting place is at the cross, where we and our partners in dialogue equally meet Jesus as our Judge and Saviour. Rooted in Christ we can enter the world in complete self-emptying.<sup>139</sup> Furthermore, both van den Toren and Newbigin, place our openness to the other in a Trinitarian perspective. According to Newbigin, the Spirit may use dialogue to change us and to point us to the riches of God given to the world in order to glorify Christ.<sup>140</sup> Van den Toren states that we also look for the presence and work of God as Spirit in the lives, culture, and religion of the people we meet, in order to learn.<sup>141</sup> In relation to the interviews, this raises the question of how the interviewees see and understand openness. What, does according to them, constitute or build true openness in dialogue and how do they relate this to their own faith or

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<sup>139</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 70; Newbigin, *Basis, Purpose and Manner*, 264-268.

<sup>140</sup> Newbigin, *Basis, Purpose and Manner*, 269-270.

<sup>141</sup> Toren, *The Relationship between Christ and the Spirit*, 269-270.



commitments? Do they experience a challenge between mutual openness and learning and a commitment to Christ? How do they experience the role of the Spirit in dialogue? And have they been surprised by what they learn in dialogue?

Another important aspect in the reflections of the authors focuses on our self-experience and attitude in dialogue. Cornille stresses the importance of humility, both spirituality and doctrinally, which is not only a prerequisite but also a consequence of dialogue.<sup>142</sup> Van den Toren also points to the importance of humility in dialogue. Yet, where Cornille connects the idea of doctrinal humility to the ineffability of God, van den Toren links humility to the fact that the truth which we have found in Jesus Christ is Gods gracious gift and not the result of our own knowledge. Yet, because it is a gift and not depending on ourselves, this may also empower us.<sup>143</sup>

Moyaert pays close attention to the individual feelings and experiences in dialogue, taking serious the fragility and vulnerability that one may experience in the interreligious encounter. A vulnerability, however, which also allows us to be really open.<sup>144</sup> The value of vulnerability in the interreligious encounter is shared by Newbigin. According to him, this allows us to be exposed to the shattering and upbuilding power of the Spirit. But, he also indicates that this complete exposure is only possible when we are rooted in the life of the Church and in Christ.<sup>145</sup> Where Moyaert focusses on the relationship between our faith identity and an openness to the religious other, Newbigin points to the role of our relationship to God and our faith community for our foundation. The importance of the latter is underscored by Cornille who describes one's tradition as essential to dialogue.<sup>146</sup> While Moyaert rightly pays attention to the personal experiences that play a role in dialogue, I believe that Newbigin and Cornille do add some important notions. The relationship to God and the broader faith community may offer a context in which we are not left completely vulnerable in dialogue. In relation to this, I am interested in the personal experiences of the interviewees in the interreligious encounter. Is Moyaert's concept of vulnerability reflected in the experiences of the interviewees or do they raise different insights? Do they also experience wrestling or fragility in the interreligious dialogue? How do they see their relationship with God and the broader faith community and does this effect their experiences in dialogue? Finally, I want to know if they experience interreligious encounters as enriching, challenging, or maybe as strengthening, to see if this reflects or questions the ideas and reflections of the authors. Where do they experience wrestling, where are they enriched, and why or how?

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<sup>142</sup> Cornille, *The-Impossibility*, 11.

<sup>143</sup> Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 226-227.

<sup>144</sup> Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 50-53.

<sup>145</sup> Newbigin, *Basis, Purpose and Manner*, 267-268.

<sup>146</sup> Cornille, *The Im-Possibility*, 60.

## 4. The Malaysian Context

### 4.1. The Political and Social Context

In his book *Proclaiming the Peacemaker*, about the Malaysian Church as an agent of reconciliation in a multicultural society, Peter Rowans describes Malaysia as a relatively small but diverse and complex modern nation, a crossroad of the world's religions due to its diversity and geographical location.<sup>147</sup> This ethnic and religious diversity plays an important role in Malaysia's society and politics, consequently also affecting the position and possible role of the church and, especially relevant for this thesis, the role and practice of interreligious dialogue. It is for this reason that I wish to give a basic description of the Malaysian context and the position of the Malaysian church, in order to understand how this might influence the practice of interreligious dialogue and inform the views and attitudes of the people I have interviewed.

In 2010 the total population of Malaysia was 28.3 million, the majority (67.4%) being Bumiputera ("son of the soil": the ethnic Malays and different indigenous communities). The rest of Malaysia's populations consist mainly of citizens with Chinese or Indian ethnicity, most of them descendants of the large groups of migrants who came to Malaysia during the second half of the nineteenth century. While they have become an integral part of the Malaysian society, contributing a lot to the formation and development of the nation, their presence has also raised and influenced the opposition or even tension between the Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera.<sup>148</sup> After the independence, the Chinese and Indians were able to maintain their place in the local economy and receive limited citizenship, in return for special rights and privileges for the Malay community, mostly related to Islam and Malay customs and culture.<sup>149</sup>

Besides its ethnic diversity, Malaysia is also characterized by religious diversity. The majority (61.3%) of Malaysia's population is Muslim (including almost all Malays), other religions that are present are Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Chinese Religions, etc. Christians make up around 9% of the population, of which the majority lives in East-Malaysia. However, ethnicity and religion have increasingly become more closely connected to each other, illustrated in the fact that the special

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<sup>147</sup> Peter Rowans. *Proclaiming the Peacemaker: The Malaysian Church as an Agent of Reconciliation in a Multicultural Society* (Oxford, UK: Regnum Books International, 2012), 57.

<sup>148</sup> Abdul Rahman Embong. The Culture and Practice of Pluralism in Postcolonial Malaysia. In *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 59; Robert W. Hefner. Multiculturalism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. In *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 19.

<sup>149</sup> Rowans, *Proclaiming the Peacemaker*, 158.

position of the Malays often includes a special position of Islam.<sup>150</sup> Although many examples of pluralistic tolerance can be found in Malaysia, these ethical and religious differences continue to play a role in society, as well as in the broader discussion on the law, constitution, and religious freedom in Malaysia. In the words of Sivin Kit, lecturer in religious studies and director of the centre for religion and society in Malaysia:

Therefore, while it is undeniable that Christians live in a relatively peaceful and safe environment, nonetheless this tolerant coexistence between the Muslim-majority and remaining non-Muslim minority has experienced sustained governmental and social pressure in recent years particularly for Christians, who represent just 9.6 percent of the population.<sup>151</sup>

The governmental and social pressure he is talking about is due to different reasons. One of the reasons is the increased presence of Islamization, which is partly the result of the government's policy in response to the growing influence of the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), a party that has as its long-term goal the creation of an Islamic state.<sup>152</sup> But on a more fundamental level, the growing governmental and social pressure are also part of the unclear, ambiguous and sometimes even tense relationship between the Islamic law and the civil law.<sup>153</sup> Article 3 (1) of the Constitution states 'Islam is the religion of the Federation; but other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony in any part of the federation'.<sup>154</sup> In practice, this means that, although the constitution guarantees freedom of religion, this is challenged by the official status of Islam, which emphasizes its special position and that of the Muslim-Malay community.<sup>155</sup> This becomes visible, among other things, in Article 11 of the constitution where the first clause emphasizes the freedom of religion, but where some of the following clauses point to certain restriction or limits to this freedom.<sup>156</sup>

According to Kit, religion and politics are for the Muslim-majority in the country often not clearly separated, both institutionally and culturally, which influences politics and society and

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<sup>150</sup> Hefner, *Multiculturalism and Citizenship*, 22; Joseph Chinyong Liow. Prospects for Civil Education and Multiculturalism in "ketuanon melayu" Malaysia. In *Religious Education and the Challenge of Pluralism*, ed. Adam B. Seligman (Oxford University Press, 2019), 176.

<sup>151</sup> Sivin Kit. 'Christian Participation and Creative Resistance: Reflecting on Luther's two-fold Governance in Muslim-Majority Malaysia' *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 56 nr. 3 (2017), 262.

<sup>152</sup> Cheetham, *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, 225; Rowans, *Proclaiming the Peacemaker*, 200.

<sup>153</sup> Andrew Harding. 'Malaysia: Religious Pluralism and the Constitution in a Contested Polity' *Middle East Law and Government* 4 (2012), 383.

<sup>154</sup> Taken from the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, published by the commissioner of law revision Malaysia (fifteenth reprint; 2010).

<sup>155</sup> Harding, *Malaysia*, 372; Seng Guan Yeoh. 'Managing Sensitivities: Religious Pluralism, Civil Society and Inter-faith Relations in Malaysia' *The Round Table* 94 nr. 382 (2005), 633.

<sup>156</sup> Hefner, *Multiculturalism and Citizenship*, 368.

therefore also the church. He cites the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Taoism, that highlighted that these restrictions and the increased current religious intolerance have caused an erosion of their public liberties. According to them, this has to do, among other things, with unclear policies or questions that have occurred in the process of judicial reviews and specific cases.<sup>157</sup> Examples of these restrictions to religious freedom are the problematic and sensitive issues of proclamation and apostasy, the influence of Islamic morality on the state law and therefore also on non-Muslims citizens, and the experienced difficulties in finding land to build temples or churches or in using the name of 'Allah' for God.<sup>158</sup> According to Kang-San Tan, the director of BMS World Mission and former executive director of AsiaCMS, the close connection between religion and ethnicity makes that the conjunctions of ethnicity and political power not only contribute to the polarization of race but also of the religious commitments of the people in Malaysia. As such, interreligious relations are deeply affected by racial perceptions between different ethnic groups.<sup>159</sup> Tan even argues that there is no such thing as a purely religious conversation in Asia.<sup>160</sup>

#### 4.2. The Malaysian Church

The political and social situation in Malaysia clearly affects the role and position of the church. Not only does the church find itself in an ethnic and religious minority position, but Christians are also affected by certain restrictions and infringements of their civil and religious freedom. However, according to Rowans, this should not lead the Malaysian church to become introspective or preoccupied with its own survival.<sup>161</sup> Instead, the fact that she exists as a multi-ethnic community in a divided society, should motivate her to become an agent of peacebuilding and reconciliation. The unique fact that she has not one single or dominant ethnic identity, contrary to other religious groups in Malaysia, raises some internal challenges but also gives her the possibility to work on positive interethnic relations and on interfaith trust and cooperation. Based on the research he has conducted among Malaysian churches, he points out that this is the wish of most Christians but that in practice many churches are still more inward-focused, showing little involvement in peacemaking and reconciliation initiatives, and national commitment.<sup>162</sup> According to Rowans, this has to do with

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<sup>157</sup> Kit, *Christian Participation*, 262-263.

<sup>158</sup> Yeoh, *Managing Sensitivities*, 633-635.

<sup>159</sup> Kang-San Tan. *Evangelical Missiology from an East Asian Perspective: a Study on Christian Encounter with People of Other Faiths*. In *Global Missiology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, William D. Taylor (ed.) (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2000), 298.

<sup>160</sup> Tan, *Evangelical Missiology*, 299.

<sup>161</sup> Peter Rowans is UK national director of OMF international and has previously worked for more than ten years with OMF in East Asia. His book 'Proclaiming the Peacemaker' focuses on the challenges that shape the mission and role of the Malaysian church. Rowans approaches this question from both theological, historical and sociological components, in which he specifically focusses on the need for a Malaysian Christian self-identity.

<sup>162</sup> Rowans, *Proclaiming the Peacemaker*, 107.

different factors, like its internal segregation, its minority position and sensitive interfaith relation to Malay Muslims, and a lack of confidence in how the gospel can actually contribute to peace and reconciliation.<sup>163</sup> Rowans claims that this points to the need for the development of a strong Malaysian-Christian identity and self-understanding. Here he strongly builds on Hwa Yung, bishop emeritus of the Methodist church in Malaysia, who says,

If they (Christians) have no clear sense of identity of who they are in Christ... it is impossible for them to proclaim the gospel with confidence and clarity. Or, they may have a clear sense of identity and dignity in Christ, but nevertheless lack confidence and rootedness in their own culture, and cannot celebrate what is good therein.<sup>164</sup>

According to Hwa, Christians need to recover their Asian Christian heritage. Christianity in Asia is often accused of being a Western religion and according to Hwa this idea is so strong that Malaysian Christians themselves seem to believe it.<sup>165</sup> Instead, he argues for a kingdom identity that combines a Christian identity as member of the body of Christ with an identity that is rooted in one's own culture and society.<sup>166</sup> This is underscored by Tan, who claims that a Christian identity is first of all rooted in Jesus Christ but that it is, among others, also formed by one's social and religious context, including other philosophical and religious traditions.<sup>167</sup> Finally, Rowans argues that a more confident Christian identity, rooted in the Malaysian context, will contribute to the church's ability to relate and 'to reach out to the 'other' and to co-operate with non-Christian communities in Malaysia.<sup>168</sup>

The relationship and co-operation with people of other faiths is also strongly emphasized by Kit, who states that it is not only the issue of religious freedom that affects Malaysian Christians. According to him, the relations of Christians to people of other faiths, especially Muslims, are often challenged and hindered by a lack of interreligious understanding or prejudices. Therefore, grass-root face-to-face encounters are needed to grow in mutual understanding.<sup>169</sup> In a context where interreligious issues continue to play a role, ultimately interreligious and intercultural collaboration is needed to create solidarity and work for the common good.<sup>170</sup> Besides that, Rowans argues for the importance of friendship and relationships between people of different faiths, making reconciliation

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<sup>163</sup> Rowans, *Proclaiming the Peacemaker*, 141 and 146.

