

Solidarity with the Religious Other

A Reflection on Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

James L. Fredericks

Problems arise when the framework of John Paul II's fulfillment theology is brought to bear on Buddhism. Examples of the author's own experience of dialogue with Buddhists help us to think in more constructive ways about Buddhism's Otherness and welcoming the religious Other as neighbor.

Some years ago, I had a student in my class named Muhammad. His parents are from Pakistan, but Muhammad was born in Los Angeles. He is a devout Muslim. He was in my Buddhism course. In class, Muhammad used to sit near a student named Nom (a drastic contraction of her actual name), who was born in Thailand and came to Los Angeles as a child. Nom is a devout Buddhist. One day Nom asked Muhammad why he was so interested in her religion. What Muhammad said in reply bears repeating: "I live in LA, so I need to know my neighbors." Sometimes new neighbors, like Muhammad and Nom, pose a challenge to American

James Fredericks is a Roman Catholic priest of the Archdiocese of San Francisco and a faculty member in the Department of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University. A specialist in interreligious dialogue, especially the dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity, he has lectured internationally. He was a Senior Fulbright Research Scholar in Kyoto, Japan, and held the Numata Chair in Buddhism and Culture at Ryukoku University in Kyoto. For many years, he has been a member of the Los Angeles Buddhist-Catholic Dialogue Group and the Bay Area Zen/Chan-Catholic Dialogue Group. In addition to many articles, he is the author of Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and the Non-Christian Religions (Paulist Press) and Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to a New Solidarity (Orbis Books).

society. For example, there have been problems when Sikh boys arrive at public high schools with their *kirpans*, the traditional sword or dagger worn by men of the Sikh tradition. A Muslim woman was required to take off her head scarf when she was on duty as a flight attendant. Not a few of the new neighbors have religious traditions that require them to slaughter animals. This is not always easy for Americans who grew up with the old Catholic-Protestant-Jew paradigm to take.

Our new neighbors pose a challenge to the church as well. There is, of course, the problem of religiously motivated intolerance, both within the church and in the wider society. We need to recognize, however, that our new neighbors bring with them an opportunity for the church as well. In the first section of *Lumen Gentium*, the Second Vatican Council taught that the church is “like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument” of “the unity of the whole human race” (no. 1). I want to reflect on the church’s mission to promote the unity of the whole human race in light of my two students, a Buddhist and a Muslim, neighbors in Los Angeles, studying together in a Catholic university. In welcoming the religious Other as a neighbor, the church is being faithful to its mission.

The Theology of Fulfillment

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed momentous developments in Roman Catholic thought about other religious communities. I want to summarize these developments by looking at the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and the writings of John Paul II.

At times, the council’s view of other religious communities has been interpreted in an overly optimistic manner. The council was quite clear about the universality of the offer of salvation to all human beings, regardless of their religious affiliation. The council was cautious, or ambiguous, about the role played by the many religions in the salvation of their adherents (Dupuis). For example, *Ad Gentes*, no. 3, teaches that God’s plan of salvation is not brought to fulfillment “secretly in the soul of [human beings].” Christian believers, therefore, should expect to find the saving work of the Holy Spirit mediated by social institutions, including religious institutions. Religions, however, are not mentioned. In fact, religions might have been intended for inclusion among the “attempts” that need to be “enlightened and healed,” as noted further on in *Ad Gentes*, no. 3. On the other hand, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 17 teaches that grace is available not only in the hearts of human beings, but also in their “rites and customs.”

John Paul II’s understanding of the diversity of religions is rooted in the council and at the same time a careful step beyond it. At the center of his theological vision is his understanding of the universal activity of the Holy Spirit. The pope’s thinking is clearly stated in *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 29, where he notes that the famous

Assisi meeting of October 1986, in which the pope invited religious leaders from many faiths together for prayer, was intended to confirm his conviction that “every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in every human heart.” Moreover, in his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), the pope recognized in the teachings of non-Christian believers an “effect of the Spirit of truth operating outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body . . .” which is so impressive, that Christians should be “ashamed at being often themselves so disposed to doubt concerning the truths revealed by God and proclaimed by the Church . . .” (RH, no. 6). Similarly, in *Dominium et Vivificantem*, the pope stated that “we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit, in a manner known only to God, offers every man the possibility of being associated with this Pascal Mystery” (DV, no. 53).

The background to the pope’s pneumatology can be found in *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22, which first speaks of the power of the Spirit to conform the human person to the likeness of the Christ. After making this point, the pastoral constitution goes on to claim:

All this holds true for Christians but also for all individuals of goodwill in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for all [cf. Rom 8:32], and since all human beings are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being associated, in a way known to God, with the Paschal Mystery.

