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Intercultural Theology vis-à-vis Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue

Edited by
Francis-Vincent Anthony

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Editor

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Contents

About the Editor

Francis-Vincent Anthony

Francis-Vincent Anthony, born in Mumbai (India), is currently Full Professor of Practical Theology at Salesian Pontifical University, Rome. His areas of theoretical and empirical research are inculturation, interculturality, interreligious dialogue, human rights, religious education, youth ministry, migration, etc. He has published and edited over a dozen volumes and over a hundred articles in specialized journals and edited books. Noteworthy among his publications related to interculturality and dialogue are the following: *Ecclesial praxis of inculturation. Toward an empirical-theological theory of inculturizing praxis* (LAS, Roma 1997) and *Religion and Conflict. Religious beliefs and conflict attribution among Christian, Muslim and Hindu students in Tamil Nadu, India* (Brill, Leiden 2014). The latter publication was written in collaboration with Chris Hermans and Carl Sterkens of Radboud University Nijmegen. Among the numerous publications on human rights, the recently edited volume, edited together with Hans-Georg Ziebertz, *Human rights and the separation of state and religion*, Religion and Human Rights, Vol. 10 (Springer, Cham 2023), may be mentioned.

Preface

Yādum Ūrae, Yāvarum Kaelīr means "All places are our homeland, all are our kindreds" in Tamil, the oldest classical language still flourishing. Tamil is currently used by over 80 million people around the world. The proverbial expression from the poem *Puranānuru* by Kaniyan Poongundran, an influential Tamil poet associated with the Sangam Age (between 6th Century BCE and 1st Century CE of what is today known as Tamil Nadu, India), underscores that relationality is an expression of our attitude towards a 'place' and 'people'. What is perhaps taken for granted by the poet is that relationality is shaped by the dynamic features of 'history' and 'culture', language being the quintessence of these.

Even if the native Indian context breathes cultural and linguistic pluralism, it was the experience of migrating to Italy as a student and now as a professor—altogether, for over 40 years since 1981—that has marked the various shades of my intercultural experience. Since the time of my Doctoral research (1989–1993), rapport between societal culture and Christian faith has been the centre of my interest. Convinced of the relevance of an intercultural approach to youth work, as Director of the Institute of Pastoral Theology, I had the opportunity to organize a series of fifteen seminars (2009–2017) on an intercultural approach to youth ministry, engaging colleagues and students of the university in this enterprise. Such a research process entails interdisciplinary, intercultural, interdenominational and interreligious relationality. As if to crown these efforts, on 21st January 2021, I received a surprise invitation from the prestigious online journal "*Religions*" to be the Guest Editor of a Special Issue on the proposed and concorded theme "Intercultural theology vis-à-vis ecumenical and interreligious dialogue".

I am indebted to the authors and co-authors who joined me in this adventure by contributing creatively to this Special Issue in spite of the difficulties posed by COVID-19 during these years, each of them bringing their own specialization and scientific acumen into the area of intercultural theology, thus opening up original vistas of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue for reinvigorating the *cosmotheandric* communion. This complex leitmotif has been artistically captured by the watercolour painted specifically for this Volume by Assistant Prof. Francisco José Enríquez Zulaica (mestizo Mexican) at the Salesian Pontifical University, Rome.

Francis-Vincent Anthony
Editor

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Editorial

Intercultural, Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue: An Introduction

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Religious traditions with their universal intent on human salvation or well-being have de-territorialized themselves or migrated from the place of their origin along trade routes in the company of merchants, invaders, and colonizers. Moreover, in the contemporary world, every other aspect of society, namely, economic, socio-political, and cultural, has tended to de-territorialize. The intersection of complex features of diverse cultural and religious traditions in a globalized world thus poses daunting challenges and innovative opportunities.

While cultures differ in their core aspect of meaning–value systems and linguistic-expressive systems, giving rise to socio-political systems and ecological-economic systems (Anthony 1997), religions vary in their articulation of transcendence and immanence. Religions can uphold absolute transcendence (e.g., Islam, Judaism) or absolute immanence (e.g., Taoism, Confucianism), or they can take the mediating stance of immanent-transcendence (e.g., Christianity, Hinduism) or transcendent-immanence (e.g., Buddhism) (Panikkar 2008).

Although distinction can be made between religion and culture in the modern secular context, in its origin, the former is so bound to the latter, as soul to body (Panikkar 1991), that separating them would mean the decline and demise of both. The strong bond between religion and its culture of origin faces a challenge as the former enters new cultural territories. The challenge is to express and share the religious core, integrating with features of new cultures through the process of inculturation/acculturation. Given that the newly encountered cultures themselves are generally animated by a religious core, the migrant religion faces the dilemma of complete isolation to preserve its identity or full immersion, risking self-destructive syncretism. Hence, as a religion moves from one context into another, it necessitates a critical diachronic intercultural dialogue to maintain and develop its identity; when it spreads across diverse contexts simultaneously, it needs to engage in a critical synchronic intercultural dialogue to maintain unity in diversity (Anthony 2012). Since culture is a dynamic reality, religious traditions have to engage in intercultural theology both diachronically and synchronically to maintain and progress in their understanding of the transcendental reality and be relevant to the local context and the world at large.

The history of religions testifies to the inner divisions or sectarianism based on religio-cultural sensitivities. In Christianity, this may be exemplified by the emergence of churches, such as the Coptic Orthodox Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Anglican Church, Lutheran Church, and the Roman Catholic Church. Besides historical socio-political factors, it cannot be denied that underlying the denominational differences, there are religious–cultural and linguistic factors in comprehending and expressing the Christian faith. Analogously, this is true in the case of other religious traditions: for example, sectarian divisions in Hinduism, like Shaivism and Vaishnavism, or inner divisions in Islam in terms of Sunni and Shi'ah communities. A dialogue for unity in diversity among denominations or sects of religious traditions would require an interdenominational or ecumenical dialogue, which could be rendered possible via the complex process of intercultural theologizing. Divisions, in a way, point to the monocultural assertion of religious truth as against the intercultural exploration of transcendental reality.

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The fact that culture is enlivened by a religious core implies that one cannot engage in intercultural theology without some dialogue with the religious core of an encountered culture or with its ideological core, as in the case of secular culture. Likewise, an interreligious dialogue can be facilitated and furthered through intercultural theology as the two represent intersecting features of a complex process. Such a process can forestall further divisions and even help overcome existing rifts both within and between religious traditions. Moreover, intercultural theology, when facilitating ecumenical and interreligious encounters, can provide a deeper scrutiny of the divine mystery, a progressive consolidation of unity-in-diversity, and a wholesome experience of *cosmotheandric* (Cosmic-Divine-Human) wellbeing (Panikkar 1993, 2008, 2010).

The focus of the present Special Issue is to carry forward intercultural theology as a process not only for enriching theological discourse within the context of one's own faith-community but also as an added stimulus for engaging in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. The centrality of culture in ecumenical and interreligious engagements suggests that these, in turn, can give rise to a multifaceted intercultural theology.

The scope of this Special Issue, then, is to explore innovative aspects of intercultural theology in relation to an ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. The efforts made by scholars in the thirteen contributions can help overcome the confessional or sectarian view of intercultural theology and find its full significance and rightful place in close association with ecumenism, interreligiousity, and interdisciplinarity. The contributions of the authors, in fact, bring into dialogue various religious traditions (Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, African religion, Confucianism), various Christian denominations (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Pentecostal/Charismatic and Independent churches), and diverse socio-cultural linguistic contexts (Russian, Greek, South African, Asian, Indian, Chinese, post-colonial) and interdisciplinary perspectives (theological, philosophical, practical/pastoral, spiritual, catechetical and educational). We offer a synthetic panorama of the contributions based on the abstracts and evince how these add to the existing literature on intercultural theology and enhance *cosmotheandric* communion and wellbeing (see Special Issue: https://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special_issues/ITVEID, accessed on 29 August 2023).

Henning Wrogemann's article that introduces "Intercultural Theology as In-Between Theology" takes up the profile of intercultural theology against the background of world Christianity and the anthropology of Christianity and defines it as an in-between theology with respect to factors such as audience, media, power, methodology, plurality, and connectivity. According to the author, intercultural theology should be understood as both a descriptive and normative discipline, the driving force behind it being the universal-missionary truth claim of salvation and being committed to a comprehensive understanding of reality and theology.

Opening the discussion with reference to ecumenism, Johan Buitendag and Corneliu C. Simut focus on "Emerging Religious Consciousness: A *Cosmotheandric* Understanding of Reality in the Light of Sophiology of Some Russian Theologians towards an Eco-theology". It appears that the sophiology of Russian Silver Age theologians (e.g., Solovyov, Bulgakov, and Florensky) can open up a vista in the spirit of aggiornamento to a meta-religious approach recognizing the infinite capacity of humanity to transcend particularized religious identities and to belong in different ways to, with, and in God. Sophiology, then, is a form of progressive Christianity that brings together philosophy and faith in promoting an ecological public theology.

In his paper "Charismatic Pneumatology as Ecumenical Opportunity", Jason Wesley Alvis engages the work of three emerging Pentecostal/Charismatic thinkers whose pneumatologies provide novel opportunities to think more carefully about 'relationality' and ecumenical unity. Nimi Wariboko's pneumatology helps us acknowledge the very kind of relational ontology God has with Godself as a split subject, thereby disrupting not only our all-too-human meaning-making process but also the way God signifies the world for us. Amos Yong's pneumatology emphasizes human practice or an 'orthopraxy' that is polyphonous, historically rooted, and concerned with spiritual gifts not only for sanctifica-

tion but also for worldwide witness. Finally, Clark Pinnock emphasizes the connections between creativity and relationality, suggesting how at-one-ment is also the telic work of the Spirit.

Michael Nausner's contribution, "Culture-Specific and Cosmopolitan aspects of Christian Coexistence: A Postcolonial Perspective on Ecumenical Relations", suggests that the academic discourse on postcolonial theory and the ecclesial movement of ecumenism are siblings of sorts in as much as they both deal with the lingering consequences of past violence and the tensions between particularity and universality. Hence, a growing awareness of the problem of postcolonial conditions in the ecumenical movement and Simón Pedro Arnold's suggestion of an 'inter theology' that is sensitive to power dynamics and cultural intermingling in global Christianity have their relevance. In a similar vein, Claudia Jahnel argues for an intercultural theology that takes processes of hybridization seriously and calls for forms of 'vernacular ecumenism'. To understand and recognize the complexities in these postcolonial Christian identity formations, some kind of 'cosmopolitan ecumenism', as André Munzinger calls it, needs to be developed. In this way, hybrid cultural and theological formations can be recognized, and hegemonic universalisms resisted.