<sup>164</sup> Rowans, *Proclaiming the Peacemaker*, 192. See, Hwa Yung, "Kingdom Identity and Christian Mission" *Mission Round Table* 3, nr. 2 (2008), pp. 2-12.

<sup>165</sup> Rowans, *Proclaiming the Peacemaker*, 194.

<sup>166</sup> Rowans, *Proclaiming the Peacemaker*, 192.

<sup>167</sup> Kang-Sang Tan. 'The Inter-Religious Frontier: A "Buddhist-Christian" Contribution' *Mission Studies* 31 (2014), 146 and 152.

<sup>168</sup> Rowans, *Proclaiming the Peacemaker*, 196-197.

<sup>169</sup> Kit, *Christian Participation*, 263-264.

<sup>170</sup> Kit, *Christian Participation*, 268-269.

possible and offering a necessary base for genuine and respectful dialogue and cooperation.<sup>171</sup> In short, a confident Christian-Malaysian identity can give Christians in Malaysia the confidence to relate to the other, in openness and acceptance. Such an attitude enables not only mutual understanding but also the possibility of co-operation for the common good and the wellbeing of the nation.

The reflection above shows how interreligious dialogue and engagement are seen as both important and necessary means to build the society and better relationships in a country characterized by rich diversity but also suffering from ethnic and religious separation and misunderstanding. The important place of religion in Malaysia, its religious diversity, and the interconnection between one's religious and ethnic or cultural identity offers not only a suitable but also a very interesting context to study interreligious dialogue and encounter. Interesting as well because of its profound differences with the Dutch and/or Western context, where religion is less present and often more private. Whereas interreligious dialogue in the Western context is often restricted to a theological exchange or to the personal interests of some people, dialogue in Malaysia is inevitably but also necessary part of peoples lived realities. Hence, the question arises whether Western reflections on interreligious dialogue always do justice to the Malaysian context and especially to the experiences of Malaysian Christians in the interreligious encounter. This is one of the reasons why we will look in the next chapter to the experiences of Malaysian Christians with intentional interreligious encounter – especially the relationship between openness and commitment – and reflect on how these experiences relate to the theoretical debate on openness and commitment.

#### 4.3. Introduction of the Interviewees

The material in the next chapter is based on my interviews with ten Malaysian Christians who are intentionally, and mostly more reflexively engaged in interreligious encounters. Although in different ways, most of them are involved at a bit more higher or official level, yet they also bring in more grassroots experiences. Together, the people I have interviewed display a variety of experiences with and reflections on the interreligious encounter, and more specifically concerning the question of openness and commitment. Moreover, they themselves represent a diverse group of people in sense of age, gender, and church background, and embodying different reasons and ways to engage in dialogue. This has been a conscious choice because of the relatively small group of interviewees. Furthermore, it is important to note that all my interviewees are Chinese- and Indian Malaysians from

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<sup>171</sup> Rowans, *Proclaiming the Peacemaker*, 170. The importance of friendships and relationships with people of other faiths might also reflect an orientation on the community, which, according to Hwa, characterizes Asian culture. According to him, Asian worldviews, for example, often prioritize relationships over principles in contrast to a Western moral perspective. See, Hwa Yung. 'Towards an Evangelical Approach to Religions and Cultures', *Transformation* 17: 3 (2000), 90.

West-Malaysia and thus speak about their experiences there. As such, the results can and do only refer to the West-Malaysian context and situation.

Dr. Sivin Kit, my guide and lecturer at STM, has provided me with a large group of possible interviewees. Based on his suggestions I have selected a group that includes both male and female, people from the age of 30 to 60, and from different church backgrounds. The latter is especially relevant because the different church denomination in Malaysia holds quite different perspectives on interreligious dialogue. The Roman Catholic church, for example, has its own ministry of ecumenical and inter-religious affairs, encouraging every parish to be actively involved in interfaith engagement. Evangelical churches on the other hand often have various committees that focus on mission or evangelisation, but not often one that focuses specifically on inter-religious dialogue. Initially, most of my interviewees were involved in forms of dialogue that were focussed on building better relationships or working toward a better and more united Malaysia. With the help of Sivin Kit I was able to find two people who are more involved from an apologetical approach. Finally, I chose to include two people who engage in dialogue with a clearer missional perspective or approach.

While I am aware, that this relatively small group of people that I have interviewed will not be able to represent the whole range of experiences of Christians in Malaysia, I believe that the group is diverse and representative enough to allow their experiences and reflections to be ‘telling’ examples and to offer relevant and grounded insights that may contribute to our understanding of openness commitment debate in dialogue.

<b>Interviewee *</b>	<b>Interreligious Involvement</b>	<b>Church Background</b>
<b>1. Samuel Nesan</b>	Pastor and apologist	Baptist
<b>2. Living Lee</b>	Apologist. Former professor in Geology	Baptist
<b>3. Alexa Ho</b>	Kairos Dialogue Network and Safe Space. Former pastor.	Evangelical Free Church
<b>4. Jacqueline Rajan</b> (Not her real name for privacy reasons)	Harmony Work Facilitation and Building Bridges	Roman Catholic
<b>5. May Leong</b>	Social Empowerment Work	Methodist
<b>6. Eugene Yapp</b>	Kairos Dialogue Network and director of RFL partnership (an organisation for the promotion of religious freedom for all people in Malaysia)	City Discipleship Presbyterian Church
<b>7. Clarence Devadass</b>	Catholic Research Centre	Roman Catholic
<b>8. Lyon Chua</b>	Fellowship Evangelical Students Malaysia	International Network of Churches (An Australian Network)

<b>9. Rachel Chan</b> (Not her real name for privacy reasons)	Migrant Ministry	Independent Church (A Christian fellowship focused on raising missional leaders)
<b>10. Jason Leong</b>	Christians for Peace and Harmony Malaysia	Damansara Utama Methodist Church (DUMC) (A modern intergenerational cell church)

\* With the consent of the interviewees I refer to them by their real names, except for Jacqueline Rajan and Rachel Chan who preferred to be not know under their own name.



## 5. The Practice of Intentional Interreligious Encounter by Malaysian Christians

'I think the theology of interreligious engagement is very much lived in Asia' – Clarence Devadess<sup>172</sup>

After we have looked in the previous chapters at the theological debate on openness and commitment in the interreligious dialogue and to the Malaysian context, we move in this chapter to an analysis of the experiences with and reflections on interreligious encounter by Malaysian Christians. I have analysed the interviews by looking at how openness and commitment occur in these interviews. While mostly not named literally, except in response to specific questions, various experiences and reflections that are brought up in the interviews are definitely linked to the theme of openness and commitment. However, in order not to restrict myself to these two topics and consequently closing myself for other themes or questions that might play a role in people's personal experiences with interreligious encounter, I have also focused on more general themes like their attitude, starting point, and experiences.

This chapter starts with a paragraph about the reasons for the interviewees to engage in dialogue. Do they, for example, engage in dialogue with the hope to learn more about God or with the hope to give witness of their faith? I believe this to be a relevant question because we saw in chapter 3 how the understanding of the authors about the goal of dialogue informed their understanding of openness and commitment. In this paragraph, there is specific attention for the role of context. The second paragraph focusses on the interviewees' understanding of openness and commitment and whether they experience it as an important topic or challenge. I look at how they understand and value openness and commitment and whether this is linked to notions like humility or flexibility. Besides that, I look at how they relate both to each other and to their faith. The third paragraph pays specific attention to the theme of relationship because this was by far the most recurring theme in the interviews, both concerning the religious other and God. Moreover, I believe that this may offer a fruitful way to think about the connection between openness and commitment. Finally, the last paragraph of this chapter focusses on the results of dialogue. Have the experiences with interreligious encounter challenge, strengthened, changed, or enriched the interviewees? And does this relate to the concepts of vulnerability and fragility? However, before we come back to that, we will first look at the purpose and reasons of people to engage in interreligious dialogue.

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<sup>172</sup> Clarence Devadess, *Interview 7* (Kuala Lumpur, 3 April 2019), 7.66.

## 5.1 Purposes or Reasons to Engage in Dialogue

‘Who asked you to talk about your faith, but what does your faith tell you about coming together and interact with other people?’ – Clarence Devadass<sup>173</sup>

Malaysia’s great religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity continues to recur in the interviews as one of the prime reasons for interreligious encounter, making it not only necessary but also unavoidable.<sup>174</sup> Alexa Ho mentioned that she felt that ‘it would be really foolish to live in Malaysia and to not be in conversation and know people of different faith or work together with people of different faith.’<sup>175</sup> And according to Clarence Devadass, interreligious dialogue in Asia is not an option but an imperative, because ‘we need each other’.<sup>176</sup> Besides the religious diversity, some interviewees indicate how the minority position of Christians in Malaysia has often made the church more inward-focused, yet they argue that it should rather urge the church to go out, saying ‘we can no longer live isolated, being minority’.<sup>177</sup> Jason Leong states that Christians in Malaysia will become an even smaller minority in the coming years, and therefore says ‘now is the time to build that relationship and that friendship’ in order to create open channels of communication.<sup>178</sup>

The interviews indicate that the religious and ethnic differences between people in Malaysia still regularly lead to separation, prejudices, or even polarization. According to May Leong, ‘there are very little interactions on a social level between races and especially in the religious sphere’.<sup>179</sup> Because of this polarization, ‘people sometimes tend to retreat into their own cave, to live among their own people, and not want to engage’.<sup>180</sup> Combined with a lack of understanding of other religions, this may even lead to a sense of fear towards the other.<sup>181</sup> Ho even personally reflects on her own narrow mindedness and her lack of knowledge of her own neighbours, and how she came to realize this through her interreligious engagement.

And that is like after thirty years being in Malaysia and suddenly be found wrong and have all these stereotypes, your prejudice came out to stare you at your face. That was like a moment of truth for me.

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<sup>173</sup> Devadass, 7.48.

<sup>174</sup> Lyon Chua, *Interview 8* (Petaling Jaya, 4 April 2019), 8.2; May Leong, *Interview 5* (Kuala Lumpur, 27 March 2019), 5.1 and 5.9.

<sup>175</sup> Alexa Ho, *Interview 3* (Petaling Jaya, 19 March 2019), 3.19.

<sup>176</sup> Devadass, 7.20.

<sup>177</sup> Ho, 3.96-97; Devadass, 7.19. Ho argues that the church will lose its mandate if she shies away from engaging with people of other faiths.

<sup>178</sup> Jason Leong, *Interview 10* (Petaling Jaya, 27 May 2019) 10.42.

<sup>179</sup> M. Leong, 5.2 and 5.8; Ho, 3.35.

<sup>180</sup> Devadass, 7.12.

<sup>181</sup> Samuel Nesan, *Interview 1* (Kuala Lumpur, 5 March 2019), 1.56 and 1.57; Jacqueline Rajan, *Interview 4* (Subang Jaya, 25 March 2019), 4.15.

You know, that I could be like serving in a church for so long, teaching, and preaching about loving people, loving our neighbours, and I know nots about our neighbour.<sup>182</sup>

In response to this reality, Samuel Nesan and M. Leong point to the need for mutual understanding and trust relationships. According to Nesan, 'there is nothing to be feared only to be understood'.<sup>183</sup> Devadass, further states that the theology of interreligious engagement is very much lived in Asia. According to him, dialogue takes place at the grassroots and is, more than a dialogue of theology, a dialogue of life and experience. He says, 'that is the ideal, that communities can live together and people can exchange life, that is what interreligious engagement is all about'.<sup>184</sup> Moreover, he points out that dialogue often carries a negative connotation because it is associated with talking about the theological aspects of your faith, something people feel unable to engage in or that is regarded as having little result.<sup>185</sup> According to him, interreligious dialogue should ultimately lead to a situation in which 'you love your God, I love my God, but we love each other'.<sup>186</sup> Jason Leong, who decided to take a grassroots approach when he and others formed the organisation Christians for Peace and Harmony in Malaysia, underscores something similar when he says,

Forget about all those forums and dialogues and all that, because that is stage two basically, we have not even come to the first place. So to get to the first place, the only thing is that to start building a relationship; a friendship.<sup>187</sup>

While Nesan, as an apologist, focuses more strongly on the theological debate and the conversation about truth, most of the other interviewees seem to share Devadass' focus on interreligious engagement and the dialogue of life. According to Jacqueline Rajan, the questions of the man on the street 'may not necessarily be highly religious questions, it may be how do I live with my neighbour who is a Christian'.<sup>188</sup> Friendship, relationship, working and learning together, and the need for the other in our lives show to be important themes in the interviews. Eugene Yapp, for example,

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<sup>182</sup> Ho, 3.36, 3.37 and 3.39.

<sup>183</sup> M. Leong, 5.32; Nesan, 1.66 and 1.60.

<sup>184</sup> Devadass, 7.4 and 7.45.

<sup>185</sup> Devadass, 7.48 and 7.54. He explains that he responds to people who say 'I don't know my faith enough to go and talk to somebody', by saying 'who asked you to talk about your faith, but what does your faith tell you about coming together and interact with other people?'