The pope interprets this to mean that all human beings are called to the same supernatural destiny, regardless of their religious affiliation, and that the offer of salvation through the Spirit must in some way be universal. *Gaudium et Spes*, however, does not specify the means of this universal offering of salvation, except to say that “grace is active invisibly” in the hearts of all individuals of goodwill, presumably, individuals who are not baptized Christians.

If the council declined to state definitively that the supernatural grace is available in the other religious traditions, John Paul II moved decisively beyond the council in his pneumatology. The Holy Spirit is at work in every genuine human act of transcendence. This is because human acts of transcendence cannot be separated from the material, social, and cultural life of the human person. Therefore, the saving grace of the Holy Spirit empowers the human person’s self-realization through self-transcendence by means of our “rites and customs” as taught in *Ad Gentes*, no. 3. For John Paul, this must mean that a Buddhist is touched by God’s grace by means of Buddhist practice, not despite it. John Paul II took the council’s restraint as the starting point for his theology of religions, not the end point. In section 28 of *Redemptoris Missio*, for example, the pope teaches that the Holy Spirit is to be found “in human initiatives—including religious ones—and in mankind’s efforts to attain truth, goodness and God himself.” Section 28 should

be read in conjunction with section 10 of this encyclical; the pope affirms Christ as the one, universal mediation of grace, but also recognizes the possibility of “participated forms of mediation” in which other religious communities share in the one saving mediation of grace, which is Christ.

The pope’s pneumatological approach to religious diversity is an example of what has been called a “fulfillment theology of religions” (Knitter, 63–99). The universal human religious quest is marked by the working of the Holy Spirit in the various religions. This quest, however, finds its ultimate fulfillment in an explicit Christian faith in Christ and membership in the church. Thus, even while affirming the soteriological value of other religious traditions, John Paul II sees the relationship between the many religious paths and Christianity as one of aspiration and fulfillment.

The Buddhist Challenge

John Paul II’s pneumatology must be recognized, along with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, as a milestone in Christian thinking about the challenge posed by religious diversity. He has advanced a comprehensive theology of religions based on his vision of the universal action of the Holy Spirit. Christian dialogue with Buddhism, however, challenges the adequacy of this fulfillment theology as a basis for interreligious dialogue. In our dialogue with Buddhists, Buddhists and Christians have discovered many points of similarity connecting the two religions, in spiritual practice if not in doctrine. Without calling these similarities into question, I want to underscore the fact that the differences that distinguish Buddhism and Christianity are of genuine theological interest. Furthermore, if we are to recognize our new religious neighbors as our Other instead of merely a paler version of ourselves, Christians will have to learn how to recognize and honor these differences and respond to their theological importance. My basic complaint with the Roman Catholic theology of religions is that the fulfillment approach tends to minimize the theological significance of religious differences. My position, then, is that the pope’s pneumatology is a dramatic step forward for Christian thinking, but still inadequate to the needs of the church today given the diversity of religions and the need for dialogue with these religions.

The Christian community needs a theological account of the meaning of religious diversity. The fulfillment theology of John Paul II, without a doubt, is more adequate to the demands of Christian faith than any of the other alternatives (Fredericks 2004, 11–29). But when this theology is brought to bear as a framework for dialogue with Buddhists, problems arise. The Buddhist *Dharma* becomes a version of Christian faith. In dialogue, Christians tend to focus on the ways in which Buddhist teaching is compatible with Christian faith. What is “true and good” in Buddhism (to cite *Nostra Aetate*) is what Christians already know, from their own

faith, to be true and good. The fulfillment theology of religions is necessary for the church, but also a strategy of control which succeeds in keeping the Otherness of Buddhism at bay. Buddhism's Otherness is, without a doubt, a danger to established formulations of faith—but it also comes to us bearing a gift: the potential to transform faith. The fulfillment theology of religions, to the extent that it shelters faith from the Otherness of the *Dharma*, also succeeds in keeping Christians from appreciating the Buddhist Other as a neighbor. Let me offer some examples gleaned from my own dialogue with Buddhists.