Extending the discussion to religious pluralism, Vojko Strahovnik, in his contribution "Holism of Religious Beliefs as a Facet of Intercultural Theology and a Challenge for Interreligious Dialogue", argues for a holistic understanding of religious beliefs and suggests that the formation and maintenance of religious beliefs are holistically sensitive to background information, which includes the culture's meaning–value system. Beliefs embed their appreciation of this background without the believer being explicitly conscious of how it has shaped them. Any model of intercultural theology must then understand religious belief holistically if it purports to facilitate interreligious dialogue. Holism is a vital epistemic and pragmatic facet of intercultural theology. The article concludes by outlining the significance of epistemic humility for interreligious and intercultural understanding.

Shruti Dixit's contribution "The Apocalypse as a *Cosmotheandric* Communion: A Hindu-Christian Dialogue" focuses on apocalyptic theologies in the context of Hindu and Christian settings in India and how they interact, creating the possibility for an interfaith dialogue. Based on Raimon Panikkar's neologism '*cosmotheandric* vision,' the paper establishes a relation between intercultural theologies and interfaith dialogue. The apocalypse can be viewed as being a constant reminder of the *cosmotheandric* nature of the universe for Hindus and Christians alike, fostering a dialogue between the two religions and allowing for their hermeneutical differences. The Apocalypse can then be viewed as an instance of *cosmotheandric* union and absolute togetherness, wherein cultural and religious differences disappear with the consciousness of the whole: the One.

In their contribution "Invigorating Interfaith Consciousness for the Common Good: Reimagining the Role of African Religion and Pentecostalism in Contemporary South Africa", Gallous Atabongwoung, Johannes M. Lütz, and Denise A. Austin investigate some of the factors that could limit harmony between African religion and Pentecostalism. After making reference to some definitions and historical context, they discuss the power and legacy of anti-apartheid interfaith solidarity. They then explore the ongoing factors hindering interfaith engagements between the African religion and Pentecostalism in South Africa. Utilizing Walter Hollenweger's Pentecostal intercultural theology, they argue that expressive liturgy for biodiversity and sustainability, communal participation for reconciliation, and experiential spirituality focused on land care could provide a potential 'fourth' approach to the interfaith dialogue for African religion and Pentecostalism.

Widening the perspective to include the Islamic tradition, Nur Serikovich Kirabaev, and Olga Vasilievna Chistyakova compare "The Human Being in Eastern Church Father's and Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology". They analyze two historical types of philosophical culture: the classical Eastern Patristics and Arab–Muslim medieval thought. The focus on the religious doctrine of man allows the intercultural and inter-theological nature of these traditions to be elucidated. In more specific terms, the authors examine the understanding of the human being as emerging in the Nicaea and post-Nicaea periods

of Eastern patristics—Athanasius of Alexandria and Maximus the Confessor—with Abu Hamid al-Ghazali as the most insightful representative of the Sufi philosophical-theological system in the Middle Ages. After presenting the Christological views of Athanasius of Alexandria and Maximus the Confessor, the authors take up Al-Ghazali's holistic and systematized doctrine of humanity. Conclusions are drawn about the comparability and the presence of intersections between Eastern Christian, Byzantine, and Muslim forms of thought.

Roberto Catalano elucidates "Pope Francis' Culture of Dialogue as Pathway to Interfaith Encounter: A Special Focus on Islam". Since 2013, the pope appeared to be unambiguously committed to finding an alternative pathway to the much-publicized category of the 'clash of civilizations', which, over the last few decades, has been the reference paradigm in Christian–Muslim relationships. Papal initiatives, gestures, and journeys have consistently aimed at a 'culture of dialogue and encounter'. The author seeks to show how Bergoglio's engagement to establish constructive dialogical rapports with Muslims is an effective way toward the implementation of the Second Vatican Council while opening avenues for what could be defined as 'interreligious synodality'.

In a similar vein, Francis-Vincent Anthony takes up the question of "Intercultural Lived Ecclesiology: The Asian Synodal Praxis of *Communio, Partecipatio et Missio Inter Gentes*". The author examines the crucial issue—to a great extent ignored—of the intercultural lived ecclesiology associated with the *inter gentes* synodal praxis of the Catholic church. Although the synodal journey appears to be promising, the endogenous and exogenous ecclesial and societal differences implied in the *inter gentes* discernment can render it a complex transformative endeavor, entailing reciprocal enrichment and mutual critique. Making a synthesis of the views associated with inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and human flourishing that emerged in various episcopal conferences in Asia in dialogue with some key themes of the German Episcopal Conference, the author traces the intercultural challenges and prospects of *communio, partecipatio et missio inter gentes* with a view to transforming the Church's way of being and functioning.

Moving on to the practical theological area of education, Antony Christy Lourdunathan elaborates on "Intercultural Theology Competence for an Intercultural Faith Education". Taking for granted Intercultural theology as the bedrock of faith education in an multicultural context, the author seeks to enumerate the specific competencies that can render the process of intercultural faith education possible, significant, and feasible. From a catechetical or faith education point of view, this article analyses the three perspectives of faith that intercultural theology should promote, namely, the dialogic personalization of faith, the prophetic challenging of faith, and the cohesive exchange of faith—corresponding, respectively, to personal and interpersonal dimensions, communitarian and social dimensions and expressive and missionary dimensions of faith. Each of these three perspectives declinate itself into at least three specific competencies, amounting to nine in all. Interpreting each of these competencies and their distinctive contributions, the article configures the foundational framework of intercultural theology for intercultural faith education.

In a similar vein, Thor-André Skrefsrud focuses on "Rethinking the Intercultural Potential of Religious Education in Public Schools: Contributions from Intercultural Theology". The author studies the question of how intercultural theology can inspire a critical and constructive reflection on the intercultural potential of non-confessional religious education (RE). Taking the Norwegian non-confessional RE subject as a starting point, the author draws attention to the tendency to present religions, worldviews, and denominations as single entities with distinct characteristics. As emphasized by Jackson, Jones, Meyer, and others, a systemic approach can largely capture the institutionalized sides of religion. It means that in schools, the intercultural dimension of RE could easily be reduced to emphasize the students' need for encyclopedic knowledge regarding different traditions, overlooking how religion is embedded in social life and transforms, develops, and interconnects through everyday practices outside of institutionalized religious stand. It is then crucial to examine how intercultural theology can create critical awareness of the inner

diversity and interconnectedness of denominations and religious traditions. The study posits that the descriptive and normative framework of intercultural theology can inspire educators to reflect critically on the intercultural dimension of a non-confessional RE.

Focusing on the pastoral–spiritual domain, Caroline Yih examines "The Impact of Cultural Diversity on End-of-Life Care", that is, how end-of-life care needs and expectations are unique and are influenced by the individual's cultural conditioning, values, and beliefs. In the pursuit of quality end-of-life care provision within the increasingly complex and diverse contemporary medical context, it is vital for cultural idiosyncrasies to be taken into consideration in order to attend to the individual patient's needs and end-of-life goals. Palliative chaplains, as spiritual care specialists within the multidisciplinary healthcare team, play a crucial role in the support and facilitation of the holistic vision of end-of-life care delivery. Using Hong Kong as a case study, this author examines the impact of cultural diversity on the effectiveness of the chaplains' delivery of end-of-life spiritual care. Specifically, special attention is paid to two challenges arising in the Confucian cultural context: the cultural taboo of death and the cultural idiosyncrasies in end-of-life communication. The article seeks to highlight the cultural incongruencies within the current chaplaincy professional formation and to sustain chaplains in becoming culturally competent practitioners in the pluralistic healthcare landscape.

In conclusion, let me take this opportunity to thank sincerely Jan Holton, Heup Young Kim, Stephen Morgan, Michael Northcott, Thomas St James O'Connor, Corneliu Simut, and numerous other anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback and constructive criticism. I would also like to express my gratitude to Bella Xu and the editorial staff at *Religions* for their prompt support in the production of this Special Issue. It is hoped that this collection of essays will stimulate further research in the complex area of intercultural theologizing in association with ecumenical and interreligious dialogue with the view to nurturing *cosmotheandric* communion and wellbeing.

I would like to dedicate this volume to Prof. Michael Amaladoss SJ, the Founder-Director of the Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions, Chennai (2003–2018), for being a constant source of inspiration since my doctoral dissertation under his guidance (Anthony 1997).

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Article

Intercultural Theology as In-Between Theology

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Abstract: Since the beginning of the 21st century, the term intercultural theology has been gaining more and more traction. At the same time, the terms world Christianity and anthropology of Christianity have also become established. This article inquires into the profile of intercultural theology against the other two terms and defines the subject as in-between theology with regard to such factors as audience, media, power, methodology, plurality, and connectivity. Looking forward, the author identifies current challenges and proposes that intercultural theology should be understood as a both descriptive and normative discipline, that the driving force behind it is the universal-missionary truth claim of the New Testament message of salvation, and that—as a subject with a primarily systematic orientation—it is committed to a comprehensive understanding of reality and theology.

Keywords: intercultural theology; mission studies; world Christianity; anthropology of Christianity; semiotics; discourse theory; intercultural hermeneutics; theology of religions

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1. Intercultural Theology over against Ecumenical and Interreligious Studies

What is intercultural theology about? In terms of academic history, the discipline emerged out of the field of mission studies (Cartledge 2011; Wrogemann 2016, pp. 1–28; Phan 2008; Flett and Wrogemann 2020). So, is this just a new label for the same old subject? Does it mean that everything remains the same? Or is it the other way round: Is it about bidding farewell to the subject of mission in a global and plural world, and celebrating the diversity of cultures and religions under the term intercultural theology instead? Does the novelty of the term consist in not only acknowledging diversity but also leaving it unchallenged as a friendly gesture of approval? Additionally, what exactly would that look like? Is intercultural theology a collection discipline that meticulously compiles every new form of Christian presence from the various continents in an album entitled "the diversity of Christianity"? Does intercultural theology not also have to do with critical and thus evaluative questions? To take it one step further: Is intercultural theology about "theology" in the sense of written texts? Is it merely about the products of contextual theologians, such as the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologists (EATWOT)? Or would a focus on the elite discourses of the EATWOT not simply circumvent the mass of Christian life on the grassroots level?

To provide orientation in this subject area, I would like to propose the following theses:

1. Intercultural theology is not only concerned with "theology" in the sense of academic texts, that is, with explicit theologies, but also with implicit theologies expressed in other media, such as songs, poetry, dances, or graphic representations.
2. Intercultural theology is not only about "culture"; rather, this term also covers other categories such as context (economic, social, societal, ecological, religious, etc.) and locality. Since a technical term has to be succinct, it cannot represent all these aspects in and of itself. However, it must be clear to those who use this term that "intercultural" does not only refer to "culture" in the narrow sense.