<sup>186</sup> Devadass, 7.50.

<sup>187</sup> J. Leong, 10.7.

<sup>188</sup> Rajan, 4.5.

points out that the dialogue in which he engages is focused on finding common solutions to human rights issues, on 'working together for what I would call wellbeing'.<sup>189</sup>

In chapter 3 we saw how dialogue is driven by a wish to give witness and/or the wish to learn from the other and grow in our understanding of truth. Here we see how dialogue is also and maybe foremost driven by the need for interreligious relations and the common wellbeing of people in Malaysia. The interviewees stressed the importance of lived forms of dialogue, of interreligious engagement and relations, especially in the Malaysian context. This also challenged my own assumptions of what dialogue is ultimately about. Based on the theological discussion in chapter 3, I tended in the interviews to ask and look for examples of conversations about faith and truth or of what they had learned about God through the conversation with the other. Only in looking back to some of the interviews I started to realize that a lot more was actually happening in the practical engagement with the religious other. Therefore, I believe that Devadass makes an important point when he argues that the fact that interreligious engagement in Malaysia is lived out in an ordinary way is something 'the West has got lots to learn from'.<sup>190</sup> The tendency to see engagement as a step toward a deeper level of theological learning, which I did not only recognize in myself but also in the literature, may indeed reflect a more western mindset. The interviews showed at least how, in the context of Malaysia, real and deep engagement might be an even more difficult step to take but also more fruitful. In the next chapter, I will further reflect on what this means for our understanding of the interreligious engagement and the relationship between openness and commitment.

The reflection above also relates to the fact that I was intuitively looking for a distinction between those who focus on witness and those who focus more on cooperation or building bridges. Although, some of the interviewees indeed voiced a stronger wish to give witness and others were indeed more focussed on social cooperation, this distinction was not experienced that strongly by the interviewees. Except for very closed and one-way forms of evangelism, which they all criticised, they did not seem to experience witnessing and working together/connecting with the religious other as an either-or choice. Something which we will further look at in the next paragraph.

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<sup>189</sup> Eugene Yapp, *Interview 6* (Petaling Jaya, 2 April 2019), 6.2 and 6.32. For Eugene Yapp, dialogue is a way to find solutions to common issues (in his case to human rights issues) but more than that he believes that dialogue is only the start and that it extends to mutual collaboration. Yapp, 6.27.

<sup>190</sup> Devadass, 7.66 and 7.67.

## 5.2 Openness and Commitment

‘We will have to first indeed be very open with them, but we also don’t compromise ourselves. That means we don’t pretend that we are one of them, but we go there and say that we are Christians, though you are Muslims, but it is okay we can still be friends’ – Rachel Chan<sup>191</sup>

One of the first things I realized while conducting the interviews was that the terms openness and commitment were often understood and interpreted differently from what I had in mind. In my interview with Nesan they were for example interpreted as openness and commitment to dialogue, Devadass spoke about the need for a commitment to interreligious engagement, and Chan understood openness and commitment initially as the openness of the religious other and his or her willingness to become committed to the Christian faith.<sup>192</sup> While openness and commitment are important concepts in the reflections of the authors on interreligious dialogue, especially the term commitment did not initially occur in the reflections of interviewees. Even after further explanation, commitment and its relationship to openness in dialogue was often not picked up by the interviewees as a specifically relevant or challenging question. Chan, for example, shared how the interview made her think about the relationship between our openness and commitment in dialogue, yet in her subsequent reflection she spoke of the conviction that you have something unique and important to share, rather than of commitment. More than that, she argues that in relationship and with an attitude of respect she does not experience this to be in tension with openness.<sup>193</sup> Furthermore, Yapp spoke about the question of openness and commitment as a very specific question in our interreligious engagement, often used by Christians who fear that interreligious engagement leads to a compromise in your own faith. However, according to him this idea of openness versus commitment follows from a lack of actual interreligious engagement. Instead he shared about his experience of being invited as a Christian for a Muslim gathering, and said ‘this is openness and commitment, friendship’.<sup>194</sup>

While analysing the interviews, this raised for me the question whether the reflections of the authors on openness and especially commitment relate to the experiences of the interviewees, and if these terms are truly able to describe and explain what is going on or needed in interreligious dialogue. The fact, for example, that commitment is not easily recognized or used by the interviewees might indicate that it is not experienced as relevant or rather seen as unquestioned or self-evident, but it may also depend on the term itself and how people interpret this. I will reflect on this in the next two sub-paragraphs. Although the interviewees generally didn’t use the terms openness and commitment

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<sup>191</sup> Chan, 9.4.

<sup>192</sup> Nesan, 1.20 and 1.48; Devadass, 7.19 and 7.20; Chan, 9.19.

<sup>193</sup> Chan, 9.59, 9.62 and 9.64.

<sup>194</sup> Yapp, 6.9.

on their own accord, this doesn't mean that they didn't share experiences and reflections that relate in a different way to the question of openness and commitment. In the next two sub-paragraphs, I will give an overview of these experiences and reflections and start with an initial exploration of how they mirror, illustrate, or challenge important ideas and questions of the theoretical discussion.

### 5.2.1 Commitment

'There is no such thing as fully open. But we are doing it on the basis of, you believe because you are convinced that that is truth' – Living Lee<sup>195</sup>

As pointed out earlier the term commitment was not really picked up or used by the interviewees, yet in different ways, they spoke about the role of their faith in the interreligious encounter. The first thing I noticed is the role that the interviewees ascribed to their faith as an important motivator to engage in dialogue. Devadass and Yapp, who see interreligious engagement first of all as an important way to work for the common good and wellbeing of all, both point out that it is their faith that motivates them to engage in the first place. According to Devadass, it does not 'call for you in any way to lessen your ideal of the faith', instead it 'is your conviction of your faith that brings you to the table to work towards the common good', and which moves you and pushes you to do it.<sup>196</sup> According to J. Leong, we cannot completely walk the holistic Christian walk when we do not engage with people of other faiths. Therefore, he asks the question 'how can you be the light of the world, when you are hidden just in churches and you are only engaging with the people that you are comfortable with?' Instead, he states 'if the Lord's heart is for all then we should emulate that.'<sup>197</sup> Finally, Yapp says, 'I do this because I am a Christian, my Christian theology says this, but by doing that I really depend on, I realize, my Muslim colleague'.<sup>198</sup>

More personally, some of the interviewees also shared how they feel called to do this work. Ho, for example, explains 'Whether I like it or not (...) I have friends that I care for, and I have friends that I love, and God has put them in my life for a reason'. And Chan states that it is God who puts a burden in you to love the other.<sup>199</sup> This indicates how the Christian faith of the interviewees motivates their encounter, their openness to the other, and the manner in which they want to engage. In line with the

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<sup>195</sup> Living Lee, *Interview 2*, (Kuala Lumpur, 10 March 2019) 2.40 and 2.41.

<sup>196</sup> Devadass, 7.25. He refers here to the greatest command of loving God and loving your neighbour, which motivates him to engage in dialogue, but he also hopes that this may be a result of the dialogue itself. Moreover, his understanding of the kingdom as being bigger than the church convinces him that we need to work together for unity and the common good. Devadass, 7.50 and 7.16.

<sup>197</sup> J. Leong, 10.20 and 10.21.

<sup>198</sup> Yapp, 6.29.

<sup>199</sup> M. Leong, 5.27; Ho, 3.86; Chan, 9,.52 and 9.53.

conclusions in chapter 3, this confirms, in general, the role and importance of faith commitments in dialogue. Not only for the encounter but also more personal. However, it may also question a too far-reaching distancing from or flexibility towards your commitments in order to be open. Finally, the interviewees seem to place the value of openness to the religious other in their understanding of what a Christian life should look like.

Furthermore, Chan believes that we need to know where we stand and be open about this to the other. She says 'because we want to be real in the community, we do tell them who we are'.<sup>200</sup> According to her, it is important to know where we stand, because 'if I am not convinced it is difficult to talk' and 'if you are uncertain, I think, if you don't have a good stand, then to be open can be really destructive, maybe not destructive but can be confusing'.<sup>201</sup> She explains that it has been through faith and the experience of God's love that she has been able to open herself and to share and live out her faith.<sup>202</sup>

If you feel that you are saved, you must live out that confidence of your salvation. If you think that God is love you must live out that love. (...) If we really can get hold of this revelation that God is good, then I can just throw my whole life to him. (...) The more we experience this goodness, then the more confidence we have to talk.<sup>203</sup>

While Chan does not specifically refer to Christ, this seems to illustrate Newbiggin's and van den Toren's conviction that the experience of God's grace gives us the confidence to witness but also informs the manner of witness. In line with this, Lee shares how his conviction that God through Christ wants to come into a relationship with us guides him in dialogue. Yet, he argues, in dialogue 'first of all we accept that we are not there to convert each other, but just to tell what we believe, and we are willing to let the others decide what they do with that information'.<sup>204</sup> And Ho says,

I subscribe to Christianity, I believe in God and I think that Jesus is the perfect revelation, but having and knowing the truth, shouldn't negate my respect for other religions who also believe that God has revealed certain things to them.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Chan, 9.16 and 9.54.

<sup>201</sup> Chan, 9.45 and 9.57. This is further illustrated by Chua who share about the experiences of Christian students who come across interreligious differences and meet people of other religions, at a time that many of them are still developing their identity and faith. According to Chua, for those whose faith is not yet very personal or strong, interreligious encounter and the questions that are asked in these encounters, may be more challenging.

<sup>202</sup> Chan, 9.25-31 and 9.44-47.

<sup>203</sup> Chan, 9.27 and 9.28.

<sup>204</sup> Lee, 2.24, 2.41, 2.50, and 2.66.

<sup>205</sup> Ho, 3.45. In line with this Lee says 'certainly going in with an open mind but not believing that every religion is the same, has allowed me to have glimpses into certain truths within the different religions which I did not know previously' and Devadass 'It calls for an openness to accept others; to accept that there are truths out there

At the same time, Ho shares how her experiences in dialogue made her reflect on her own faith and wrestle with it but directly adding to this that it also strengthened her faith. She believes that it is a strength in its own when you meet people who radically differ from you and you are able to hold firm to your faith, feeling that you do not need to have all the answers or know everything.<sup>206</sup> This is an interesting notion against the background of chapter 3, for it points out that it is not only a strength to show openness in dialogue but also commitment. Especially, because Ho's commitment does not negate her openness.

Ho, furthermore, indicates that interreligious engagement has made her to depend more on God in dialogue, to receive wisdom and the right words to say.<sup>207</sup> Lee, similarly describes how he depends in dialogue on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who 'has to give you the words and the wisdom'.<sup>208</sup> How does this relate to the conviction of Cornille that our experiences in dialogue lead to an awareness of the particularity and relativity of our religious expressions and understanding of God, and as such require a doctrinal humility?

We saw how faith moved the interviewees to engage in dialogue, likewise, Chan also points out how her faith moves her to share her faith. For her, this is very practical because interreligious encounters ask for a faith that lives out what is taught in the Word. She says 'If we say God is love, I think if you try to tell people that this God is love, you better help them experience something'.<sup>209</sup> The wish to share something of one's faith is shared by Chua who says that, while he hopes to learn more about and from the religious other, he also hopes that he can speak truth to them at the end of the day.<sup>210</sup>

Both Devadass and Ho, whose main focus is not directly missional, share that they will not shy away from sharing what they believe, yet they are critical about a limited focus on evangelisation or conversion. According to Ho, this may change our priority and close us to a lot of other things that are happening in the interreligious encounter and which are also important to God.<sup>211</sup> And Devadass says, 'if through my actions you encounter my God and you want to know, then I am ready to talk to you about it, but I am not going to go and push it down your throat'.<sup>212</sup> This relates to the focus in the literature on the openness and humility that should govern our witness and attitude in dialogue, but

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that is beyond your understanding. (...) I fully believe that of course with Jesus there is the fullness of truth but you realize that there are many things that we have not yet understood'. Lee, 2.52; Devadass, 7.61 and 7.62.

<sup>206</sup> Ho, 3.57-59.

<sup>207</sup> Ho, 3.55, 3.57 and 3.60.

<sup>208</sup> Lee, 2.13.

<sup>209</sup> Chan, 9.20-9.22.

<sup>210</sup> Chua, 8.4.

<sup>211</sup> Ho, 3.102-3.104.

<sup>212</sup> Devadass, 7.41.



it also touches upon the important question how we really remain open to the surprising presence and work of the Spirit.

Their critique on conversion as a goal in our encounter with people of other faiths is shared by most other interviewees, even those who stand for a more missional approach agree that a strong or limited focus on conversion might close us to the religious other, making real relationships impossible. J. Leong even argues that it diminishes our credibility and sincerity in the eyes of the other, due to which they may not want to engage with us.<sup>213</sup> It reflects something of Moyaert's fear that a strong soteriological approach will close us off to the religious other. Their critique is pointed at forms of Christian evangelism that miss a more holistic approach, that only see the other as a subject of conversion, or believe that there is nothing to receive only to give. This removes every possibility of openness, relationship, cooperation, and possible enrichment, and is according to the interviewees in a context like Malaysia no longer tenable.