Christians are sometimes surprised to learn that Buddhists do not believe in God. After they learn this about Buddhists, these same Christians presume that Buddhists are atheists. In fact, Buddhists are neither theists nor atheists. They are not agnostics either. The Buddha taught that the path that leads to the ending of suffering requires us to let go of our attachments—our attachments to the gods and even our attachment to God. The Bible testifies to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who has entered into history in order to change the course of events in accordance with his plan of redemption. This is the God that utterly transcends the world as the eternal “Thou” that has created everything out of nothing. Buddhism teaches that we should renounce not only our belief in such a God, but even more important, our faith in this God. Buddhists do not seek mystical union with a deity that transcends us. In fact, Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, teaches that this transcendent God must be negated in the process of “awakening” to the true reality of all beyond which there is no transcendence (see Hisamatsu). Instead of the transcendence of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Zen Buddhists seek *shin-nyo*, the “true suchness of all”—pure immanence without any transcendence. Zen Buddhism and Christianity are quite different in the way they construe what might be called “ultimate reality.” To the extent that Zen offers a profound alternative to Christian faith in God, this fact should be of great theological interest to Christians. How does Buddhism challenge us to think in new ways about the doctrine of creation? Environmental ethics? The theology of revelation? When a fulfillment theology of religions is taken as a guiding principle for dialogue, however, Buddhism's Otherness tends to be pushed to one side in order to give more attention to points of Buddhist doctrine and practice that seem familiar to Christian believers. The “true suchness of all,” to the extent that it is taken seriously, has sometimes been

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shoehorned into Christian mysticism or a Franciscan embrace of the natural world, ignoring it as a rejection of the “holiness” of the Christian God.

Another useful example has to do with the spiritual dimensions of anger. There is a long tradition within Christianity and Buddhism of looking at anger negatively as a “deadly sin” (Christianity) and as one of the “three poisons” (Buddhism). Dialogue on the similarity of these teachings is certainly worthwhile. Buddhists, however, are very skittish in regard to the practice of evoking anger in another in the search for justice (as with the nonviolent practice of Martin Luther King) and the notion of “righteous anger” is unintelligible to a Buddhist. This difference should be of genuine theological interest to Christians. The significance of the inability of our Buddhist dialogue partners to embrace the prophetic dimensions of anger is obscured by our fulfillment theology. In dialogue, attention is shifted away from this disagreement about anger as a virtue toward virtues that Buddhists and Christians have in common—that is, humility, self-renunciation, docility—as confirmation of the work of the Holy Spirit in the religious lives of Buddhists, in keeping with the official fulfillment theology.

A third example has to do with human rights. At least in official documents, Roman Catholics have embraced the notion of universal human rights since John XXIII’s *Pacem in Terris* (1963). Today there is a lively debate among Buddhists over the propriety of defending human rights as a spiritual practice appropriate for Buddhists (Fredericks 2003). Some Buddhists argue that human rights is a notion that is foreign to Buddhism and incompatible to it. Buddhist ethics is not based on the assertion of rights but rather the practice of compassion. A rights approach to social problems leads to an adversarial mentality and a negative notion of freedom (see Ihara; Junger). The hesitancy of Buddhists regarding human rights should raise stimulating questions for Christians as well. Like Buddhism, Christian ethics is a virtue ethics. How does the embrace of human rights distort the Christian notion of agape as something that is commanded of us? How compatible is the notion of human rights, a doctrine that comes not from Christianity but from Western liberalism, with Christian faith? No Buddhist condones torture. Many Buddhists, however, are dubious about the usefulness of human rights as a Buddhist way to address social problems. The Otherness of our Buddhist neighbors raises important questions for Christians. The fulfillment theology of religions, however, tends to obscure this Otherness.

Interreligious Dialogue as Solidarity

Claiming that the fulfillment theology of religions is inadequate as a framework for Christian dialogue with other religious communities implies that it is not helpful in assisting Christians to welcome the religious Other as a neighbor. I come to this conclusion even as I recognize the pope’s contribution to the theology of

religions as the most responsive to the universalist character of Christian faith in Christ as the one mediation of grace. In this final section, I want to reflect on inter-religious dialogue as an alternative *praxis* to this fulfillment theology and as relatively more adequate to the needs of the church today. Interreligious dialogue promotes solidarity among religious communities, and we need to carry on our dialogues with this purpose in mind.

For John Paul II, “solidarity” is a reflection of the nature of the human person. Human beings are spiritual subjects that achieve themselves by means of participation in a community of other spiritual subjects. The background to this vision of our humanity is the pope’s understanding of human interdependence today. Interdependence is assuredly an economic reality, but in addition, a political, cultural, and increasingly religious reality as well. The fact of our interdependence, however, is morally ambiguous. Interdependence can be coercive and dehumanizing. The fear of interdependence and its abuse can produce militant responses (sometimes religiously legitimated). But in addition, the fact of our interdependence must also be seen as an opportunity as well. Human dignity cannot be realized apart from our actual connection with other human beings. For this reason, interdependence is not something we should try to escape (this is the futile hope of all forms of individualism) or dominated (as in what the pope calls “savage capitalism”). Instead, interdependence is something to be embraced as a means to a moral end: the dignity of each and every human being and the common good of our entire community (including the environment).