3. Intercultural theology should not be confused with ecumenical studies in the sense of traditional denominational studies, since, in the subject of intercultural theology, the whole range of religious and cultural studies methods is or may be brought to bear, depending on the topic.
4. Neither can intercultural theology simply be allowed to disintegrate into "inter-religious" theology in the sense of a pluralism of arbitrariness, since intercultural theology primarily reflects on Christianity as a global presence with many local variants. Among other things, intercultural theology reflects about *boundary work* to other religions. (Wrogemann 2019)

Intercultural theology is therefore neither a new label for mission studies, nor a completely different subject; intercultural theology has a broader horizon than ecumenical studies and a decidedly Christian-denominational profile in contrast to pluralistic approaches. It deals with the subject area of Christianity as a globally present religious configuration. Furthermore, intercultural theology needs to be distinguished from the two disciplines represented by *world Christianity* and *anthropology of Christianity*.

2. Intercultural Theology as Opposed to World Christianity and Anthropology of Christianity

Since the beginning of the 21st century, two academic terms besides intercultural theology have become established at the university level, namely, *world Christianity* and *anthropology of Christianity*. What are the differences between them? In short, world Christianity takes a primarily (though not exclusively) historical approach: Since the 1960s, Christianity has continued to expand globally, developing an increasing variety of forms in the process (Sanneh 1989; Bediako 2011). The task of world Christianity is to describe these developments (Robbins 2003; Tan and Tran 2016; Cabrit et al. 2017; Frederiks and Nagy 2020). The first main challenge facing the discipline is to provide as balanced an account of Christianity as possible, since the question arises as to who claims what to be essential or significant, and from which perspective. Protestant scholars, for example, have often dismissed Orthodox traditions (Daughrity 2013; Hann 2014; Nagy 2017); a focus on Latin America, Africa, and Asia has often led to the exclusion of Australia and Oceania; and, from a global perspective, the dominance of English-language contributions marginalizes French and Spanish research.

A second challenge is how to *frame* the production of knowledge: Which schemas are employed (Frederiks 2020)? Is the focus on center and periphery? Is there talk of multiple centers? Is the conceptualization framed in terms of network structures? Is the normative goal defined as an attempt to offer as "neutral" a representation of the whole as possible, or is the talk about the greatest possible neutrality viewed as an effort to "obfuscate" the "true" power relations, as postcolonial criticism contends (Gruber 2017)? Among many other issues, a third challenge is, of course, to understand local variants of Christianity as much as possible on the basis of their own presuppositions.

As the name suggests, *world Christianity* approaches attempt to consider the big picture, whereas the *anthropology of Christianity* focuses on describing *one* local variant of Christianity at a time and—in certain instances—on deriving applications to other phenomena from it as well (Cannell 2006; Engelke and Tomlinson 2006; Barker 2012, 2014; Robbins 2014). While *world Christianity* proceeds along a predominantly historical tack, the orientation of the *anthropology of Christianity* is ethnological and thus empirical in nature. *Field work* takes center stage in the latter discipline. It goes without saying that historical work is part of the process. A prominent point of focus is the relationship between continuity and transformation, that is, the question of the extent to which a local ethnic group integrates Christian elements into an existing structure, or conversely, the extent to which this structure is transformed by Christian elements. Questions regarding the relationship of *agency* in cross-cultural interactions are also important, as is the question of the interplay between local and global phenomena.

In contrast to both the historical focus of world Christianity and the empirical focus of anthropology of Christianity, intercultural theology operates with a systematic focus. As with the other two disciplines, this is a matter of emphasis; that is to say, adherents of the discipline may also conduct historical, empirical-anthropological, and cultural and religious studies research. However, as the term "theology" indicates, intercultural theology is not only a matter of descriptive research; rather, normative statements (formulated after due philosophy of science deliberations) are also appropriate to this discipline (Wrogemann 2016, pp. 22–25).

3. Intercultural Theology as Opposed to Metatheologies

With regard to normative statements, intercultural theology is sometimes viewed as a kind of ethical metatheology. Those who hold to this viewpoint believe that specific local theologies give rise to doctrinal imports, that is, to ethical imperatives that every theology must take into account. For instance, scholars may point to Latin America to make reference to "Andine" theologies, which are particularly concerned with a theological appreciation of the Earth as an ecological context. The thesis is that—contrary to the "European reason" profile—other concepts of reason must be considered (Walz 2020, pp. 190–96). However, though theological reflection on ecological issues is certainly worth considering, the question remains whether the respective recommendations are not perhaps formulated too broadly. The same can be said, for example, for theologies deriving from Oceania, which point out that locally contextual phenomena such as *communality* and *interconnectedness* may be seen as "pacific" values (Bird 2016) that all theologies worldwide should emulate.

Does this mean then that *intercultural theology* is a metatheology encompassing all manner of cultural-contextual expressions of Christianity, a trendsetter, so to speak, of global challenges and attempts at theological responses? Is it a "broker" of such values, which, illustrated locally, can lay claim to global validity?

This interpretation is quite possible. The question is, however: Does this not amount to an idealization of local cultures accompanied by a generalization of what is typically desirable? In short, hardly anyone would disagree with claims that humanity should strive for more freedom, justice, peace, and ecological sensitivity; on the contrary, these are truisms that can almost be described as clichéd.

Intercultural theology in this sense would be a theology proceeding by way of abstraction from specific contexts that runs the danger of exhausting itself in an ethical-moral outlook. Thus, what is at stake here is the in-between space of the continental, which makes it difficult to determine what the whole thing is supposed to be about exactly. The talk of European reason, for example, is so broad that sketches of the alleged profile of such "reason" may easily slip into the realm of ideology and arbitrariness. Such broad generalizations do not seem helpful in view of the abundance and specificity of profiles of what all may be defined as reason (Möller 1986; Habermas 1988). We will need to proceed, therefore, by inquiring into more specific in-between spaces that are essential for *intercultural theology*.

4. Intercultural Theology as In-Between Theology

Before explaining in what sense intercultural theology should be understood as an in-between theology, I propose to define the subject as follows:

Intercultural theology reflects the missionary/boundary-crossing interactions of the Christian witness of faith motivated by the claim to universal validity of its message of salvation. In the interplay between the respective cultural, religious, societal, and other contexts and actors, these interactions lead to the formation of multiple strands of local Christianities. Knowing that they belong together places before these strands the task of continually renegotiating normative contents of Christian doctrine and praxis in the tension between universality and particularity (Wrogemann 2019, pp. 441–42).

This definition interweaves the subject areas of mission, culture, and religions. It expresses the conviction that the missionary impulse of the universal Christian message has always led and will always lead to the Christian message crossing boundaries (of all kinds). Mission is the driving force behind *intercultural theology* (van den Toren 2015; Paas 2017; Flett 2018). This simultaneously establishes the theme of universality and particularity: Only that one particular that is claimed to be universal—that is, the salvation history of God in the history of Israel and of the mediator of salvation, Jesus of Nazareth, who becomes known as the Son of God—can prevent the message from being confined, as it were, within a particular cultural context. That being the case, this particular (God's story with Israel and in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ and Son of God) challenges and transforms all cultures.

The assertion that this particular is universally valid—a *theological* assertion—immediately raises normative questions. The interplay between this particular that is claimed to be universal and the individual cultures (with the word "cultures" again serving as an umbrella term covering all conceivable contextual conditions of human sociality) establishes the topic of intercultural understanding in several ways. These phenomena constitute the subject area of the discipline of intercultural theology. For this reason, intercultural theology is to be understood as in-between theology.

In what sense does intercultural theology move in in-between spaces? Below, we will point out some of these in-between spaces and in-between positions. Basically, the preposition "inter" entails keeping in perspective at least two different expressions of Christian presence in terms of doctrine, praxis, and medial form. This usually refers to a comparison between presences in different continents, countries, and cultures. One example may be a comparison of the social engagement of liberation-theological approaches in Brazil or Honduras, on the one hand, and that of forms of West African Pentecostal churches such as the *Church of Pentecost* in Ghana or the *Redeemed Christian Church of God* in Nigeria, on the other (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013; Wrogemann 2018, pp. 297–305). Another might be a comparison between "*low intensity religion*" in, say, Orthodox churches, on the one hand, and Roman Catholic presences in southern Italy, on the other. Time and again, such comparisons are a matter of considering Christian presences in very different world regions and countries, each with their own specific cultural, religious, social, economic, and political conditions.

However, how are these phenomena to be presented from the perspective of researchers in one country? What do these researchers select? How much sensitivity does it take for them to understand that, depending on the context, Christians may consider quite different things to be meaningful? And which authorities may claim that certain phenomena are ostensibly meaningful for their particular group (whatever form that may take)?

4.1. Between the Academy and the Grassroots Level—Intercultural Theology and Its Audience

Intercultural theology shifts between different audiences in what it does. On the one hand, it faces the task of truly seeking out those things that are meaningful on the ground (in a given local context). For example, these may be different forms of dignity and honor, different patterns of cultural distribution of goods, or certain notions of justice, time, space, or of what has value. Furthermore, there are also different understandings of scholarship and of what is considered academically acceptable, depending on the local context. The academic discourses of different continents, countries, and regions vary considerably. Not only do the scholarly standards and discursive "identity-markers" differ between countries and languages, but they also often differ considerably between one university and the next, and between one seminary and the next. *Intercultural theology* must therefore remain aware of its own conditionality; for instance, of its commitment to a certain academic culture (an Anglo-Saxon one, say, or an Indian, Japanese, or German one).

This in turn means that researchers have to begin by reflecting on their own academic tradition with its strengths and weaknesses, its preferences, and its blind spots. It is

imperative to conduct an inquiry into this conditionality which is also informed by the philosophy of science. Researchers need to come to a more profound and comprehensive understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of their own tradition, as well as of other traditions.

In addition, it is also important to understand what kind of theological education predominates in a particular country. What constitutes the bulk of what may be designated as theological education? Here, the aim is to arrive at a proper interpretation of the situation in a given country. To give an example: In the case of South Korea during the 1970s and 1980s, it was easy to obtain the impression from the international discourse associated with the World Council of Churches that the so-called Minjung theology was a predominant theological trend in South Korea. This interpretation, however, is merely due to the fact that material on the topic sold particularly well on the international book market. In reality, churches with a more conservative orientation make up the vast majority of Christians in the South Korean Christian scene. Similar observations can be made with regard to many countries: Particularly radical theologies tend to draw theological attention, since they stand out from among the multitude of voices with their (sometimes deliberate) *offensiveness*. While on the one hand, *intercultural theology* is called upon to identify such voices, on the other hand, it is also called upon to demonstrate their limited significance for a particular context. Frequently, very different issues play a role on the grassroots level than in the few seminaries participating in the international discourse.