At the same time, this does not mean that they criticize every missional approach and focus in dialogue or that they do not witness or hope for conversion in dialogue. Being convinced about or committed to one's faith and being open about that, does not directly seem to be challenged in dialogue nor experienced as an issue or an impediment to openness or building relationships with the religious other. For me, this became mainly clear in the statement of some interviewees that interreligious engagement and openness to the religious other did not cause or necessitate them to water down or compromise their faith, in contrast to the fears and accusations of some other Christians. They even argued that it made them more convinced of the God they worship.<sup>214</sup> Moreover, when I tried to explore whether openness and commitment were experienced as a challenge this was often not recognized or picked up. As such, it often felt like I was raising a question that was not necessarily experienced to be most relevant in the encounter with the religious other. For example, in response to my question whether a certain understanding of truth makes it more difficult to be open to others who hold a different truth, J. Leong responded by saying that we just need respect and sensitivity towards the other.<sup>215</sup> And in response to a direct question about having a missional focus and the possibility to be open to the other, Chan said,

I think it all depends at how you really look at it. If we think mission equals conversion, then not possible. (...) Then you have to keep doing a lot of things to convince the other person (...) so because of that I think we will not be so open to the other person, what he is trying to say about his faith. (...) But if we just want

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<sup>213</sup> J. Leong, 10.34.

<sup>214</sup> Yapp, 6.5 and 6.10; Devadass, 7.40 and 7.56; Ho, 3.59.

<sup>215</sup> J. Leong, 10.37-38.

that person to find God and find his own way to relate with God then I think we can be; we can be really more open.<sup>216</sup>

Further in the interview she also related this to the relationship you have with the other person, in which openness becomes more naturally but where there is also place for your commitment. We will look deeper into this in the paragraph about relationship. In conclusion we can say that rather than referring to commitment, the interviewees speak about their convictions and experiences of God guide them in their dialogue. While they mostly relate commitment either to a conscious decision to engage in dialogue, to evangelize or to no compromise one's own faith, they focus more on the importance of entering dialogue, knowing where you stand, trusting God and guided by your faith and God self. These descriptions point to something deeper than just commitment for they include notions of trust, guidance, experience and inspiration.

### 5.2.2. Openness

'For me a successful encounter is a meaningful encounter (...) It is meaningful when it does something to me – opens up my spirit a bit – and if it is able to open up the other persons spirit towards me – towards what we about to do' – Alexa Ho<sup>217</sup>

Dialogue is seen by the interviewees as an opportunity to genuinely learn and deepen one's understanding. Lee says 'I go there with an attitude not of I am superior and I know everything but I am going there to learn' and he concludes in the interview that he indeed learns a lot.<sup>218</sup> Nesan believes that a serious consideration of what the other is saying is very important in dialogue, he argues 'if I don't mischaracterize them there is a chance that I can actually learn from them (...) but once you mischaracterize them, any possibility of gaining truth is just thrown out of the window'.<sup>219</sup> More than learning about other faiths, Yapp points out that studying Islam and working together with Muslims has been the greatest learning experience in terms of his Christian faith.<sup>220</sup>

These contributions indicate something of the importance the interviewees attach to an open attitude if we want to learn. Furthermore, opening ourselves to the religious other is first of all seen as the openness and willingness to engage, to take the time to listen, to take the contributions and opinions of the other seriously, and to acknowledge that we need the religious other in our lives and

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<sup>216</sup> Chan, 9.36-9.38.

<sup>217</sup> Ho, 3.76.

<sup>218</sup> Lee, 2.7.

<sup>219</sup> Nesan, 1.63.

<sup>220</sup> Yapp, 6.11 and 6.12.

work. Chan, for example, shared that is always a training to really listen, but she also believes that a meaningful relationship is a mutual kind of thing and that it always builds on the acknowledgment that we need each other's input in our lives.<sup>221</sup> However, according to Chua, this is not possible when we remain stuck in our Christian bubble. He explains how communicating with people of other faiths enabled him to see how God works in different ways, something he would not have been able to discover in his Christian bubble.<sup>222</sup> The contributions of Nesan and Chua reflect Moyaert's focus on welcoming the difference rather than fearing it and her wish to understand the other according to his or her own self-interpretation.

Ho points out that interreligious encounters have helped her to realize that God is truly God for all and 'that I am not the center of gravity, that I am not the center of truth, that there are a lot of things that I do not know; that I could be proven wrong about what I know about them'.<sup>223</sup> Therefore, she believes that besides openness, humility is an important value for a successful interreligious encounter.<sup>224</sup> A humility that first of all reflects Christ's humility and a humble attitude that acknowledges that we don't have all answers and can be wrong about things, that enables us to say sorry, and to reconstruct some of the things that we know about ourselves and the other.<sup>225</sup> Humility has allowed her to be more open and to have really meaningful encounters. One of the things she consequently has come to realize is that 'in his omniscience God has allowed me to know him, to know Jesus, but in his harmony he has also allowed other religions to flourish'.<sup>226</sup> In line with this, both Devadass and Yapp point out that we also have to acknowledge that other faiths might be doing things better than we do, something which we can learn from.<sup>227</sup>

Besides humility, respect is frequently named as an important characteristic of our attitude towards the religious other. First of all, respect for the religious other as a person, made in God's image, and who love God in their own way. According to Ho, interreligious dialogue 'helps us to see human beings for who they are, like a human being of worth'.<sup>228</sup> Secondly, it is also about respect for the beliefs of the religious other, even though we may not agree.<sup>229</sup> Nesan, argues that we should respect one another's standpoints and our disagreements. However, he also criticizes forms of respect in which

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<sup>221</sup> Chan, 9.12 and 9.61. In the words of Chan 'right, I am as needy as you, I also need your input in my life, you need my input in your life'.

<sup>222</sup> Chua, 8.21.

<sup>223</sup> Ho, 3.32 and 3.44.

<sup>224</sup> Ho, 3.73.

<sup>225</sup> Ho, 3.80-82, and 3.112.

<sup>226</sup> Ho, 3.47 and 3.76.

<sup>227</sup> Devadass, 7.17 and 7.37; Yapp, 6.14. Devadass also argues that there are elements of truth and that there is goodness in other religions that we could take.

<sup>228</sup> Ho, 3.89 and 3.91.

<sup>229</sup> Ho, 3.46; J. Leong, 10.37.

we are no longer able to speak against untruths.<sup>230</sup> This respect for disagreement is also underscored by Devadass when he says that we need to respect the other's beliefs and our differences.<sup>231</sup> According to him, this calls for a certain openness in our faith, 'it calls for an openness to accept others; to accept that there are truths out there that is beyond our understanding'. To him, this is in line with his understanding of God as all-encompassing and all-loving.<sup>232</sup>

In my reflection on the interviews, I realized how several of the interviewees explicitly or implicitly referred to this respect for our differences. Respect is thus not only related to the beliefs of the other but also to the fact that we might differ in our beliefs, and that we need to accept the difference, maybe even welcome it. In a way, this relates to Moyaert's conviction that we should welcome difference. Yet, unlike Moyaert, this respect for differences does not directly relate to feelings of fragility or an initial need to let go. This somehow surprised me, maybe because it contrasts my own initial unease with theological questions raised by plurality or difference. While these questions may be shared by the interviewees, this does not wipe out their focus on respect. Furthermore, the reality of religious diversity is not necessarily experienced in contrast to their Christian faith or as a challenge to their understanding of God. Disagreement is not considered as problematic when this stands in a context of mutual respect.<sup>233</sup> The interviewees' respect for the religious other and religious diversity seems to be grounded in their faith; in their belief that God is a God for all, that his work is not confined to the church, but also in the trust that God is in control. Lee and Ho, for example, both indicate in different ways that we do not know how God judges and that it is not in our power to change people, but that we are just called to trust God, to be faithful, and to love our neighbour.<sup>234</sup>

According to Chan, we should embrace diversity, which shows that this respect for diversity is not an unengaged form of respect. She believes that we should enter the interreligious encounter with the perspective that we must accept first, rather than judge. This means that 'we must be open to people who are different from us in all sort of ways' and 'fully appreciate the diversity that God has created', for while we are different we are still the same because we come from one God. Moreover, she says that this means that we also need to realize that there is some goodness in others that we need to accept.<sup>235</sup> The contributions of Ho and Chan reflect a lot from Cornille's and Moyaert's descriptions of humility and hermeneutical openness. While the openness and humility described by Chan and Ho are, first of all, focused on the interrelationship with and attitude towards the religious

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<sup>230</sup> Nesan, 1.51, 1.70 and 1.71.

<sup>231</sup> Devadass, 7.60. Rajan also argues that people need to understand that you can have different points of view (Rajan, 4.3).

<sup>232</sup> Devadass, 7.36, 7.60 and 7.61.

<sup>233</sup> See for example Devadass, 7.58 and Nesan, 1.51.

<sup>234</sup> Lee, 2.32 and 2.42-43; Ho, 3.102 and 3.106.

<sup>235</sup> Chan, 9.2, 9.3, 9.5 and 9.61.

other, they also indicate that they learn in dialogue and that it enlarges their understanding of God. Yet, we also saw how Ho and Chan underscore their reliance on and faith in God. Something which we also saw by Chua, who's described interreligious encounter as enriching for his understanding of God, but also as a possibility to share Christ. Based on this, the interviewees seem to hold openness and commitment quite close to each other. While this openness follows from their faith and their understanding of who God is, they do not clearly relate this to the Trinity, like Newbigin and van den Toren.

Finally, the interviews indicate that openness, humility, respect, and a genuine love for the other will enable us to build deep relationships with people of different faiths. However, as we will see in the next paragraph, some of the interviewees also point out that it is only in these relationships of trust that real openness, learning, and collaboration are possible.

### 5.3. Relationship with God and the Other

'If there was one thing that we could do, it is to form personal friendships which requires trust relationships'. –  
May Leong<sup>236</sup>

One of the most recurring themes in the interviews was the need to build friendships and relationships with people of other faiths. According to M. Leong and J. Leong, we are called, as Christians, to proactively form these relationships for it is, according to J. Leong, part of a holistic Christian walk.<sup>237</sup> Devadass, Chan and J. Leong describe relationships as the first level of engagement, an important part of the dialogue of life, and the base for other forms of dialogue.<sup>238</sup> According to Devadass, dialogue is first of all about people engaging with each other. Therefore, he prefers to speak of interreligious engagement, saying 'I think there is a kind of experiential level also, that I am engaging with someone; that there is something happening between us; that we are a kind of connecting somewhere'.<sup>239</sup>

The interviewees share how through relationships and friendships bridges are build that enable us to come closer to the religious other, to grow in understanding, and to reduce suspicion and mistrust. Based on her personal experiences, Ho argues that openness only happens when there is a relationship and that 'encounter at the deeper level cannot happen at the first or second encounter because you barely know the person'. In friendships, however, we can interact on a deeper and more

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<sup>236</sup> M. Leong, 5.33.

<sup>237</sup> M. Leong, 5.32; J. Leong, 10.22.

<sup>238</sup> Chan, 9.8; Devadass, 7.4; J. Leong, 10.7.

<sup>239</sup> Devadass, 7.45 and 7.55.

personal level.<sup>240</sup> J. Leong, who initiated different get-togethers between people of different faiths, says that the conversations that take place during these meetings are first of all meant to get to know the other as a person and that the religious talk that may take place is mainly personal.<sup>241</sup> Interestingly, almost all interviewees underscored how relationships are a prerequisite for deep and open conversation and cooperation. Through the credibility, trust, and further openness that is built in these friendships, it becomes possible to talk about more sensitive issues and to form a strong base to work together.<sup>242</sup>

Building friendships takes times though and according to Lee, it is always necessarily long term without a specific end goal.<sup>243</sup> According to the interviewees, friendship requires openness, realness, humility, and sincerity.<sup>244</sup> J. Leong explains

There are various levels of engagement and various barriers that we need to break through, and those barriers can only be broken if we persevere here and be consistent in our walk, to build that credibility. So that people can see your sincerity and the work that you do.<sup>245</sup>

Moreover, Ho, J. Leong, and others share how friendship is created through face to face conversations, simple meals, get-togethers, and in working together for the wellbeing of all.<sup>246</sup> Important for both Lee and Chan is that it is only in such relationships that we can live out our faith and share something of God's love and his invitation to be in relationship with us.<sup>247</sup>

Finally, some of the interviewees point out that in a relationship it is still possible to disagree while continue to work together and learn from each other.<sup>248</sup> It even seems that in relationship openness and commitment are less perceived as a tension. Chan, who on the one hand acknowledges that her commitment might affect a little bit of her openness, also believes that 'if we really think in the relational aspect then openness is not so much an issue'.<sup>249</sup> Besides that, we saw how several

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<sup>240</sup> Ho, 3.66; 3.70 and 3.72.

<sup>241</sup> J. Leong, 10.11-10.14.

<sup>242</sup> Ho, 3.18 and 3.72; M. Leong, 5.34 and 5.35; Yapp, 6.24 and 6.28. Especially interesting here is the contribution of Yapp, according to whom, the Western definition of freedom of religions with its focus on the right to profess, change, and practice your religion doesn't fit into an Asian context or the context of Malaysia. This definition of religions is more individualist centric, while he proposes a definition that fits better in the Asian context because it is more communal centric and closer to religious talk. According to him, an Asian definition of freedom of religion is about free interaction between religious groups, the sharing of interpersonal relationships and mutual collaboration for wellbeing (Yapp, 6.34 - 6.39).