The embrace of our interdependence as a way of promoting human dignity is what John Paul calls the “virtue” of solidarity. On this, the crucial text is found in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38, where the pope calls us to embrace the fact of our interdependence on one another as something integral to our personhood:

It is above all a question of interdependence, sensed as a system determining relationships in the contemporary world, in its economic, cultural, political and religious elements, and accepted as a moral category. When interdependence becomes recognized in this way, the correct response as a moral and social attitude, as a virtue, is solidarity.

The pope taught that interdependence must be accepted as a “moral category,” which I interpret as meaning that our interdependence needs to be recognized as a means to a moral end, namely, the common good and the dignity of every human being. Alienation marks the failure to achieve this moral end. Solidarity must be counted a sign of success. Therefore, interdependence is far more than merely a curious fact having to do with our external circumstances that is imposed on us by the economics of late-capitalism and the global technologies of transportation and communication. Being interdependent is a reflection of the human situation and brings with it moral consequences. The embrace of our interdependence as a

means to promote human flourishing must be recognized as a virtue rooted in the nature of the human person as a social being. This is what the pope means by “the virtue of solidarity.”

In *Centesimus Annus*, we find a discussion of dialogue as a way to cultivate the virtue of solidarity. The first point that the pope makes is that dialogue is a way to realize solidarity because it creates “real communities of persons that strengthen the social fabric, preventing society from becoming an anonymous and impersonal mass” (CA, no. 49). Let me hasten to note that, in this encyclical, the pope is referring to political dialogue, not interreligious dialogue per se. However, I believe that the point the pope makes in regard to political dialogue has important ramifications for our appreciation of the social and theological significance of interreligious

dialogue for the church’s mission. We need to recognize that the church’s dialogue with its religious neighbors has the potential to create new kinds of community that strengthen the social fabric by bringing together those who follow divergent religious paths. The second point to be underscored in the pope’s teaching is that political dialogue promotes solidarity because it creates a space for difference, pluralism, a lack of consensus, and even opposition (CA, no. 22). This is because in the solidarity of dialogue we finally have an opportunity to get beyond passive tolerance to active engagement in a way that honors the real differences that distinguish us. Once again, the implications for interreligious dialogue are substantial. Dialogue with our religious neighbors can create solidarity by engaging what the fulfillment theology of religions marginalizes: religious

differences. A dialogue that is content to remain in the shallow water of similarity will lead to a shallow solidarity. The pope is saying that pluralism, difference, and the lack of consensus are ways of participating in the Other. To the extent that a fulfillment theology of religions renders the Other a version of the same truth that is already affirmed by Christian faith, the potential of interreligious dialogue for creating solidarity is diminished. The recognition of the Otherness of our religious neighbors in our dialogues with them leads to a solidarity more radical than that achieved by a fulfillment theology of religions.

Welcoming the religious Other as a neighbor demands more of the church than may first seem to be the case. The challenge of religious diversity cannot be limited to the problem of overcoming intolerance. The church’s own theology of fulfillment brings with it problems that are not generally recognized. Guided by this theology, we too easily recognize the Buddhist as neighbor while failing to appreciate this

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neighbor as truly Other. The fulfillment theology would have us believe that Buddhists are to be welcomed as neighbors because, fundamentally, they are like us. This is not solidarity. In my view, this is not even being truly neighborly. I also believe, however, that welcoming the religious Other also brings with it an opportunity for the church. At heart, it is an opportunity for ministry. In the introduction, I noted that the first section of *Lumen Gentium* envisions the church as “a sacrament or as a sign and instrument” of “the unity of the whole human race.” Almost always, these words have been interpreted in terms of a theology of fulfillment, in which the plan of God will be eschatologically fulfilled by the church as a universal community of faith embracing all human beings. In the shorter term, the words of the dogmatic constitution can also be interpreted apart from the theology of fulfillment. Beyond just tolerance of religious differences, the church should dedicate itself to promoting solidarity among religious communities today. Solidarity, as John Paul II envisioned it, does not presume a fundamental similarity in which differences have become insignificant. True solidarity creates a space in which difference can be recognized and even honored. This, I argue, is the proper goal of interreligious dialogue today and the best way for Christians to welcome the religious Other as neighbor.

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