4.2. Between Explicit and Implicit Theology—Intercultural Theology and Media

Intercultural theology has the task of sifting through, analyzing, and explaining the significance of explicit scriptural theologies from other continents. Why, for example, are there theologies in which Jesus Christ is understood as a master of initiation, a proto-ancestor, or a Dalit (Wrogemann 2016, pp. 87–111, 171–228)? Moreover, what do these designations mean against the background of the respective cultural-religious contexts? Another question touches on the media in which theology manifests itself. Is the culture in question a scriptural culture or an oral culture (Prior 2019, pp. 143–62)? In many cases, it is a question of theology in the form of song texts or of melodies, of dances and their symbolic meaning, of stories that are told or of patterns of social order in which the life of the community is organized. It is about the places where and the times when worship services are held, it is about connections to and distinctions from local cultural-religious traditions, values, and media. Thus, the work of intercultural theology takes place between forms of explicit and implicit theology, whereby it is the task of intercultural theology to make the hidden meaning of implicit theologies visible, that is, to describe them explicitly.

4.3. Between Semiotics and Discourse—Intercultural Theology and Power

Since people share both implicit and explicit theologies, and since people have to agree on certain semiotic codes in order to be able to understand each other, the question arises as to which phenomena are regarded as meaningful signs in a certain culture. Here, the work of intercultural theology takes place between the poles of semiotics and discourse: In a particular local Christian culture, meaning is not simply ascribed to certain things as a matter of happenstance; on the contrary, there are always people or people groups who claim to interpret on behalf of the group what has meaning and what does not. Thus, culture is never simply "there" or a "given"; rather, it is always contested (Wrogemann 2016). When, for example, in African or Oceanian cultures, male authorities (such as male theologians who also have the cultural-ethnic status of a "chief") claim that for a given local culture, male domination has always been an essential aspect of the culture and must therefore now also be continued in the local Christian church, then this will often encounter fierce resistance from women (Prior 2019; Strahm 1997), who, for their part, invoke cultural traditions emphasizing gender equality.

Intercultural theology is thus tasked with recognizing and describing not only local forms of Christianity but also *conflicts* among these local Christianities. The question arises

whether intercultural theologians are permitted to take sides in such conflicts. Moreover, what about the respective *discursive locus*? Consider the observation Matt Tomlinson makes in the case of a Pacific theology where Pacific theologians studying as scholarship holders at foreign seminaries call for theology to be contextualized, and even put that in writing in their dissertations—but after returning to their home churches and becoming members of the church hierarchy, they seek to prevent the very same changes (Tomlinson 2020, pp. 64–65)! People's attitudes toward issues such as contextualization thus also depend to a considerable degree on the particular discursive locus they occupy.

One question we may ask in return is who may be considered an intercultural theologian in the first place. Are intercultural theologians by definition theologians who come from one country or culture and investigate a local form of Christianity in another country (preferably also on a different continent)? Or are they locals who interpret their own culture as intercultural theologians in order to take sides in certain questions? It remains to be seen how things will develop, since there are so few professorships for intercultural theology in African, Asian, Latin American, Australian, and Oceanian countries to date. Nevertheless, the minimum requirement for intercultural theologians must be that in terms of subject matter, they deal with significantly different local expressions of Christianity and thus do justice to the preposition "inter".

4.4. Between Descriptive and Normative—Intercultural Theology and Methodology

These observations bring us to the question of the extent to which the subject of intercultural theology is descriptive or normative. Should intercultural theology not operate on a purely descriptive level? Based on what has been said so far, is that even possible or likely? Different scholars will tend either to limit themselves to a descriptive approach or to make theological statements as well. The significance attached to normative statements will vary greatly depending on the church background of the theologian (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Pentecostal, etc.). Thus, normativity becomes an issue on a meta-level.

At issue is not only (a) *which phenomenon* is regarded as normative (Christian tradition, say, or the church's magisterium, the evidence of spiritual experience, or Scripture references) but also (b) which significance is attached to *which kind of normativity* and (c) *in which media* normativity manifests itself.

Whereas in many church traditions, a high degree of normativity is demanded in the area of worship, normativizations of, say, pilgrimage are usually defined much less stringently; while sharp boundaries are drawn when it comes to worship, boundaries tend to be more fluid when it comes to veneration. A high degree of normativity is often maintained with regard to certain media, as seen, for example, in the way Orthodox churches treat icons. It is rather unlikely that local symbols such as Pacific coconut palms will appear in icons in the near future. Be that as it may, questions of normativity are not arbitrary, as is evident in the example of discussions surrounding a draft of the WCC paper *Together Towards Life*. The draft declared in pneumatological diction, "The Holy Spirit—Breath of Fire". Following sharp protests from various participants at a conference in Manila (2012), this wording was promptly removed from the draft. One person indignantly commented, "The Holy Spirit is no dragon!" This example shows that the metaphoricity of the New Testament message is by no means arbitrary. Hence, we keep coming back to *boundary work*.

4.5. Between Unity and Diversity—Intercultural Theology and Plurality

Intercultural theology is concerned not only with the emergence of new strands of Christianity but also with the question of how to determine the relationship between diversity and unity. What is the counterpart to tendencies toward diversification? Is it homogenization? What about the fact that Christianity has been marked by a certain plurality since its very beginning? The manner in which the Bible came into being can be taken as a symbol of this plurality: Early Christianity did not homogenize the early scriptures; rather, over a period of time it recognized a selection of 27 scriptures as the canon of the New Testament. From a theological perspective, the plurality of spirit ex-

periences corresponds to the plurality of writings considered to be inspired. That being said, this plurality remained *limited* in nature and did not give rise to boundless pluralism (Schnelle 2019, p. 480). Hence, *intercultural theology* is tasked with inquiring into a viable concept of plurality.

Theologically, it is about formulating a concept of Christian unity that is able to represent an ongoing, yet limited plurality of Christian presences in doctrine, praxis, and media. At the same time, it is about critiquing concepts of unity that would deny the intrinsic theological value of other expressions of the Christian faith. It is obvious that both concepts, plurality and unity, are extremely controversial issues. With regard to this topic, too, the fact remains that intercultural theology is to be understood as an in-between theology tasked with asking uncomfortable questions and criticizing careless answers.

4.6. Between Local and Translocal—Intercultural Theology and Connectivity

In each of the observations so far, local varieties of Christianity are connected on multiple levels to translocal expressions of Christianity. The *nature* of this connectivity is fundamentally important. This holds true, for example, in the case of the Anglican Church family, whose connective point of reference is the Archbishop of Canterbury. Those who recognize the historical succession and along with it the Archbishop of Canterbury are considered members of the Anglican Church family. This connectivity places certain limits on expressions of local variants of Christianity. The same holds true for other streams of Christianity: Translocal connectivity enables and encourages certain forms of local contextualization and inhibits or prohibits other forms. The centrifugal forces that come into play in the formation of ever new varieties of local Christianity are thus opposed by centripetal forces of connectivity. Centrifugal forces can have a diversifying effect, while centripetal forces have a homogenizing effect.

As in the other issues, questions of power play a pivotal role. For example, conservative Lutheran forces from the United States are trying to persuade Lutheran churches in the Baltics to cease or retract the ordination of women through the promise of funding. Various churches in Europe are attempting by means of various programs to get sister churches in Africa and Asia to grant theological recognition of homosexuality. Connectivity is found in many forms, from joint consultations, scholarship and exchange programs, to communication by means of social media.

5. In-Between Theology: Cultures—Missions—Religions

As an in-between theology and by virtue of its subject matter, intercultural theology is primarily concerned with cultures (and contexts), with cross-boundary interactions and thus with very different forms of missions, (Wrogemann 2018) and with reflecting on interreligious relations (and thus with other religious traditions). For each field, it is necessary to take the different forms of "inter" into account and reflect upon them: How do elite discourses and life on the grassroots level relate to each other? How do implicit and explicit theology relate to one another? What can be said about the relations between semiotics and discourse, descriptiveness and normativity, unity and diversity, and locality and connectivity?

By addressing these issues and the interstices established by them, intercultural theology contributes to the development of a more comprehensive understanding of reality, on the one hand, and of theology, on the other. Hence, it is no longer about discussing theological ideas in a vacuum or simply pondering about cognitive artifacts and their application, but about the forces, spaces, and atmospheres in which the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah and Son of God, manifests itself in ever new and life-giving ways by transforming the sinful world towards the love of the triune God.

By contributing to this more comprehensive understanding of reality and theology, intercultural theology helps us understand the complexity of the processes that keep taking place in the cross-boundary interactions of this universal message of salvation: First, processes of emergence of new culturally-contextually-local varieties of Christianity;

secondly, processes of development of new forms of missionary activity; and, thirdly, processes of constructive *boundary work* over against other religions and worldviews with their competing truth claims, values, and practices.

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Article

Emerging Religious Consciousness—A Cosmotheandric Understanding of Reality in the Light of Sophiology of Some Russian Theologians towards an Eco-Theology

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Abstract: Intercultural theology is increasingly a major subject matter of 21st-century scholarly inquiry. This results in an interreligious discourse and encounter at different levels. However, gone are the days when the aim is to identify or even to fuse certain overlapping magisteria. A linguistic-cultural approach takes us beyond mergers or grand unified theories. To speak of reality as a whole is not to talk about the whole of reality. Creatio continua, the radical newness of each moment and phase unfolds in unpredictable ways. The ecological crisis of planet earth has forced all responsible researchers to engage with the Anthropocene by establishing space for a common earth religion. Through ressourcement, it appears that the sophiology of theologians of the Russian Silver Age (e.g., Solovyov, Bulgakov, and Florensky) can open up a vista in the spirit of aggiornamento to a meta-religious approach recognising the infinite capacity of humanity to transcend particularised religious identities and so belong in different ways too, with, and in God. In the end, sophiology is a form of progressive Christianity that puts together philosophy and faith by promoting an ecological public theology that is concerned about raising society's awareness about creation as material nature.

Keywords: eco-theology; sophiology; Russian Silver Age; public theology; cosmotheandric understanding; meta-religious experience; metatheism; ecodomy; wisdom

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1. Introduction

The relatively unknown adjective "cosmotheandric" in the title is borrowed from Raimon Panikkar (1993)[1] in his seminal work, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging religious consciousness* followed up and revised by *The Rhythm of* Being (2010) which is based on his Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh of 1988[2]. This nomenclature helps us fuse the horizons of different cultures and traditions, trying to come to grips with a unified understanding of reality without sacrificing differences. However, contends Panikkar,

> [w]e must resist the temptation into which many Western scholars fall today when they speak of a "global perspective" or of a world vision, which is a residue of a colonialist, or monocultural, mentality, even though today it is called scientific. Instead, it is a matter of a healthy pluralism and of an interreligious perspective for our diachronic age. (Panikkar 2019, p. 149)

Cosmotheandrism indicates the intertwining of the "cosmic", the "divine", and the "human being", providing a lens on a multi-layered understanding of reality, i.e., *κόσμος*, all matter, from the heaviest metals to the lightest molecules, which make up everything from universes to quarks; *ἀνδρός* all biological life leading up to the climax of the evolution of human beings with profound potential and atrocities; and *Θεός*, all metaphysical thinking has its roots in God. Yet, the cosmotheandric vision does not gravitate around a single point; neither God nor man nor the world forms a single point of gravity and are, in this

sense, polycentric. God's trinitarian immanence is not primarily a doctrine but contrasting facets of reality to which different religions (read cultures) bear witness. The trinitarian structure of reality presumes differentiation and diversity:

> Panikkar feels that the doctrine of the Trinity should not be treated, as it often is, as recondite teaching about the inner life of God cut off from the rest of life and experience. Rather, so potent and rich a symbol it is that it invites further deepening and development, preferably by intercultural and interreligious communication. (*Foreword*, by Joseph Prabhu in Panikkar 2010, *loc*. 253)

In the title, we have alluded to a meta-religious approach instead of an "inter-" or "intra-religious" one because this approach transcends the traditional boundaries of space and time, which leads to a "Theology Without Walls" as Christopher Denny (2016) epitomises it.[3] This approach acknowledges that there are various paths of coming to grips with reality and experience subsequently deification or *θέωσις*. "Theosis is recognition of the infinite capacity of humanity to transcend particularized religious identities and so belong in different ways too, with, and in God." (Denny 2016, p. 370). This is the movement from knowledge to encounter, from *I-it* to *I-Thou* (Buber).