<sup>243</sup> J. Leong, 10.15 and 10.17; Lee, 2.46.

<sup>244</sup> Ho, 3.75; Chan, 9.14; and J. Leong, 10.34.

<sup>245</sup> J. Leong, 10.35.

<sup>246</sup> Ho, 3.115; J. Leong, 10.8; Yapp, 6.27 and 6.28; Rajan; 4.7.

<sup>247</sup> Lee, 2.45; Chan, 9.32 and 9.38.

<sup>248</sup> Among others Chan, 9.4 and Devadass, 7.60.

<sup>249</sup> Chan, 9.60, 9.63.

interviewees indicated how their relationship to God actually motivated them to engage with people of other faiths, how God revealed their prejudices and even used those engagements to deepen and broaden their understanding. In this way, the relationship to the other and God seem to actually reinforce and enrich each other.

This relates to what Newbiggin describes as our faith in Christ that moves and enables us to open ourselves to the religious other. And the time that is taken to build relationships relates to Moyaert's focus on understanding and listening before we judge. Yet, the centrality of friendship and relationship does not occur by the authors. I believe, however, that relationship can indeed be seen as an important prerequisite for deep dialogue and may even offer an important insight into our thinking about openness and commitment. For it occurred to me while analysing the interviews, that relationships are often considered by the interviewees to be the place where we can learn and be vulnerable, but where we can also be honest and speak out.

#### 5.4 The Results of Dialogue

'I felt that my relationship with God has really bloom, really grow, because I don't now just practice my faith in my own bubble, in my own comfort zone'. – Alexa Ho<sup>250</sup>

The majority of the interviewees explicitly pointed out how their engagement in interreligious dialogue has strengthened and deepened their faith and/or made them more convinced of the reasons why they are engaged. Interestingly, we saw how they often contrast this to the fears of other Christians in Malaysia. Ho points to the fear of some Christians to go into interreligious encounter because they worry that their faith will be challenged or that it might not be strong enough.<sup>251</sup> Yapp, adds to this that others stay away from interreligious engagement because they fear that it will either compromise your faith or cause you to fall away from it.<sup>252</sup> However, he argues that learning Islam has actually been his greatest learning experience in sense of faith, showing new things that he never saw in Christianity. Moreover, it strengthened his own faith, making him more convinced and more able to explain his faith.<sup>253</sup> The enrichment experienced through interreligious engagement is also recognized by Chua, who says that seeing how God works in different ways and in other people's lives has enriched his perspective of God.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Ho, 3.59.

<sup>251</sup> Ho, 3.52.

<sup>252</sup> Yapp, 6.5 and 6.9.

<sup>253</sup> Yapp, 6.10, 6.12, 6.15 and 6.20.

<sup>254</sup> Chua, 8.21 and 8.22.

According to Nesan, interreligious dialogue has actually sharpened his faith, because it forced him to deepen his understanding of his faith and the Bible. He says, 'eventually I found everywhere, where I ask the question and let it challenge my faith, in the context of being committed to truth, it turns out that my faith gets strengthened'.<sup>255</sup> M. Leong also experienced how working with other religious groups refined and crystalized her faith. Moreover, it tested her faith in a very practical way which is not always a pleasant experience at first, she explains,

It is like sharpening. I mean if you are in the middle of the knife you don't feel the sharpening stone and you are just sitting there in comfort (...) but when you are on the edge... I think that it constantly forces us to ask 'just exactly what is my faith?', you know, 'why am I doing this?'.<sup>256</sup>

Ho points to something similar when she says that she experienced interreligious engagement, contrary to the fears that people have, as a good exercise of faith. It helped to break a lot of her presuppositions and challenged her understandings of God, but because of that it also helped her to open her mind, to depend more on God, and to become a more diligent seeker in her own tradition.<sup>257</sup> As such, she felt that these encounters are 'fun, enlightening, and also devastating'.<sup>258</sup> This seems to be the overall experience. Although interreligious engagement is often experienced as challenging, it is first and foremost seen as a meaningful and enriching experience, often even strengthening one's own faith.

While I was initially more focussed in my questions on how interreligious dialogue had challenged them or changed their understanding of God, the interviewees kept stressing that actual engagement had strengthened and deepened their relationship with God. That interreligious engagement had changed them, more than their faith in or understanding of God. It made them realize that they do not possess all answers or truth, that they cannot monopolize God but depend on God, and that they have still a lot to learn. As such, they shared how dialogue indeed evokes humility and even a certain vulnerability because it challenged them to look in a different way at the other and their own faith. Yet, with the literature in my mind, I was surprised to hear that almost all of them explicitly shared that this did (mostly) not evoke feelings of uncertainty, but rather encouraged them to deepen their faith and to depend more on God. In the next chapter, we will continue this conversation between the literature and the data of the interviews.

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<sup>255</sup> Nesan, 1.21 and 1.58.

<sup>256</sup> M. Leong, 5.28 - 5.31.

<sup>257</sup> Ho, 3.40, 3.53 and 3.57.

<sup>258</sup> Ho, 3.38.



## 6. A Constructive and Critical Engagement

In this final chapter, we will bring together the reflections of the previous chapters by bringing about a conversation between the different theological voices. The main question in this conversation is how does the operant and espoused theology of the interviewees relate, or more specifically, how may it critically and constructively contribute to the formal theology in Chapter 3? To answer this question I will compare and contrast the insights from the interviews with the important themes that came up in the conversation between the authors. Furthermore, I will reflect on where the contributions of the interviewees offer new insights, illustrate certain ideas, or criticize the theory.

In this chapter, we will, first of all reflect, on how the authors of chapter 3 and the interviewees understand dialogue. Besides that, we will look at the role context plays in one's understanding of dialogue because I believe that this also influences the way one looks at openness and commitment. Secondly, we will look at the role ontological and epistemological ideas play in the understanding of dialogue and openness and commitment. Finally, we will reflect on the relationship between a commitment to Christ and an openness to the surprising work of the Spirit, and the place of wrestling and confidence in dialogue.

### 6.1 Dialogue of Life

In the last chapter, we saw how several interviewees pointed to the importance of dialogue, and especially a dialogue of life, in the Malaysian context. Several interviewees indicated that interreligious engagement in Malaysia is threatened by a polarization between different ethnicities and religions. This becomes visible in the presuppositions, suspicion, or misunderstandings that still often tend to influence people's attitude and openness towards the other.<sup>259</sup> This is specifically the case concerning the Muslim other, this encounter is also affected by the special status of the Malay and Islam, and the minority position of the other religions.<sup>260</sup> Because ethnicity and religion are often very closely interrelated, dialogue does not just take place between a Muslim and a Christian, but, for example, between a Chinese Christian and a Malay Muslim.<sup>261</sup> This influences one's commitment as well as the encounter. It also means that interreligious dialogue is not considered to be a purely individual encounter but also an important way to bring different religious and ethnic communities closer to one another. Moreover, it illustrates Tan's statement that there is no purely religious conversation in

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<sup>259</sup> Ho, 3.36-37; M. Leong, 5.36; and J. Leong, 10.18-19. J. Leong points out that Christians are also looked at with suspicion, which follows from the idea that Christians might have a hidden agenda to evangelize. Besides that Chuo also points to the stigma that can be found in Malaysia that Christians are very Western.

<sup>260</sup> One of the interviewees explained that the word interfaith itself is on an official level often unacceptable. For interfaith implies that all faith are equal. However, under the constitution Islam is the official religion, which means that it cannot be places on equal level with other religions.

<sup>261</sup> M. Leong, 5.2 and 5.8; Tan, *Evangelical Missiology*, 298.

Asia.<sup>262</sup> Against this background, dialogue is to a significant extent seen as a way to build good relationships, to work together, and as something which cannot be separated from one's daily experiences and encounter. While the interviewees recognize that there are more formal forms of dialogue, they argue that most of the dialogue that takes place is informal. In the words of Devadass, it is about people engaging and living together.<sup>263</sup>

How does this relate to the theological contributions of the authors in Chapter 3 and their reflections on openness and commitment? First of all, I believe that it raises some important questions to van den Toren and Newbigin, for example about the relationship between one's rootedness in Christ and one's own culture, but also about the manner and possibility of witness, or where we may expect to see the Spirit at work. I will return to this later but first reflect on how the focus of the interviewees on the lived reality of interreligious engagement relates to the comparative theological focus of Moyaert and Cornille, which seems to place the interreligious conversation on a more cognitive level.

In the interviews, the importance and manner of interreligious engagement are closely connected to the Malaysian context. Although Moyaert and Cornille do not relate their contribution to a specific or their own context, I believe that their approach does reflect a Western context and mindset. A context in which interreligious dialogue is still often more optional and often primarily understood as or limited to a theological exchange. And a context in which faith is largely connected to the private and personal sphere and where strong religious commitments or religiously inspired motivations are doubted or even distrusted.<sup>264</sup> On the one hand, Moyaert also criticises unengaged forms of dialogue and she underscores the relationality and embeddedness of human being and the holistic reality of religions. Yet, on the other hand, Moyaert speaks of the hermeneutical circle as a never-ending movement between commitment and distanciation. According to her, dialogue requires a certain openness in which we take a certain distance from our own starting point in order to truly learn from the other.<sup>265</sup> This presupposes a dialogical engagement that is not only very personal but also more related to a reflexive or cognitive level. Consequently, raising the question of whether Moyaert's understanding of dialogue – as a hermeneutical circle – is not too much confined to the theological or religious sphere. Does her understanding of hermeneutical openness do justice to the larger role and more integrated role religion plays in people's lives, informing their daily choices,

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<sup>262</sup> Tan, *Evangelical Missiology*, 299.

<sup>263</sup> Devadass, 7.4.

<sup>264</sup> Especially interesting are the contributions of Devadass and Yapp who specifically point to the differences between the Asian and Western context. Devadass says that while there are theological issues that they are struggling with, the theology of interreligious engagement is very much lived in Asia. This is according to him something the West can learn a lot from. And Yapp describes how the Asian perspective on religion and religious freedom is more communal and relational centric, in contrast to the more individual perspective of the West. (Devadass, 7.66; Yapp, 6.38).

<sup>265</sup> Moyaert, *Recent Developments*, 39 and 41.

practices and relationships? Does it do justice to the way openness develops? And can it be relevant when interreligious engagement faces the challenges we described above?

For Cornille, a certain perspectivism to our own truth claims and an openness to recognize truth in other religions is an important prerequisite for a dialogue in which we may come to a deeper understanding of the ultimate reality. This corresponds with a broader reserve or unease in our society when it comes to strong truth claims or even faith commitments and with the endorsement of the equality of different perspectives. While dialogue remains for Cornille an important part of the pursuit for truth, this will be always partial.<sup>266</sup> As part as the pursuit for truth and a deeper understanding of the ultimate reality, dialogue is placed on a more abstract or cognitive level, raising certain requirements or expectations for those who participate in dialogue as representatives of their religious tradition. Which involves the risk that dialogue becomes limited to a small group of people. This may work well in a context where dialogue is optional or mainly understood as mutual theological exchange, but the question is whether this also offers a fruitful way forward in a context where interreligious dialogue and engagement is inescapable and complicated by very practical and social challenges.

While I believe that comparative theology offers valuable insights for a theological understanding of other religions, I question whether it is always fully applicable or the most fruitful way for the daily interreligious encounters of people. Through the interviews, I realized that while my questions were initially often focussed on what people had experienced or learned, through conversation, on a more theological or rational level, their answers often spoke more of what they had come to realize and learn in the relationship or engagement with the religious other. Or even more about what they had achieved through building relationship and mutual collaboration. Devadass shares how many people actually feel not equipped to engage in more formal dialogues in which they have to talk about their faith. Moreover, the questions they encounter are often more practical or relational in nature. That is why Devadass prefers to speak of the dialogue of life.<sup>267</sup>

This refers back to the different forms of interreligious encounter that were mentioned in chapter one. According to Küster, dialogue creates a meeting place for the dialogue of life, a place of wisdom for the dialogue of the mind, and a place of spiritual experiences for the dialogue of the

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<sup>266</sup> Cornille, *The Im-Possibility*, 134-135. Cornille states that shared concerns may lead to a sense of interconnectedness but also argues that this interconnectedness is ultimately to be found in the belief that the teachings and practices of other religions are somehow related to one's own conception of the ultimate reality.

<sup>267</sup> Devadass, 7.48-49. Another problem with more formal forms of dialogue is that they mainly attract the more liberal representatives of a religious community, especially when it comes to the Muslim-Malay community. Groups who hold more radical or orthodox Islamic views are often, for different reasons not represented in the for a. According to the interviewee, to include their voice and to reach a more diverse group of people we need to take a more grassroots approach and build contact and friendship first.

heart.<sup>268</sup> Yet, we should be cautious not to value one sort of encounter over the other. A risk that might be present when we describe dialogue ultimately as a pursuit for truth. Moreover, the interviewees indicate that we can never strictly separate the different forms of dialogue but that they are instead closely related to one another. When personal relationships are missing or when there is no dialogue of life in which we are able to work together, a dialogue of the mind or on the level of theology may remain very superficial, not able to bring about a wider change or a true and deep learning experience. According to Yapp, it is only on a level where you are interacting as real friends that you can talk openly with the other, even about sensitive issues.<sup>269</sup> Moreover, he feels that most of the ground breaking work has not happened in the field of dogma's but in the mutual collaboration for common concerns.<sup>270</sup> With 'the field of dogma's' he refers to debates in which one tries to find common grounds etc., he argues that these debates often fail to be relevant to the concrete daily interreligious encounters of people. Through mutual collaboration, however, trust relationships are created in which it becomes possible to interact in a deeper way with people of other faiths. Ho adds to this that real solidarity is only possible when we have come to know the other religion. Therefore, she believes that we need to engage more with other faiths, to move into a deeper union, working together, being together, and living together.<sup>271</sup> Finally, I believe that it is significant that most interviewees do not speak about the religious other. While Moyaert uses this term to indicate the particularity of other religious traditions and of the religious other, the interviewees rather speak of neighbours, friends or comrades. Besides understanding, this opens the way for relationships, which may only deepen mutual understanding.

## 6.2 Revelation and the Pursuit of Truth

In the paragraph, above we have discussed the place and character of dialogue in the reflections of the authors and interviewees and how this also informed by contextual factors. In this paragraph we will further reflect on the epistemological and ontological differences between Moyaert and Cornille on the one hand and van den Toren and Newbiggin on the other hand, as pointed out in chapter 3. Especially how this influences their understanding of dialogue and relates to what we see in the interviews. According to Cornille and Moyaert, dialogue has an important role in the pursuit of truth and the understanding of ultimate reality.<sup>272</sup> Yet, their understanding of truth as a timeless task and

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<sup>268</sup> Küster, *Who, with Whom, about What?*, 92.

<sup>269</sup> Yapp, 6.24.

<sup>270</sup> Yapp, 6.40.

<sup>271</sup> Ho, 3.91-3.93.

<sup>272</sup> Cornille says 'Dialogue without concern for the question of truth seems barren, if not inauthentic. It is precisely the thirst for truth which represents the motivation for dialogue'. Cheetham, *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, 206

the ineffability of the ultimate Reality influences their understanding of commitment in the interreligious dialogue.<sup>273</sup> While Cornille and Moyaert do not argue for a total relativism, they argue for a certain relativism towards our faith commitments. Moyaert points out that we are never really clear about what is absolute or relative in our faith commitments and Cornille underscores that our normative judgments should always remain open to change and transformation.<sup>274</sup> Similarly, Stanley Samartha argues that the nature of commitment is such that it is never an established position, instead, it is both an assent and a question, a road, and a destination. Following from this, our commitments do indeed not only guide us in dialogue but they may also be transformed through dialogue.<sup>275</sup>

I believe that Cornille and Moyaert rightly warn for an attitude in which we believe that we have nothing to learn or in which unreflected and fixed ideas or commitments negatively affect our openness. Besides that, they rightly point to the importance of deep listening to and understanding of the religious other. This is also underscored by the interviewees when they point out that fruitful interreligious encounter requires an open and humble attitude and the acknowledgment that we have much to learn. Presuppositions and mischaracterization are regarded to be an impediment to interreligious dialogue, just as an evangelistic approach that is only focussed on converting the other and which reflects the idea that we have only something to offer and nothing to receive.<sup>276</sup> Humility, respect, love, and engagement, on the other hand, are seen as important requirements for a fruitful interreligious encounter. Most of the interviewees connect this to the idea that we do not possess the fullness of truth. They describe how this realization enabled them to relate to the religious other and to learn more about God, but also how it encouraged them to depend more on God in the interreligious engagement.<sup>277</sup> At the same time, they shared that this does not come naturally, instead, openness asks for training in listening, genuine consideration of what the other is saying, and a willingness to be confronted with your own misunderstandings.<sup>278</sup> However, I am not doing full justice to the contribution of the interviewees when I would present their reflections only in relationship to the idea of dialogue as a way to grow in our understanding of truth. Even when my focus was more on the learning that happens in dialogue, the interviewees often stressed the need of interreligious

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<sup>273</sup> Cornille, *The Im-Possibility*, 26, 40-42, 59-60; Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 268; Moyaert in Cheetham, *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, 206. They argue that faith and hope in the possibility of growth and progressive understanding of truth make dialogue irreconcilable with relativism. Moyaert refers here to Ricoeur who argues that 'The unity of truth is "a timeless task only because it is at first an eschatological hope".'

<sup>274</sup> Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 52-54; Cornille, *Conditions*, 11.

<sup>275</sup> Stanley. J. Samartha. "More than an Encounter of Commitments: An Interpretation of the Ajaltoun Consultation on "Dialogue between Men of Living Faiths" *International Review of Mission* 59 nr. 236 (1970) 293 and 395.

<sup>276</sup> See for example, Nesan, 1.55 and 1.62-63 and Lee, 2.7.

<sup>277</sup> See for example Chua, 8.21; Devadass, 7.60 and 7.61 and Ho, 3.32, 3.44 and 3.89.

<sup>278</sup> Chan, 9.61; Nesan, 1.63; Ho, 3.80.

engagement in relation to questions such as, 'How do I, and we as a Christian community, build relationships with our religious neighbour?' 'How do we live together in peace?' and 'How do we work together for a better Malaysia?' Yet, their focus on lived relationships did not come at the expense of the possibility to learn. As we saw, the interviewees point out that it is in these relationships that understanding, openness, and trust can develop, which enable genuine and deep interreligious engagement, mutual learning and cooperation. We will come back to this in the next paragraph.

Moyaert and Cornille thus offer some important contributions, however, I believe that Gavin D'Costa raises a valid point in his book *Christianity and World Religions*. Here he argues that the conviction that we can never really have a sense of religious truth or say something decisive, has become a new norm of neutrality, openness, or authenticity, while it just as much represents a particular point of view.<sup>279</sup> Instead D'Costa argues that we have to speak in the light of the Triune God who is the fullness of truth, which is no more or less biased than starting from the idea that we can never really grasp or speak about the ultimate reality.<sup>280</sup> As we saw in chapter 3, this conviction is shared by Newbigin.<sup>281</sup> He argues that we are not open-minded explorers of reality but that we can only be led to an understanding of truth in all its fulness by faith and in response to God's gracious gift in Jesus Christ.<sup>282</sup> While there is still a lot that we do not understand we know Jesus as the way, something which cannot be placed on par with other claims of truth.<sup>283</sup> As we saw in chapter 3, this touches upon an important ontological and epistemological difference between the authors. According to Newbigin and van den Toren, God's revelation in Christ radically changes the way we know. Rather than speaking about a discovery of truth, knowledge is related to a knowledge relationship, in which we know by receiving in basic trust, believing that the other is trustworthy. Truth is found in God's self-revelation in Christ and our knowledge is based on this God in whom we trust.<sup>284</sup>

This has several consequences for the way we look at dialogue, openness and commitment. First of all, it influences our interpretation of commitment, for commitment to God's revelation in Christ is not a commitment to a dogma but to a person and an event. Moreover, our commitment has more the character of a response in faith and of entrusting ourselves to this revelation, in the belief that this is the way that will lead us to the fullness of truth. Secondly, when truth is found in God's self-revelation, this shifts our focus in dialogue from a search for truth to Jesus Christ who becomes the centre in our engagement with people of other faith. In dialogue, we do not just depart from and

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<sup>279</sup> Gavin D'Costa. *Christianity and World Religions* (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 91, 95 and 100; Ramachandra, Vinoth. *Faiths in Conflict? Christian Integrity in a Multicultural World* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2000), 216.

<sup>280</sup> D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 95 and 100.

<sup>281</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 57-63.

<sup>282</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 104.

<sup>283</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 104. Newbigin says 'we have been laid hold by the truth'.

<sup>284</sup> Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 131-132 and 205-207; Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 65-67.

return to our tradition but it is Christ of whom we want to testify in the interreligious encounter but whom we also expect to meet in new ways through the encounter with people of other faiths. David J. Bosch says, 'we do not have him in our pockets, so to speak, and do not just "take him" to the others; he accompanies us and also comes towards us'.<sup>285</sup> This shows that while we believe that truth is found in Jesus Christ, this does not mean that we possess the fullness of truth. Because our confession of truth follows on a gift of grace, our understanding of truth should be open for revision and deepening, yet always rooted in Christ.<sup>286</sup> Furthermore, van den Toren and Newbigin, point to the wider work of the Spirit through which we may come to a deeper and new knowledge of Christ. Finally, I believe that when truth is received in grace this should characterize our attitude to the religious other. We can only truly witness to Christ in grace and humility.

How does this relate to the experiences and reflections of the interviewees? Above I pointed out how the interviewees point to the importance of openness in dialogue, the willingness to learn and to realize that we have much to learn. But how do they relate this to their faith commitment and can this in any way inform our reflection thus far? I believe it can. In chapter 4 we saw how faith forms an important motivation for the interviewees to engage in dialogue. Besides that, Lee, Chan, and others express the hope to share something of what they believe in the encounter. This corresponds to what Newbigin and van den Toren describe about the place of witness in dialogue. This is also underscored by Cornille, who believes that we can only truly and fruitfully engage in dialogue when we start from our own faith tradition and search for reasons in our tradition to open ourselves to the religious other. Moreover, witness and proclamation have, according to her, a necessary place in dialogue.

Yet, more than commitment the interviewees speak about their faith that moves them. Chan, for example, shares how the belief that God is love and the experience of being saved, should move us to live out that love and the confidence of your salvation. She believes that in the encounter 'we have to bring in the reality of experiencing God' and that this becomes much easier when we work in 'partnership with God'.<sup>287</sup> Furthermore saying,

The reality has to be there. The experience, it has to be something that warm there heart, the spiritual has to be spiritual.

We know that we cannot do, a lot of thing we cannot do on our own strength. (...) Sometimes we just wait and then we realize that when God works it is quite amazing, you just wait and then you see things happen.<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> David J. Bosch. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, third printing, 2014), 496.

<sup>286</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 70.

<sup>287</sup> Chan, 9.27 and 9.39-40.

<sup>288</sup> Chan, 9.42-44.

Lee, testifies that your faith in the centrality of Christ follows from the conviction that this is the truth and consequently constitutes the foundation from which you engage in dialogue.<sup>289</sup> Besides a ground for witness, the interviewees also described how their faith moved them to be open or at least made them aware that this should characterize our attitude towards the religious other. Ho acknowledges that while she knows that the gospel, of 'Christ who has set us free', should make us more embracing, this didn't come naturally. Through the encounters with people of other faith, she felt that God revealed her own prejudices and the need to die to them.<sup>290</sup> It seems that the interviewees' faith and witness and their attitude towards the religious other follow from a deeper conviction, which is also founded in their relationship with and personal experience of God. Ho said, 'In his omniscience God has allowed me to know him, through Jesus, but in his harmony he has allowed other religions to flourish'.<sup>291</sup>

Besides this, the interviewees all testify how interreligious engagement strengthened their faith and led to a growth in their understanding of God and the Christian faith. In some cases it was difficult to find out how they exactly understand this process of learning and growth but rather than a general growth in their understanding of 'the Ultimate Reality' they seem to relate it more specifically to a growth in their understanding of the God they had come to know through the Bible or Jesus. Yapp, for example, experienced working with Muslims and learning Islam as the greatest learning experience in terms of his Christian faith, which was both enriched and strengthened in the process.<sup>292</sup> And Devadass shared how interreligious encounters have made him more convinced of the God he worships.<sup>293</sup> He argues that openness in our faith does not mean that we can no longer believe that in Jesus we find the fullness of truth but it helps us to realize that there is much that we have not understood yet.<sup>294</sup>

While these contributions do not conflict with what Cornille and Moyaert say, I believe they illustrate more deeply what van den Toren and Newbigin understand to be commitment or confidence in dialogue. The reflections of the interviewees illustrate how their Christian faith guides them in their witness and encounter with the religious other. They show how their commitment or faith follows from a discovery and experience of God's presence and work in their lives and how this informs their relationship with the religious other. Both Van den Toren and Newbigin, stress God's acting and

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<sup>289</sup> Lee, 2.39-41 and 2.68. He describes his faith and conviction by saying 'I have accepted, and I have tasted and seen that he is good'.

<sup>290</sup> Ho, 3.30 and 3.43. This is underscored by J. Leong who says 'if the Lord's heart is for all then we should emulate that'. J. Leong, 10.21.

<sup>291</sup> Ho, 3.47.

<sup>292</sup> Yapp, 6.10 and 6.11.

<sup>293</sup> Devadass, 7.37 and 7.40.

<sup>294</sup> Devadass, 7.62.



presence in our lives and in the interreligious dialogue. Instead of a focus on discovering God through the interreligious encounter, like Cornille implies, this stresses the fact that it is God who makes himself known in our encounter with the religious other. This connects more deeply to what the interviewees refer to. Be it in different ways and gradations almost all of them refer to the importance of experiencing God. Dialogue is not just seen as an opportunity to learn more about God but to grow in a deeper understanding of who God is by seeing God at work in the dialogue and the life of the religious other. They search for God's voice and guidance in dialogue and it is God self who has revealed himself to them in new ways. Even when they speak about commitment or their faith this is not so much seen as an adherence to certain convictions or faith traditions but as the will to live their lives led by faith in and relationship to God. Finally, the interviewees also indicate how this encounter with the religious other as well as their relationship to God, contributed to a deepening of their faith as well as the realization that there is still a lot to learn. Which reflects Van den Toren's statement that we can only talk about God incomprehensibility after God has made himself known.