It is impossible to know the essence of God; we can only know who God is. Pope John Paul ll says it rightly in his Apostolic Letter, *Orientale Lumen* (Pope 1995):

> Thus is born what is called the apophatism of the Christian East: the more man grows in the knowledge of God, the more he perceives him as an inaccessible mystery, whose essence cannot be grasped. This should not be confused with an obscure mysticism in which man loses himself in enigmatic, impersonal realities. On the contrary, the Christians of the East turn to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, living persons tenderly present, to whom they utter a solemn and humble, majestic and simple liturgical doxology. But they perceive that one draws close to this presence above all by letting oneself be taught an adoring silence, for at the culmination of the knowledge and experience of God is his absolute transcendence. This is reached through the prayerful assimilation of scripture and the liturgy more than by systematic meditation. (Pope 1995, § 16)

The path of union with God is not an academic pursuit but based on applied revelation, i.e., wisdom. Panikkar uses the word "ecosophy" to describe the wisdom of the earth as a subjective genitive, i.e., not our personal view of what the earth is, but the earth's wisdom, which humans grasp when we engage (Panikkar 2010, *loc*. 9414). This leads to unveiling or discovering of the real. God's wisdom is, therefore, revelation removing the mystery. Panikkar is a philosopher of wisdom in the sense of seeking a tripartite way to engage with pluralism and practise dialogue.

The raison d'être of this paper is that the Russian Orthodox theology's sophiology is not only typological of a cosmotheandric experience but has the nature of both ressourcement[4] and aggiornamento[5] towards a meta-theistic understanding of reality. The authors of this paper apply the prism of Russian sophiology to support a vista for a holistic and integrated understanding of reality, i.e., a cosmotheandric view of reality. Despite living in a world full of suffering, vulnerability, and death, evolutionary biology and ecological sciences are reluctant to face natural suffering. Celia Deane-Drummond (2021) contends that "it can still make sense to speak in the theological language of Sophia, wisdom, both creaturely and divine. When read through New Testament lenses, Sophiology points to a new creation that provides a basis of joy filled hope rather than a false optimism that overlooks present troubles" (Deane-Drummond 2021, n.p.). Sophia is an ontological foundation of all material things illuminated by the world of ideas (cf. Obolevitch 2019, p. 136). Panikkar (2010, *loc*. 1111) is of the opinion that a sophianic approach tries to overcome the insufficiencies of both the historical (piecemeal) and the rational (formal) approach.

2. Sophiology as Eco-Theology and Public Theology

Solovyov[6], Bulgakov[7], and Florensky[8] are not the initiators of Russian sophiology. The interest in Sophia among 19th-century Russian theologians began with Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), who was not a theologian like any of the three but a fully-fledged theosophist and esotericist. Blavatsky became known worldwide due to her Isis Unveiled (Blavatsky [1877] 1891), a book that contains numerous references to Sophia and her multifaceted aspects. One of the most striking features of Blavatsky's Sophia is her connection to what Blavatsky considers "the belief of the genuine primitive Christians" (Blavatsky [1877] 1891, p. 183). Sophia appears to be a distinct entity that became united with Christos, whom Blavatsky calls "the perfect" (Blavatsky [1877] 1891, p. 186), immediately after the birth of Jesus. In this context, Sophia is depicted as "wisdom and spirituality" (Blavatsky [1877] 1891, p. 186). Still, her becoming one with Christ in Jesus reveals that each name represents an entity of individual self-standing: Jesus, Christ, and Sophia. They are, as it were, distinct hypostases if we were to use the language of traditional trinitarian theology. Blavatsky's system is profoundly gnostic in the sense that the many characters she alludes to appear to be emanations of some sort under the powerful influence of the demiurge. According to Blavatsky, the demiurge seems to have become incarnate as Christ in the man Jesus; as Christos, the demiurge seems to have "entered into the man Jesus at the moment of his baptism in the Jordan" as Sophia because before that specific moment in time, "he had been completely ignorant of his mission" (Blavatsky [1877] 1891, p. 186). Moreover, when Jesus was crucified, both Christos and Sophia "left his body and returned to their own sphere' (Blavatsky [1877] 1891, p. 186). Before the crucifixion, however, Sophia gave Jesus "perfect knowledge" and "perfect Gnosis" which he communicated to his apostles, the tiny cluster of people who were able to receive this special gift (Blavatsky [1877] 1891, p. 186).

Blavatsky may have sparked the flame of intellectual interests among Russian sophiologists, but none of the three, Solovyov, Bulgakov, and Florensky, fully agreed with her theosophic-esoteric approach. Many did not entirely support her gnostic perspective; in fact, Solovyov (her contemporary) became highly critical of Blavatsky's Isis Unveiled, which he considered "obscure" and "disjointed" (Kornblatt 2009, p. 32, n.63). Suffice to say that Solovyov and Blavatsky did not appreciate each other's works. For instance, while Solovyov accused Blavatsky of obscurity, Blavatsky pointed out his alleged incompetence for not knowing English well enough to read her works nor paying sufficient attention to her arguments (Blavatsky 2018, pp. 2–3). Bulgakov, however, although not a gnostic esotericist but a Christian theologian, was nevertheless quite open to magic and the Kabbalah, while Florensky was highly knowledgeable of Western esotericism and theosophy in general, as demonstrated by the sources that he used to produce his The Pillar and Ground of the Truth (Rosenthal 1997, pp. 19–20). Regardless of the actual connections between Blavatsky, on the one hand, and Solovyov, Bulgakov, and Florensky, on the other, what counts is their shared interest in the reality of creation as nature and matter. This feature makes all four crucial for ecosophy (deChant 2009, p. 262). Their references to Sophia as a divine reality or spiritual entity which connects the divine to the natural reality of material creation turn their works into genuine exemplifications of eco-theology. For the intellectual history of ideas, what matters is not that Sophia was portrayed gnostically as an emanation or theologically associated with Christ, the Spirit, or even God the Father. What counts in this respect is that, throughout the works of Blavatsky, Solovyov, Bulgakov, and Florensky, Sophia emerged not only as a unifying theme for underscoring the crucial importance of creation in religious ecology but also as a critical concept for defending the vital role of nature in eco-theology.

3. Solovyov's Sophia

Vladimir Solovyov's perspective on Sophia originates from a series of three personal and very intimate experiences, which he details in his prominent War, Progress, and the End of History: Three Conversations, Including a Short Story of the Anti-Christ (Solovyov 1990). He reveals that he had three visions of a woman he describes as blue-eyed and engulfed

in an aura; the woman approached him and addressed him in a Moscow church, the British Museum's Reading Room, and the desert outside Cairo. Regardless of whether one believes these visions to be true or not, it is crucial to notice the personal and experiential character of Solovyov's depiction of Sophia and the fact that Sophia manifests itself within the world, not outside it. It is equally true that, for Solovyov, Sophia is Divine Wisdom, and it works within the world, within the materiality and naturalness of the universe as personal experiential vision (Kornblatt 2009, p. 4). It seems that in making use of Sophia described as a woman who appears to him in visions, Solovyov builds a metaphysical religious philosophy based on his Western readings and an apparent affinity to Hegel, especially concerning his "sense of history" (Kline 1974, p. 160). In this respect, Sophia is the embodiment of human spirituality because, on the one hand, it manifests itself within history and the world[9].

This image resembles the traditional Christian incarnation of God's Logos in the human person of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, it becomes "incarnate" in the form of a woman. In other words, Solovyov's Sophia is God's Wisdom that goes through a process of incarnation as a human being.

However, and this aspect is of paramount importance for one's perception of Solovyov's thought, Solovyov himself is not so interested in Christian theology but in Christian theosophy (probably borrowed from Jacob Boehme). In describing the image of Christ, the pattern he uses to present his image of Sophia, Solovyov mentions that there are two distinct types of "unities" within the image of Christ: first, the Logos, and second, Sophia. Solovyov sees the Logos as theoretical unity while Sophia is presented as a practical unity. The Logos points to the Absolute and Sophia to its contents more concretely. In this respect, Solovyov appears to be a faithful follower of Kant and his distinction between the noumena and the phenomena or between the transcendent and the immanent aspects of reality (McClymond 2018). Yet, he rejects the priority of ethics over metaphysics. The genuine force of the moral principle rests on the existence of absolute order (cf. Nemeth 2022). While the Logos is the intention, more concretely, Sophia is the materialised intention. The two are consubstantial; they exist as one despite their duality, so they live together inherently, without the possibility of separation. In Solovyov's words:

> In the divine organism of Christ, the acting, unifying principle, the principle that expresses the unity of that which is, is the Word, or Logos. The second kind of unity, the produced unity, is Sophia in Christian theosophy. If we distinguish in the Absolute in general between the Absolute as such (that which is) and its content, essence, or idea, we will find the former directly expressed in the Logos and the latter directly expressed in Sophia, which is thus the expressed or actualized idea. And just as an existent being is distinct from its idea but is at the same time one with it, so the Logos, too, is distinct from Sophia but is inwardly united with her. (Solovyov quoted in Kornblatt 2009, pp. 7–8)

Although tempting, he does not identify Sophia, the divine wisdom, with the second Absolute or Logos. Christ unites the Logos and the Sophia in himself since he is the eternal Godmanhood (Copleston 1986, p. 224). Even if Solovyov uses the imagery of the God-Man, as reflected in the person of Christ, to describe Sophia, the result appears to be an anthropological reality connected to the divine. Alexandre Kojève notices that, in Solovyov, Sophia is "eternally united with God" although this entity is never separated from God (Kojève 2018, p. 4). Her comparison to humanity also reveals the predominantly anthropological constitution of Solovyov's Sophia. Thus, Kojève (2018, p. 40) notices that, according to Solovyov, "Sophia is perfect humanity, ideal, forever contained in the complete divine being".