This relates to an important insight of van den Toren and Newbigin on the understanding of openness and commitment. An insight that I believe to ring true to the Christian faith and the role of faith in the life of most believers. When we affirm that God has revealed himself in a unique and absolute way in Jesus Christ this should be the place where we expect to find truth.<sup>295</sup> Yet, the fact that God's self-revelation is an act of grace means that it can only be received and responded to in belief. It asks for an act of confidence and trust and a commitment that informs our view on the world and our engagement with the religious other. I believe that this is also the way that faith commitments work for most people. Paul Griffiths argues that people experience their religion and faith as comprehensive, incapable of abandonment and of central importance.<sup>296</sup> This corresponds to what the interviewees shared about the truth they find in the Christian faith but also their dependence and trust in God in the interreligious encounters.<sup>297</sup>

The important place of commitments in the life of the believer is underscored by Moyaert when she argues that religion is a way of life that forms the basic framework on which people live. However, her interpretation of commitment remains somewhat ambiguous, seeing them as both normative and flexible and both absolute and relative. This uncertainty or ambiguity is, according to Moyaert, something that we need to wrestle with in dialogue and which we should not avoid. Yet, I believe that this is also a consequence of her more general description of commitment. When we instead look at our faith commitment as a response in faith and trust to God's revelation in Jesus Christ, this may not resolve all wrestling but it does offer us humble confidence. Van den Toren says that in

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<sup>295</sup> Newbigin in D'Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, 137.

<sup>296</sup> Paul Griffiths. *Problems of Religious Plurality* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 23.

<sup>297</sup> See for example Lee, 2.41; Chan, 9.26-27.

concentrating on this reality Christians 'step into a community and tradition of reflection initiated by God's gracious self-revelation and guided by His Spirit, who is the source of their boldness'.<sup>298</sup> Moreover, I believe that it makes a difference when we know that we do not enter dialogue alone or in our own strength but believe that Christ accompanies us and comes towards us. This is also what the interviewees point to. Ho shared how she started to realize her dependence on God in dialogue with people of other faith, and Lee came to realize that while he does not know everything he knows that God is just and fair and that he is not sent to save the world but just to be faithful. For Chan, it was the realization and her confidence in God's goodness that enabled her to walk by faith and consequently also seeing God at work.

Finally, Newbigin and van den Tooren claim that a commitment to Christ does not need to close us off to the religious other but that it may even offer a strong internal reason for openness. Regarding this, two questions remain to which we will return in the next two paragraphs. First, the question of the relationship between a commitment to Christ and an openness to the surprising work of the Spirit and secondly, the question of fragility and identity in dialogue.

### 6.3 Commitment to Christ and an Openness to the Surprising Work of the Spirit

The Christian claim that truth is revealed in Jesus Christ does not close the door to further inquiry but opens it, according to Newbigin.<sup>299</sup> This follows from the fact that truth is not found through our inquiry or knowledge but in God's gracious gift and faithfulness. Because of that, we need to acknowledge that there is still a lot that we don't know. As such, Newbigin points out that we should be open to listen, learn, and receive from our partners in dialogue because we expect to find in their lives the signs and gifts of God's goodness and justice. He relates this to the work of the Spirit who shows us these gifts and uses them to glorify Christ. Van den Tooren further relates these gifts to the presence and work of the Spirit in the life of the religious other. Therefore, we look in dialogue for the presence and work of the Spirit of God in the life of the persons we meet, to grow into a deeper understanding of the God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ. I believe that both insights, point to important aspects of the work of the Spirit in dialogue. Through his Spirit, God does not only accompany and guide us in the encounter with the religious other, but he also meets us and reveals himself in the encounter. This is also shared by Ho and Lee who testified of how they depend on God in dialogue and how God has used others to learn them new things.<sup>300</sup>

This asks for a continuing awareness to the surprising work of the Spirit and an openness to be enriched but also corrected in dialogue. According to D'Costa, we should be attentive and open to

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<sup>298</sup> Tooren, *Christian Apologetics*, 227.

<sup>299</sup> Newbigin in D'Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, 146.

<sup>300</sup> Ho, 3.51, 3.57 and 3.86; Lee, 2.50-2.52.

listen to the testimony of others and look for God's self-disclosure in other religions if we want to be faithful to our Christian calling to be attentive to God.<sup>301</sup> This closely relates to Moyaert's understanding that we meet God in the religious other. Although, D'Costa understands this attentiveness more specifically as attentiveness for the Trinitarian God. This raises the question of how our commitment and witness to the Trinitarian God relates to an openness for new insights about the broader presence and work of the Spirit. How do we make sure that the finality of Christ does not close us off to the wider and surprising work of the Spirit? This also brings back some of the earlier questions that came up in the first paragraph.

According to van den Toren, we need to start with the unity of the Trinity; the unity between the work of the Son and the Spirit. This will make it possible to see where we encounter the Spirit of God at work and to receive a genuinely new knowledge of Christ. Referring to D'Costa, he says that it is not so much the question whether new revelations do not contradict what we know in Christ but whether they lead us back to Christ.<sup>302</sup> We can never capture Christ, for we talk about a person, not a dogma, but he is the center to which we redirect and align our understanding of God and the world.<sup>303</sup> According to D'Costa, the riches of the mystery of God are disclosed by the Spirit and are measured and discerned by their conformity to and in their illumination of Christ.<sup>304</sup>

The interviewees only referred a few times to the work of the Holy Spirit and this was either related to our dependence on the inspiration of the Spirit to witness or to the fact that it is the Spirit who changes people. Yet, the interviewees shared about the necessity of openness to the religious other. First of all, because of our shared identity as human beings, made in God's image and looking for God in our lives. Secondly, because the interviewees expect to see God at work in other religions. Lee, connects this to the two revelations of God, in the nature and through his Word.<sup>305</sup> Ho and Devadass, reflect most clearly on the relationship between faith in the finality of Christ and openness towards the larger work of God.<sup>306</sup> Ho says

I mean, I subscribe to Christianity, I believe in God, and I think that Jesus is the perfect revelation, but having and knowing the truth, and subscribing to the truth, shouldn't negate my respect for other religions who also believe that God has revealed certain things to them.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> D'Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, 23.

<sup>302</sup> Toren, *The Relationship between Christ and the Spirit*, 272.

<sup>303</sup> Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 207.

<sup>304</sup> D'Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, 17 and 23.

<sup>305</sup> Lee, 2.35.

<sup>306</sup> Devadass, 7.17; Ho, 3.45.

<sup>307</sup> Ho, 3.45.

Moreover, she points out that God's truth is found in every sphere of life. Looking for God's presence is thus not only connected to the religious sphere. She argues that while she may not agree with everything, this does not give her the right to judge or to see the other's opinions as inferior.<sup>308</sup>

Overall the reflections of the interviewees are more focused on the practical challenge of being open to the religious other rather than on the question whether it is possible to be open while being committed to Christ. They describe how openness is challenged by separations and misunderstandings between different religious and racial groups in the Malaysian society but also by a closedness of some Christians and a unilateral focus on evangelism by the church. In response to these challenges, we saw how the interviewees point out that as Christians we should overcome our prejudices towards the religious other and instead try to genuinely understand the other. This asks for respect and a certain humility to acknowledge that there are still a lot of things that we do not yet understand and that we may also learn from the other. Like Cornille, they consider this to be an important prerequisite for dialogue but also something they came to realize in the interreligious encounter itself.<sup>309</sup>

Van den Toren points out how this humility should also govern our witness, because of our limited understanding, but also because we come to know God through grace, and to reflect the One to whom we testify.<sup>310</sup> According to Ramachandra, a genuine longing for the other to come to 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' always requires a posture of humble listening, taking the other and his or her faith seriously and being willing to be challenged. As such, he concludes that 'all witness, and thus all true dialogue, is a risky undertaking'.<sup>311</sup> For the interviewees' humility in witness means that our encounter with the religious other should not be overshadowed by a unilateral focus on conversion. Looking back, I realize that for most interviewees the main question was not whether they are open or committed enough. A more important question was how they can respond to other Christians who fear that interreligious encounters may challenge or compromise their faith and encourage them to step out of their comfort zone or to move beyond a single focus on conversion. Yapp, for example, argues that Christians in Malaysia may need to reconsider their way of doing evangelism, which is often unilaterally focused on conversion, sometimes even in a confrontational way. According to him, this is originally a more Western approach that does not work in a Muslim-Malay context where religion is a way of life and where we should focus on relationships.<sup>312</sup> Likewise, Rowans argues that witness should be less confrontational and more relational, it is best done in compassionate engagement.<sup>313</sup> According to Ho, a focus on conversion may change our priority

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<sup>308</sup> Ho, 3.46 and 3.48.

<sup>309</sup> Cornille, *The Im-Possibility*, 11 and for example Ho, 3.51.

<sup>310</sup> Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 224-227.

<sup>311</sup> Ramachandra in Rowans, *Proclaiming the Peacemaker*, 173.

<sup>312</sup> Yapp, 6.6-8.

<sup>313</sup> Rowans, *Proclaiming the Peacemaker*, 185-186.

and close us to a lot of other things that are happening in the interreligious encounter and which are also important to God.<sup>314</sup> Moreover, Lee argues that we are not called to convert or save people but to be faithful, to build relationships, to share what we believe, and to trust that God will do the rest. This allowed him to relate in a more genuine way to the religious other, being able to both learn from other religions and to share his faith.<sup>315</sup>

I believe that Lee's focus on building relationships illustrates an important contribution of the interviews to the discussion on openness and commitment in the interreligious encounter. In chapter 5, we already saw how the necessity of building friendships and relationships was a recurring theme in the interviews and here I would like to argue that exactly these relationships may offer a possibility to combine both humble witness and genuine openness. First of all, a relationship requires long term engagement, openness, love, credibility, sensitivity, and an effort to get to know the other. So, it is already in the effort to form relationships that we are opened up towards the other. Secondly, Ho states that a deep and personal encounter can only happen in relationship.<sup>316</sup> And according to J. Leong, it is in engaging with the religious other that a real and authentic conversation takes place.<sup>317</sup> Moreover, Yapp and M. Leong argue that when we are able to form relationships in which we can trust one another and work together, it becomes possible to talk openly, even about difficult questions and sensitive issues.<sup>318</sup> Finally, the interviewees indicate the importance of relationships for true and humble witness. According to M. Leong, there is no better way to demonstrate our faith than to live it out.<sup>319</sup> This becomes exactly possible in relationships, in which we are faithful and present in the life of the other, in which we can show that we care about the other, and in which we can represent God's love.<sup>320</sup> Chan says, 'we have to bring in the reality of experiencing God'.<sup>321</sup> And instead of spoken witness, Devadass speaks about people encountering God through his life, because faith itself is a very personal encounter with God.<sup>322</sup>

Here, we touch upon another value of building relationships with people of other faith. If truth can only be known in relationship to God, in love and through trust, this should also characterize our attitude and relation to the other, regardless of the differences. In the conviction that we have received

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<sup>314</sup> Ho, 3.103-104.

<sup>315</sup> Lee, 2.46-52. He shared how he is taken aback by what he calls 'the American way of evangelism' in which you ask people to make directly a decision. According to him, this is not only not necessary but it also does not work because you ask people to change their whole life. The question is whether that is really necessary and if so it at least takes more time.

<sup>316</sup> Ho, 3.70 and 3.72.

<sup>317</sup> J. Leong, 10.32.

<sup>318</sup> Yapp, 6.22-24; M. Leong, 5.32-35.

<sup>319</sup> M. Leong, 5.13.

<sup>320</sup> Lee, 2.45-46; Ho, 3.106-108; Chan, 9.10.

<sup>321</sup> Chan, 9.39.

<sup>322</sup> Devadass, 7.41.

something that transforms everything we cannot but testify to this gift. Yet, as we received this gift in grace and love this should also be at the basis of our interreligious encounter. Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder describe this in a helpful way when they speak about ‘prophetic dialogue’. According to them, dialogue is a spirituality, an act of respect and friendship, of being, listening, and sharing with people. This shows that dialogue is always relational and involving different forms. At the same time, they point out that we are also called to be prophetic. To speak out and to speak forth but always rooted in dialogue, for only through attentiveness and sensitivity we will know when and how to speak out.<sup>323</sup> This balance relates to the balance between openness and commitment. As we will see in the next paragraph, the fact that this is no precise or fixed balance leads, according to Moyaert, to wrestling or even feeling of fragility.

#### 6.4 Fragility and Identity in Dialogue

In the paragraph above we saw how both Cornille and Van den Toren argue for humility in dialogue and our witness. However, van den Toren also argues that we can be confident and empowered in our witness. Both humility and confidence follow from the fact that we do not depend on our own knowledge but on God in whom we trust.<sup>324</sup> This confidence extends to the trust that God is present and working in the encounter with the religious other. As such our focus in the encounter is re-shifted from ourselves and our faith to the God we want to glorify.