Moreover, Sophia cannot be compared exclusively to God, and her existence is not that of Christ in traditional theology, in the sense that she is far from the classical sinless constitution of God's incarnate Logos in the person of Christ. Concretely, in Solovyov, Sophia is described as "fallen humanity", which contains "the essence of the empirical world", the very "anima mundi" in traditional theology, is presented as "creation" (Kojève

2018, p. 40). In other words, Solovyov's Sophia is representative of the human being and the universe in its entirety. In this respect, it departs further away from the image of Christ as God-Man; Sophia is neither perfect nor unchanging. On the contrary, Sophia is eternal in the temporal existence of the world, which also means it is "becoming", a reality that is constantly changing in the sense that it progresses towards something (Kojève 2018, p. 53).

Judith Deutsch Kornblatt's (2009, p. 7) observation that Solovyov's thought is not theological but rather theosophical is shared by Arthur Versluis (1994, p. 158), who emphasises that Solovyov studied Boehme, among other Western esotericists. The theosophical influence on Solovyov was tremendously powerful because, as Versluis points out, his image of Sophia is trans-religious and encapsulates a range of notions that are seen by "the Hindus as Maya", "the Greeks as Idea", and "the Hebrews as Sophia" (Versluis 1994, p. 158). Versluis expands his analysis of Solovyov's Sophia by insisting that these three religious patterns reflect three fundamental characteristics of Sophia as "magic" wisdom, "ideal" wisdom, and "incarnate" wisdom (Versluis 1994, p. 159). These three features reflect Solovyov's intention to move Sophia from the transcendence of the theological God to the immanence of the theosophical God, which is but an image of the human being and its spiritual aspirations for transcendence. In this respect, Sophia seems to be Solovyov's instrument. He presents traditional Christianity with its metaphysics of the absolute otherness of God into a more scientific light, reportedly more suitable for the nineteenth century's rationalistic inquiries. Soloviev subsequently postulated a synthesis of science, theology, and philosophy in the shape of integral knowledge or so-called free theosophy (Obolevitch 2019, p. 77).

Thus, Zenkovsky (1953, p. 481) reveals that Solovyov always regarded traditional Christianity as "inadequate", which means that the classical image of the Logos as God-Man was equally problematic. Sophia was Solovyov's way to tune orthodox Christianity and its image of Christ as the God-Man to the rationalistic essence of "contemporary knowledge and philosophy" (Zenkovsky 1953, p. 481). Solovyov's point thus is not to identify Sophia with the traditional Christ of Christianity (who is said to be in heaven) but with the mundane spirit and actuality of the world, which makes his Sophia a theology of creation. Therefore, according to Christopher Ben Simpson, Solovyov's Sophia "has to do with the interrelation between God and creation" because it is "eternally oriented towards creation"; it is also "the eternal creation-ward-ness of God" (Simpson 2020, p. 165). But since Sophia manifests itself within the immanence of the world, it can be argued that it is intrinsically human and profoundly anthropological because it represents the idea and actuality of the entire universe (or creation, in traditional terms). This consideration alone allows Solovyov's Sophia to be described as a concept of eco-theology; in this respect, Sophia reveals Solovyov's profound concern for creation, for the world, a preoccupation that is framed today by eco-theology, as suggested by Celia Deane-Drummond (2008, p. 63). Solovyov argues against positivism and moves away from a dichotomy of "speculative" (rationalist) and "empirical" knowledge in favor of a post-philosophical enquiry that would reconcile all notions of thought in a new transcendental whole (Nemeth 2022, n.p.).

4. Bulgakov's Sophia

"Bulgakov is a theologian of Wisdom" (Nichols 2004, p. 605). One of the books that propelled Sergius Bulgakov to fame was The Comforter (Bulgakov 2004), which presents the Holy Spirit resembling Solovyov's Sophia. Kornblatt (2009, p. 4) shows that Bulgakov was influenced by Solovyov, a clear indication that Solovyov's Sophia must have shaped Bulgakov's perspective on the same. Concretely, Bulgakov imitated Solovyov's qualified adherence to Kant's methodology (Sergeev 2000, p. 4). Still, instead of writing about Sophia from the perspective of the Western esotericism's theosophical tradition, Bulgakov appears to have preferred a more theological take on the subject. Concretely, unlike Solovyov's leaning towards theosophy, Bulgakov built his image of Sophia by getting closer to Patristic theology. Both Solovyov and Bulgakov had experiential perspectives on Sophia, but while visions influenced the former, the latter seems to have been smitten by beauty. Thus,

Bulgakov moved from his initial Marxist economic pursuits (Nichols 2004, p. 599) to theological interests (Copleston 1986, p. 204) because of two aesthetic experiences: one which revealed to him the beauty of creation as he was overwhelmed by a mountain scenery (Nichols 2004, p. 600) and another one that showed him the beauty of art as he saw a painting by Raphael (Nichols 2004, p. 602). In both cases, Bulgakov realized that matter can be transcended, and the reality of beauty extends beyond the world's naturalness. A third experience was much more dramatic, as the death of his four-year-old son defined it, but it played a key role in pushing him definitively into the realm of theology as he sensed that his child "still lived in the life of the Resurrection" (Nichols 2004, p. 602). These three personal experiences, coupled with his openness to Kant's take on traditional Christianity, turned Bulgakov into a theologian with a distinctively idealistic perspective on Christian theology in its Eastern Orthodox manifestation.

While Solovyov's Sophia is more anthropological, Bulgakov presents Sophia in terms that resemble the classical definition of the relationship between the Father and the Son. Thus, Bulgakov's Sophia appears to be consistently more "divine" than Solovyov's because he connects Sophia to the Father through the idea of divine substance or "ousia". Here is how Bulgakov writes about Sophia: "The Son then is the hypostatic self-revelation of the nature of the Father, or the hypostatic Sophia, the self-consciousness or hypostatization of the divine ousia of the Father; the Son is present before the Father as His Truth and Word, His knowledge of Himself in the Son" (Bulgakov 2004, *loc*. 992–993). Although Bulgakov sounds more theological than Solovyov's theosophical language, the former's influence by the latter sheds doubts on the actual interpretation of Bulgakov's Sophia. In other words, even if Sophia is presented in "hypostatic" terms, it is not a "hypostasis" per se, as the Son, but rather a "hypostatizedness" (Bulgakov 2004, *loc*. 2881), something that exists beyond the hypostasis of the Son. If this is true, it is logical to infer that Sophia exists not only as an external reality in conjunction with the Son but also as a different reality from the Holy Trinity itself. Sophia has more connections to creation, to the world than the world of the divine Trinity. As it exists in the three persons of the Trinity, Sophia is distinct from creaturely Sophia that is expressed in the created world. Therefore, God, extant and revealed as Trinity remains a hierarchy of unified persons (Heath 2021, p. 22).

In Bulgakov, as in traditional Eastern Orthodoxy and Christian theology in general, the world is distinct from God, but God is continuously reflected in the world. Consequently, one can argue that Bulgakov promotes a theology of creation or theology of nature and an eco-theology because the Spirit is inextricably connected to nature. In his words, the "Spirit is natura naturans which, through the word implanted in it, engenders natura naturata, or becomes it" (Bulgakov 2004, *loc*. 2950). These very few words are crucial for Bulgakov because they reveal his extreme preoccupation with the reality of creation to the point that he introduces the reality of the divine, as—for example—the Spirit, into the reality of nature itself. Thus, while traditional Christianity postulates the absolute ontological gap between God and creation, Bulgakov seems to infuse divinity into creation, but this exercise is merely symbolical. Paul Ladouceur notices that, in Bulgakov, symbols indicate the presence of the divine being within a created reality; for instance, the name of God is a symbol that not only points to God but also to the unity between God and the believer (Ladouceur 2019, p. 367) or between God and creation or between God and nature. It is clear that Bulgakov is so concerned about the reality of the world, or, in other words, the reality of nature is so crucial for him that the traditional doctrine of God is infused into his modernistic approach to nature.

It is as if God validated nature, the Spirit permeated creation, and the Logos gave life to the world; the world itself originates in God because of the "Spirit in the world in its extra-divine divine aseity" (Bulgakov 2004, *loc*. 2951). However, even if the connection between God and nature is so evident through the mediation of the Spirit, it is still Sophia that keeps the world existing as nature, especially from the perspective of its continuous change. God does not change in traditional theology, but the world does change, and Bulgakov is not one's orthodox theology. His connections to modernity and Idealism force him to notice

the changing or progressive character of nature and the fact that God himself might be subject to change. While it might have been too much for him to plainly and openly argue in favour of the divine change, Bulgakov uses Sophia to connect both God and creation to the reality of change: " . . . Sophia, the organizing force that leads this world to Truth, and it, therefore, bears the mark of truthfulness, Truth as a process, as becoming" (Bulgakov 2000, p. 138). Indeed, Bulgakov does not say that God changes, but in traditional theology, God is described as Truth, and, in his thought, Truth does change via the mediation that is provided by Sophia. What Sophia does is symbolize the immutable God in a changing world, a static God in a progressive creation, and a faithful God in a truthful nature; in this respect, Bulgakov's Sophia is an attempt to transform the traditional view of God as immutable Truth through the modernistic view of God as changing and progressive truthfulness. For instance, Celia Deane-Drummond (2021) notices that Bulgakov manages to transcend the hierarchical presentation of God as Godhead, and he does so via the instrumentality provided by Sophia. This very reality connects God and the world. This is what makes Bulgakov's thought a sample of eco-theology: Sophia as a divine agent of change within a world which is in the process of becoming nothing else but Sophia itself. In Bulgakov, Sophia explains not what the world is but rather how the world is and who the world looks, especially considering his aesthetic component of conversion. Thus, David Cheetham (2020, p. 101) writes that "Bulgakov aligns Sophia with beauty", and it is Sophia as the beauty that provides consistency to his aesthetic eco-theology. This is similar to Gregory of Nazianzus's understanding of the Spirit's inhabitation of creation.

5. Florensky's Sophia

Famous for his The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters (Florensky 2004), Pavel Florensky presents Sophia in terms that resemble ecclesiology more than Christology, as it is in the case of Solovyov and Bulgakov. If Solovyov and Bulgakov Sophia are associated more with Christ, Sophia is depicted as a bride in Florensky (2004, p. 239). This image reminds us of the traditional notion of the church. The imagery of the bride helps Florensky ascertain the total dependence of Sophia on the Word of God because—as in conventional theology—Sophia is the bride of God's Word. She has no independence of her own, but she is closely connected to God's Word (Florensky 2004, p. 239).

Furthermore, Sophia's ontology is dependent on God's Word because she cannot exist on her own. Her very existence is postulated as anchored and originating within divinity itself. John Chryssavgis (2019, p. 83) notices that Sophia is "the uncreated beauty of God" in Florensky, making his description like Bulgakov's and his sophiology another example of aesthetic eco-theology. Florensky is very clear about this aspect because Sophia is not merely an idea; it represents creation's actuality. Without her connection to God's Word, she remains a purely theoretical construct; but her actuality is given by her dependence and link to the being of God (Florensky 2004, p. 239). Sophia, in Florensky, is totally about creation; therefore, his thought is another sample of eco-theology, in line with Solovyov's and Bulgakov's; Sophia is the actualization of creation because she is endowed with power, the same power to create, which reveals her mediatory activity between God and creation. As far as Florensky (2004, p. 239) is concerned, Sophia explains traditional theology to the point that she is a sort of "missing link" between God and creation. Specifically, regarding the human being—which is traditionally described as the bearer of God's image—Florensky states that Sophia is God's very image in the human being. Here is how Florensky presents Sophia:

> She is the Eternal Bride of the Word of God. Outside of Him and independently of Him, she does not have being and falls apart into fragments of ideas about creation. But in Him, she receives creative power. One in God, she is multiple in the creation and is perceived in creation in her concrete appearances as the idea person of man, as his Guardian Angel, i.e., as the part of eternal dignity of the person and as the image of God in man. (Florensky 2004, p. 239)

It is important to see here that, in Florensky, Sophia is a concrete reality, not a mere conceptual construct. Sophia overlaps with creation; Sophia is all creation in Florensky (2004, p. 37). Sophia is the actuality of creation; even more so, it is the actuality of the human being that builds a bridge between humanity and divinity. In other words, Sophia makes it possible for the human being to anchor itself in the reality of God as Trinity.

Nevertheless, Sophia and creation are not merely synonymous; Sophia is more than just a synonym of creation—it is the very root that allows creation to anchor itself in God. Copleston (1986, p. 226) interprets Florensky saying that Sophia mediates between creation and God, between humanity and divinity, actuality and idea/s. Sophia shows Florensky's concern for the entire creation; therefore, his sophiology is a sample of eco-theology.

The way Florensky sees creation is fundamentally integrative; creation exists as rooted in divinity. Therefore, he rejected Kant's distinction between transcendence and immanence. In Florensky, the reality is unified into an existence that includes both, and Sophia reveals the unity between God and creation, idea and actuality, which brings him closer to Hegel (Nichols 1999, pp. 58–59). Nevertheless, Florensky cannot resist distinguishing between creation itself and the "core" of creation, between the reality of the human being, for instance, and the very reality which sets the human being in motion, and this core engine is Sophia. Florensky's words: "If Sophia is all of creation, then the soul and conscience of creation, mankind, is Sophia par excellence" (Florensky 2004, p. xxii). The duality of Sophia is not synonymous with dualism; on the contrary, what Florensky wishes to explain here is that Sophia exists in two distinctive aspects: as divine and as creaturely. In other words, Sophia is both divine and human, both God-connected and creation-connected, and it is in this dual capacity she mediates between God and creation. This is why Florensky sees Sophia as the exact imprint of God in creation; it is what makes creation divine, what makes the whole universe a reality that originates in God (Florensky 2004, p. 251). Thus, Sophia is creation, Sophia is mediation, and Sophia is God; Florensky's Sophia makes creation meaningful by connecting it forever with God. This aspect reveals Florensky's eco-theology in conjunction with his emphasis on Sophia as inclusive of humanity in its capacity as a particularisation of the actuality of creation. Thomas Schipflinger, however, explains that Florensky's Sophia discloses the "spirituality of creation" and her "beauty"; hence, Florensky's sophiology is an aesthetic eco-theology (Schipflinger 1998, p. 399).

It is essential to realise that, in Florensky, Sophia is not a hypostasis, as the Logos, but one cannot exclude the possibility that it is presented as if it were some hypostasis. Sophia reveals God's love, so it may not be a divine hypostasis as in traditional theology. Still, it is a symbolic hypostasis of the divine because it permeates creation by connecting it to God's being. According to Teresa Obolevitch (2019, p. 103), by making this connection between God and creation employing Sophia, Florensky explains that God's being impregnates the reality of creation through "love, beauty, and harmony". Thus, creation is rooted in the divine through the mediation that is provided by Sophia. This explains why Robert Powell (2000, p. 38) noted that, in Florensky, Sophia was "the root and pinnacle of the whole creation". The concern for the whole creation is visible again here because Florensky's eco-theology should not be seen as exclusively connected to environmentalist problems; on the contrary, Sophia reveals Florensky's preoccupation with the whole of creation: its reason for being, its very substance, and its spirituality (Powell 2000, p. 38). Bruce V. Foltz shows that, in Florensky, Sophia is the life-giving reality that connects God and creation; it is through the mediation that is provided by Sophia that God gives life to the whole of creation.

In his Early Religious Writings, Florensky writes, "there can be no consistent world-view without a religious foundation; there can be no consistent life, a life according to the truth, without religious experience" (Florensky 2017, p. 25). Sophia, Foltz puts it, is a "symbol" that brings the "everything" of creation into the "one" of God; it is the reality that anchors the diversity of the universe is the reality of the divine (Foltz 2019, p. 82).

6. Conclusions

Panikkar shows his discontent clearly with theism:

> I have been saying that theisms are inadequate, that they often contradict each other, although they may also be mutually complementary if we enlarge the horizon from which they emerge. I have also been suggesting that theisms as such do not exhaust the human ways to encounter the divine Mystery. The world of theisms has been a domain of great power. Theism has persisted for millennia and will no doubt continue to survive in some form. "Right" or "wrong" are inapplicable epithets here. The world of theism is a universe in itself, which selects its own criteria for judging what is right and wrong. Yet theisms no longer seem able to satisfy the most profound urges of the contemporary sensibilities both in the civilizations that first nurtured these theisms, and in others as well. The world of theism is not alone in facing religious problems, as well as vital metaphysical issues. In short, the divine Mystery remains a mystery. (Panikkar 2010, *loc*. 4832)

We suggest the concept of meta-theism (openness to the notion that there are unfathomable depths behind an anthropomorphic God). Perhaps no two words than "ressourcement" and "aggiornamento" were used more frequently by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) to define the question regarding the nature and extent of the Church's aim of renewal. First, the concept of ressourcement, regarding it as the questions that confront us big as life, makes it imperative to return to authoritative sources to meet the challenges of our time. Second, aggiornamento is essentially a question of a new and wider contextualisation to find new ways to rethink and reformulate the fundamental affirmations of faith to come to grips with reality[10].

Wisdom or Sophia provides a vital cue to connect God as the Divine Sophia with the creaturely world and come to terms with the suffering and loss of our dispensation. This is rooted in the wisdom of the cross, the deep incarnation or the "shadow Sophia" (Deane-Drummond 2021, n.p.). Sergeev gives a concise conclusion where he states:

> In other words, however far the world has fallen, it is always possible for the creatures to become saved, because the divine idea of creation, this wisdom of God or Sophia rooted in God's will, is eternal and unchangeable, and serves as a guarantee for the ultimate goodness of every creature. (Sergeev 2000, p. 15)

The Russian sophiological tradition does not promote only religious ecology and eco-theology. Due to its complex range of meanings and intricate symbolism, Sophia may situate itself rather uncomfortably on the verge of Christian orthodoxy leaning towards heterodoxy and even heresy, or it may just make sense in a non-Christian religious context. Either way, however, Sophia does speak about religion, it does point to creation, and it does explore the reality of the universe in a way that may inspire people to investigate religion, theology, ethics, and other similar fields of inquiry leading to personal (even sacrificial) involvement in society and the public square (Tapley 2017, p. 50). In which case, Sophia—by its capacity to connect the spiritual divine and the material universe—may be a specimen of eco-theology and a foretaste of public theology. Paul S. Chung provides ample evidence of how Sophia is viewed in the Judeo-Christian tradition as pointing incessantly from God to creation:

> Wisdom (Sophia) is begotten and brought forth before the beginning of the earth. God's Saying is connected with the bringing forth of Sophia from within God's self. In Proverbs' account of the beginning, Sophia is poured out of the depths of God's self. God's being is the One who is concerning the Word and the Spirit. The inner life of God through the Word and Spirit (Sophia) is directed toward the world. (Chung 2010, p. 54)

If God demonstrates interest in the world, so should we, and this is the very essence of eco-theology as public theology. Subsequently, Denny states it aptly:

> An inclusivist theology of religion departs from theological exclusivism in its willingness to afford revelatory value to other religious traditions, but insists that other religious traditions are at best a less adequate path for adherents to achieve the enlightenment and salvation offered in one's own religion. (Denny 2016, pp. 363–64)

In line with this insight, Paul Valliere (2000, p. 263) emphasises that sophiology is a new theology in "a new key", but also a theology that "empowers progressive Christianity". This means that sophiology is neither secularist nor traditionalist. Its progressive aspect lies in its delving into cultural creativity and cultural activity (Valliere 2000, p. 262) to open a middle way between metaphysics and history. In so doing, sophiology creates a progressive form of Christian thought that aims at serving the whole society, not only atheists and their secularist philosophy or practising Christians with their traditionalist theology. Solovyov, Bulgakov, and Florensky did, alongside Blavatsky, provide a cultural and progressive Christianity that promoted the importance of creativity in the public square for the benefit of all human society. In the end, sophiology is a form of progressive Christianity that puts together philosophy and faith by promoting an ecological public theology that is concerned about raising society's awareness about creation as material nature.

Ressourcement is about revisiting, and aggiornamento is the challenge of a new and broader contextualization to find new ways to rethink and reformulate the fundamental affirmations of the (Christian) faith to more effectively communicate the Gospel. God, humans, and cosmos combined as an integrated approach are expressed in the concept of a cosmotheandric sophiology finding its ethical complement in ecodomy[11] (cf. Buitendag and Simut 2020, p. 2, as well as Rossing and Buitendag 2020, pp. 1–2). Panikkar set this task already at the Gifford Lectures:

> Our task and our responsibility are to assimilate the wisdom of bygone traditions and, having made it our own, to allow it to grow. Life is neither repetition nor continuation. It is growth, which implies at once rupture and continuity. Life is creation. (Panikkar 2010, *loc*. 416)

Cosmotheandric sophiology looks at the interrelations of the economy, ecology, theology, religion, life, and suffering where the emphasis is on an ontology of relations and processes rather than of substance in which the One is both grounding differences as well as emerging in and through them (Panikkar 2010, *loc*. 271). The only feasible way out is an advaitic[12] approach of pluralism and interdependence. Panikkar was "painfully aware that the health of our natural environment and what we human beings do to it are all causally interconnected and interlinked" (Yusa 2017, p. 235). We desperately need the hope of the invisible.