Nevertheless, I believe that Moyaert offers relevant and important insights by asking attention for the fragility and wrestling that we may experience in dialogue. This wrestling follows from the fact that there often seems to be no precise or fixed balance between openness and faith commitment. On the one hand, we are called to give witness and, on the other hand, we are expected to be open to what the other may reveal about God.<sup>325</sup> This can cause an openness for the religious other but, according to Moyaert, it also results in feelings of restlessness and fragility. Rather than trying to overcome this restlessness, Moyaert states that we should accept it in order to enable dialogue to be truly fruitful.<sup>326</sup>

The wrestling and restlessness that Moyaert describes is something that I broader recognize, including in my own experiences and reflections on interreligious dialogue. Interreligious encounters do evoke certain theological or personal questions which are not always easy to answer. Yet, during the interviews and in my analysis afterward, I realized that the interviewees did not so much emphasize

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<sup>323</sup> Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder. *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 21-22 and 38.

<sup>324</sup> Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 226-227.

<sup>325</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 277.

<sup>326</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 299.

wrestling in relation to interreligious encounters and the question of openness and commitment. Even while they deliberately tried to train themselves in openness and allowed new insight to challenge their understandings. They described experiences in which their faith had been challenged or in which difficult questions were raised and situations in which they were forced to reconsider certain ideas or to think about why and what they actually believe. Finally, they gave examples of more personal confrontations with their own narrow mindedness. Most of these experiences were initially not very comfortable. This underscores that dialogue can indeed be challenging or difficult and, following Moyaert, that we do not only need to be aware of this but that we also need to accept it – we need a certain vulnerability. While this is also acknowledged by Newbigin and to a certain extent by van den Toren, I believe that Moyaert gives a better insight into how this vulnerability may be uncomfortable but also contribute to the fruitfulness of dialogue.

Nonetheless, Moyaert also risks to stress or value the uncertainty in dialogue too much. For, we already saw how the interviewees did not mainly describe their experiences as wrestling or as evoking restlessness and fragility, nor did they seem to primarily connect the challenging aspects of interreligious dialogue to the question of openness and commitment. Instead, they indicated that these challenges may be a reason for people to fear interreligious engagement but that they actually experienced dialogue as a very good exercise of faith. Ho, for example, describes interreligious encounters as fun, enlightening and devastating. Devastating because they show her own narrow mindedness, enlightening because they help her to live a bit more open and wiser in dealing with people, and fun because the encounters help her push the boundaries.<sup>327</sup> It is interesting that what Moyaert describes as fragility and vulnerability is here described as fun. One of the reasons, I believe, that Ho is able to describe these encounters as fun is because she believes that God uses the other to speak to her and because she sees the encounters as a way to depend more on God and deepen her relationship with God.<sup>328</sup> Although interreligious engagement initially raised some questions, rather than leading to great doubt, Ho felt that it actually resulted in a strengthening of her faith.<sup>329</sup> Like some of the other interviewees, she thus encourages other Christians to engage more in interreligious encounters as well, explaining that this does not require you to know everything about your faith.<sup>330</sup>

Like the other interviewees, however, Ho shows a serious and mature Christian faith. In this respect, I believe that Chua points to something important when he says, based on his own experiences with Christian students, that interreligious encounters may be more challenging for those who do not yet have a clear understanding of their faith of what it personally means to them.<sup>331</sup> Here I believe that

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<sup>327</sup> Ho, 3.38-41.

<sup>328</sup> Ho, 3.51-3.55.

<sup>329</sup> Ho, 3.61.

<sup>330</sup> Ho, 3.52 and 3.55.

<sup>331</sup> Chua, 8.8-9.

Rowans makes an important contribution when he underscores the importance of a strong Christian-Malaysian identity and self-understanding, which will enable Christians to proclaim with confidence and clarity and celebrate what is good in their own social context.<sup>332</sup> The profound transformation that can take place in interreligious dialogue means, according to him, that entering into dialogue indeed involves a certain amount of risk. But a church which is more secure in its self-identity will also be more confident in relating to others. Openness is thus rooted in a confident Malaysian-Christian identity, derived from and rooted in the body of Christ and one's cultural context.<sup>333</sup>

Both Moyaert and Rowans thus point to the importance of identity in the interreligious encounter, but in comparison, Moyaert's description of identity is more personal and individual, while Rowans places identity in a more communal perspective. This also influences their understanding of interreligious encounter, which is for Moyaert closely related to the individual and his or her search for identity and participation in the hermeneutical circle. I believe this reflects a more Western perspective, especially when we see that most of the interviewees and Rowans understand interreligious encounters mainly as ways to build relationships, understanding, and cooperation between different religious communities and individuals.<sup>334</sup> Rowans even specifically mentions that Christian identity should not be understood as a means of escape from the social realities of life or as only focused on the individual.<sup>335</sup> Besides that, Moyaert stresses the fragility of our identity that we may experience in dialogue, whereas Rowans chooses to stress the importance of a confident and rooted identity. A confidence and rootedness that may actually enable us to open ourselves. Following Rowans and Hwa, you could say that a Christian-Malaysian identity, through its rootedness in the Christians story and/or Jesus Christ and its cultural context, is able to combine openness and commitment. Even though a sense of fragility and vulnerability may indeed contribute to openness in dialogue this is thus not the only way to openness. A confident Christian identity, based on God's grace,

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<sup>332</sup> Rowans, *Proclaiming the Peacemaker*, 192. Rowans refers here to Hwa's idea of a kingdom identity, combining the Christian's identity as a member of the body of Christ with his or her identity within their own culture and society.

<sup>333</sup> Rowans, *Proclaiming the Peacemaker*, 192-196 and 226-227. Rowans also points out that the Christian identity is a gift of God and as such essentially relational. Referring to Ramachandra who says 'the very act that binds me to God in grace, binds me, simultaneously, to my neighbour in acceptance'.

<sup>334</sup> Although Yapp reflects more on the question of freedom of religious, I believe that his contribution is also relevant for our reflection interreligious engagement. According to him, the Western perspective is more focussed on the individual and the freedom of choice and change, but in the Asian context the freedom of religions is more focused on mutual respect and interpersonal relationships. Looking at the rest of the interviews, it is telling that respect and relationships are indeed some of the most recurrent themes.

<sup>335</sup> Rowans, *Proclaiming the Peacemaker*, 193. He cites Warren Beattie who points out that Asian writers have stressed the communal dimensions of the kingdom, both in relation to the Christian community and as a more holistic concept of how God seeks to be at work in society.



does not make openness impossible but can actually give us the confidence to really open and humble ourselves.

Finally, Moyaert states that we cannot escape our fragility or restlessness by trusting God, for even our faith is restless.<sup>336</sup> However, I believe that it is exactly trust in God, despite the many uncertainties or questions we may have, that characterizes faith. For faith is, as Newbigin argues, the courage to confidently affirm beliefs that can be doubted. As we saw, both Newbigin and van den Toren claim that this is possible because trust does not follow from the absence of doubts but from the Object of our trust.<sup>337</sup> Following this, I believe that, rooted in Christ, we may indeed enter dialogue in trust and confidence. Something that also characterizes Ho's engagement and reflections on interreligious encounters. For, she described the challenges or devastating experiences in dialogue as part of what God is learning her and as a reminder and encouragement to depend more on God.<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 287-288.

<sup>337</sup> Newbigin, *Basis, Purpose and Manner*, 74-75; Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 205-207.

<sup>338</sup> Ho, 3.55-3.57.

## 7. Conclusion

I started this thesis with the question ‘how does the practice of intentional interreligious encounter in Malaysia critically and constructively contribute to the theological debate on openness and commitment in the interreligious dialogue?’. In the previous chapter, I have tried to answer this question through a conversation between the reflections of the authors and the interviewees about openness and commitment in the interreligious dialogue. I believe that this conversation has shown that the experiences and reflections of the interviewees indeed contribute in several ways to the theological debate, which I will shortly outline below as a conclusion to this thesis.

First of all the interviews point out, in agreement with the contributions of the theological debate, that commitment, and openness in one’s faith and the interreligious dialogue is indeed not a choice between one or the other but rather that both are needed and present in the interreligious encounter. Almost all the interviewees demonstrated a wish to testify and share their faith, as well as, an effort to be open and learn from their partners in dialogue. They indicated that it is both important to know where you stand, to be open about that, and to realize that you do not possess the fullness of truth but that there is still a lot to learn. Like Moyaert and the other authors discussed, the interviews thus also warn for both relativism and closedness in dialogue.

Furthermore, we saw how humility and openness are regarded to be important values in dialogue, by both the interviewees and the authors, when we hope to learn and remain open to the broader work of God. In correspondence with Cornille, the interviewees find a foundation for openness and humility in their own faith tradition but, more than that, also in their personal faith and relationship with God. More than faith commitments the interviewees show a certain confidence in their faith that enables them to open themselves to the religious other and to be challenged in the interreligious encounter by different beliefs and practices. They shared how they are convinced in their faith, how they depend on God in dialogue, and how they see God at work in the religious other or the interreligious encounter. As such, the interviews reflect and illustrate Van den Toren’s and Newbigin’s claim for the possibility of a confident faith and genuine openness and humility, for a rootedness in Christ and the Christian community and an openness to the broader work of the Spirit. While not referring literally to these terms, they testify how they meet and experience God in dialogue and trust on his guidance and revealing power. This suggests that a confident faith or religious affirmations do not necessarily stand in the way of the possibility to learn and to be transformed. The way in which the interviewees combine humility and openness with their faith convictions even challenges the claim that we need to de-absolutize our truth claims if we wish to be truly open and engage in a fruitful dialogue. Furthermore, we can state that the interviews indicate that although dialogue remains by times a challenging or even vulnerable undertaking, it may, through confident engagement, also

become a strengthening and enriching experience. Moreover, the interviews show that faith or trust does not only lay at the basis of dialogue but also reinforces and grows in dialogue.

Based on the interviews and the theological debate, mutual learning can be seen as an important part of the interreligious dialogue, however, rather than relating this to a search for truth, as Cornille does, most of the interviewees describe how dialogue has deepened and enriched their faith and their understanding of the God in whom they believe. Furthermore, interreligious dialogue and engagement are foremost understood in the interviews as a way to build interreligious understanding, relations, and cooperation, which receives less attention in the theological debate. The interviews indicate that learning cannot take place in an unengaged or abstract manner, nor only at a theological level. Furthermore, the interviews show that interreligious engagement and dialogue is far more communal than indicated in the theological debate. Rather than relating dialogue to our identity or self-understanding, as Moyaert does, the interviewees describe dialogue and the engagement with people of other faiths as a calling of the church and Christians, and as necessary means to build the understanding and relationships between people of different faiths that are so hard needed. The contributions of the interviewees do not write off the role of personal identity in dialogue nor forms of dialogue that are concerned with more abstract or theological reflections, but it shows how the contributions in the theological debate of this thesis are also influenced by their context and more Western worldviews.

Finally, I believe that the interviews offer an important contribution to the theological debate by stressing the value and need of respect and relationships for a fruitful interreligious engagement. Relationships are not only seen by the interviewees as a necessary ground for openness but also as the most fruitful place for mutual learning. The interviews indicate that relationships create trust, understanding, respect, and true openness. Moreover, because of the all-encompassing character of faith, openness and learning can only be truly fruitful in relationships that are characterized by trust and where we do not only talk but also live and engage with the religious other. A dialogue that is not grounded in relationships or the lived experiences of people remains, according to the interviewees, somewhat superficial. Besides that, relationships offer an important base to give witness. The interviewees were critical about forms of evangelism that are only focussed on conversion, but they argue that faithful trust relationships provide a place where we can live out our faith and God's love and where we can even be open about and share of what we believe. In a relationship we can disagree without diminishing our openness, love, and respect for the other. This indicates that in such deep and true relationships with people of other faiths commitment and openness can be held together. There we can be honest and convinced about where we stand without closing ourselves to the religious other because these relationships are only possible when we continue to commit ourselves to be open and

respectful to the others faith. Relationships give us the time to learn from and reflect on what we encounter through the faith and life of the religious other.

To conclude this thesis, I believe that rooted in Christ, in the broader Christian community, and in deep and faithful engagement with people of other faiths, we truly grow into a deeper understanding of who God is.

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## Appendix 1 – Interview Guide

### Introduction

Questions about the interviewees personal involvement in intentional interreligious encounter.

- ➔ Inviting them to talk about their reasons to be involved in interreligious dialogue and the ways they take part in interreligious encounter.

Asking them how they value interreligious dialogue.

*Questions about the character and form of Interreligious dialogue and engagement.*

- ➔ Inviting the interviewees to share their vision on and examples of what meaningful or successful dialogue looks like.

- ➔ Asking them whether it is good to be open and why? And what this openness looks like?

*Questions about entering interreligious dialogue.*

- ➔ Inviting people to share their thoughts about what is needed in order to rightfully/successfully enter and engage in dialogue.

- ➔ Asking them whether commitment is part of this, and if that is a good thing. What is the basis of their commitment and to what do they commit?

*Questions about the experiences with the practice of intentional interreligious encounter, and the influence of this engagement.*

- ➔ Inviting people to talk about their experiences in interreligious encounter.

- ➔ Asking them whether these experiences are felt as enriching, challenging or both? And why?

*Questions about the meaning of openness and commitment, and their relation in interreligious dialogue.*

- ➔ Asking the interviewees how they interpret and value openness and commitment, and their relationship.

- ➔ Is it possible to be at the same time open and committed? Do they diminish or strengthen each other, and how?

- ➔ Are openness and commitment the right terms to describe the attitude in interreligious dialogue, what would you add?

### Closing