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Notes

[1] "Raimon Panikkar was born on 2 November 1918 in Barcelona, the son of a Spanish Christian mother and a Hindu father. Ordained a Catholic priest after being educated by the Jesuits, he earned doctorates in theology, philosophy, and chemistry between 1946 and 1961. Over a theological career that spanned almost half a century and encompassed dozens of published books, Panikkar probed both classic texts and contemporary societies in a synthetic quest for truth and cross-cultural understanding" (Denny 2016, p. 365).

[2] See https://www.giffordlectures.org/lectures/trinity-and-theism (accessed on 30 November 2021).

[3] However, one should be careful with claims such as "theology without walls" (Christopher Denny) in the global context beyond the West. For it was the imperialist mission of Western Christianity that built rigid walls and raised conflicts among religions in East Asia where multiple religions co-existed harmoniously without walls before Western Christianity came in for millennia. This antagonistic reality in the Non-Western world requires Western theologians, first and foremost, serious reflection on the deep metanoia for the tragic missiological errors of Western Christianity, especially in the 19th-century, before saying any new theological idea for interreligious and intercultural peace and cooperation.

[4] For a fine description of ressourcement see https://ressourcementinc.com/about-ressourcement/about-the-name/ (accessed on 30 November 2021). Panikkar sees his task as follows: "My originality, if any, will be that of going to the origins—not to do archeology or to make anachronistic interpretations, as if the beginnings were always exemplary, but to perform the task of a latter-day hunter-gatherer, re-collecting life from the stupendous field of human experience on Earth since the days when our ancestors felt the need to consign their adventures to that mature fruit of language which we call script. This is our historical period" (Panikkar 2010, *loc*. 404).

[5] See Bishop Butler's interpretation of the background of aggiornamento: https://vatican2voice.org/3butlerwrites/aggiorna.htm (accessed on 30 November 2021). Panikkar has his version too: "If rhythm were not the very Rhythm of Being, the order thus created would become a competitive chaos. If, however, Being itself is Rhythm, the order is ever new and does not follow a preexistent or preordained pattern. It is the creatio continua I mentioned several times. The ontonomy that is referred to is not the blind following of an absolute and immutable norm or nomos (law), but the discovery of the ever-new or renewed nomos of the one. The mentioned inter-in-dependence becomes an intra-in-dependence" (Panikkar 2010, *loc*. 1824).

[6] For the life and work of Solovyov see: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vladimir-Sergeyevich-Solovyov (accessed on 30 November 2021).

[7] For a detailed account of Bulgakov's life and work see Evtuhov (1997). *The Cross and the Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

[8] For a formal biography of Florensky see Pyman (2010). A more concise version is available on the web by Palini (2017) and the outline of these few biographical lines is taken from that. Available online: http://www.fondazionemicheletti.it/altronovecento/articolo.aspx?id_articolo=34&tipo_articolo=d_persone&id=145#sdfootnote19anc (accessed on 21 September 2021).

[9] Hans-Urs von Balthasar was very impressed by Solovyov's writings on Sophia and the church: "While avoiding Soloviev's sophiological language, the movement of purified sexuality which Soloviev advocated is very congenial to the thought of Balthasar" (Gawronski [1995] 2015, p. 222).

[10] Echeverria Eduardo (2014, p. 192) pays qualified recognition to the Dutch Reformed theologian Gerrit C. Berkouwer's interpretation of the Second Vatican Council with his "hermeneutics of continuity" as discussed in his book, *The Second Vatican Council and the New Catholicism* (Berkouwer and Smedes 1965).

[11] "The underlying concept is taken from 1 Corinthians 14:12 in the Greek New Testament, *oikodomé*, where it is used in reference to God's household or total cosmology. Ecodomy looks at religious worldviews and norms but has a strong interdisciplinary research focus on aspects of global justice, human dignity, reconciliation, moral formation and responsible citizenship" (Buitendag 2019, pp. 5–6, See also Kok 2015, p. 3) for the linguistic reference: "The verb οἰκοδομέω occurs approximately 40 times in the New Testament. 'According to Louw and Nida (1996)—who put the words οἰκοδομέω, ἐποικοδομέω, οἰκοδομή and ῆς f: in the semantic domain 74.15—in the NT these terms denote the following meaning: "to increase the potential of someone or something, with focus upon the process involved . . . to strengthen, to make more able, to build up." The verbs οἰκοδομέω, οἰκοδομεῖν' and οἰκοδομὴ (ν) (noun) (1 Cor 14:12) denote the act of building or constructing or edifying, or the result thereof (a building/construction), whereas the noun οἰκοδόμος refers to the "builder of a house" or "architect" (Ac 4:11; cf. Lk 20:17)". (Kok 2015, p. 3).

[12] "The advaitic knowledge is knowledge of reality and not the abstract knowledge of a formal pattern of reality. This is why I spoke of advaitic spiritual experience: the awareness of relationship is not a secondary knowledge derived from the knowledge of individual things. It is a primary knowledge, a spiritual knowledge indeed, but knowledge after all. It belongs to the third eye" (Panikkar 2010, *loc*. 6083).

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Article

Charismatic Pneumatology as Ecumenical Opportunity: Orthopraxy, Subjectivity, and Relational Ontologies of the Holy Spirit

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Abstract: The majority of new Christian communities have been appearing in Charismatic and Pentecostal movements, especially in the Global South. Along with these shifts emerge new possibilities to better understand the diversity of Christian perspectives and to rethink what it means to be "in relation" to a global Christian community. After opening connections between pneumatology and relational ontology, this article engages the work of three emerging Pentecostal/Charismatic thinkers in particular, whose pneumatologies provide novel opportunities to think more carefully about "relationality" and ecumenical unity: Nimi Wariboko, Amos Yong, and Clark Pinnock. Wariboko's pneumatology helps us acknowledge the very kind of relational ontology God has with Godself, as a split subject, thereby disrupting not only our all-too-human meaning-making process, but also the way God signifies the world for us. Yong's pneumatology emphasizes human practice or an "orthopraxy" that is polyphonous, historically rooted, and oriented around spiritual gifts not only for sanctification but also for worldwide witness. Finally, Pinnock emphasizes the connections between creativity and relationality, pointing to how at-one-ment is also the telic work of the Spirit.

Keywords: pneumatology; Charismatic; Pentecostal; Yong; Wariboko; Pinnock; relational ontology; Open Theism; Pentecost

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> *"Those who want to know the power of reality in the depth of their historical existence must be in actual contact with the unrepeatable tensions of the present."* (Tillich 1948, p. 75)
>
> *"Everything is swaying in the wind (pneuma)."* (Wariboko 2018, p. 25)

1. Introduction

The majority of new Christian communities have been forming not in the Global North, but in the Global South. Most growth has not been in traditional Churches, but rather in more Charismatic and non-institutional movements. With these shifts emerge new possibilities to better understand both the Christian faith and its intricate relationship with the (universal and particular; unifying and diversifying) cultures out of which it appears. Although we should not ignore the many challenges facing the Unification of Christians today (e.g., critiques of colonialism, "unity" as a western hegemonic concept, or the fears that all must follow a Western system of management and organization in order to be counted as ecumenical), ecumenical dialogue needs to turn attention to the confrontations between, especially, the traditional expressions of the faith and the movements of Global Pentecostalism; between orders of the orthodoxy of *des quae creditur* and the orthopraxy of *des qua creditur* (Conradie 2015, p. 67).[1] One opportunity for doing so is found in recent and emerging pneumatologies of thinkers associated with Pentecostalism or Charismaticism. Their work has opened new possibilities to rethink what it means to be "in relation" to a highly diverse faith community.

Although ecumenical dialogue more often than not has taken place through Christology, it is by no means unusual or novel to reflect on Ecumenism through pneumatology.

After all, and as the *Ecumenical Directory* confirmed decades ago, the unification of the church, for which Jesus prayed on the eve of his death ("that all may be one" John 17:21) is to be achieved through the work of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, as the founding decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*, states: "The Lord of Ages . . . has fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit a movement for the restoration of unity among all Christians" (Conciliar Decree on Ecumenism 1967). This work even extended at the time an invitation for, and interest in, how the "Spirit movements" of Charismaticism and Pentecostalism can promote unity.[2] As the Orthodox Church has recognized for centuries, the Holy Spirit binds the Eucharistic community together, helps lead to fuller communion, and organizes unity in order to counter any overly individualistic spirituality that might threaten unity. This raises some important concerns: if the Holy Spirit indeed is the Uniter of churches, yet also the founding gesture of the "many tongues" of the Church at Pentecost, then how might we truly understand this paradoxical relationality via diversity? How might the idea of the "many diverse tongues" of Pentecost actually help provide this *relational* unity?

Since its 20th century inception, Pentecostal Theology has become increasingly focused upon developing deep practices that express new perspectives in pneumatology. Although "Renewal", "Charismatic", or "Penecostal" theologies bear fruitful similarities to "Evangalical theology", it would be a mistake to assume that they are simply "Protestant" or "Evangelical Theology plus" some different beliefs about Spirit Baptism, gifts, and healing tacked-on (Yong 2013, p. 249)[3]. Instead, these theologies' focus upon pneumatology reshapes the entire meaning of what it means to "do" theology. McDonnell bemoaned this problem 40 years ago:

> "In the West we think essentially in Christological categories, with the Holy Spirit as an extra . . . we build up our large theological constructs in constitutive Christological categories, and then, in a second, nonconstitutive moment, we decorate the already constructed system with pneumatological baubles, a little Spirit tinsel." (McDonnell 1982, p. 142)

In order to take this movement seriously, then, we must begin likewise with their pneumatologies. One way to engage their work, and to demonstrate its potential for ecumenical and relational unity, is to consider in what ways Charismatic pneumatologies trade out the traditional form of modern subjectivity for a "relational ontology". By attempting to expand creatively the "pneumatological imagination", these thinkers seek connection with the very person of the Godhead who throughout the scriptures is responsible for creation. In addition to creation, and the sanctification of humans, one of the central features of the Holy Spirit is the giving of power and gifts in order to strengthen persons' relations to God, in social movements, and in churches globally.

After setting the context and possible connections between pneumatology and relational ontology, this article engages the work of three Pentecostal/Charismatic thinkers in particular whose work provide novel opportunities to think more carefully about "relationality" in the context of pneumatology: Nimi Wariboko, Amos Yong, and Clark Pinnock. Nimi Wariboko's pneumatology helps us think more closely about the very *kind* of relational ontology God has *with Godself*, as a split subject, thereby disrupting not only our all-too-human meaning-making process, but also the way God signifies the world for us. Amos Yong's pneumatology emphasizes human practice or "orthopraxy" that is polyphonous, historically rooted, and oriented around spiritual gifts for not only sanctification but also worldwide witness, while Clark Pinnock emphasizes the connections between creativity and relationality, pointing to how at-one-ment is also the telic work of the Spirit. Each of these thinkers stress the absolute priority of a "relational" encounter with Christ made possible by the Spirit who links human hearts (Yong 2014). Considering these three thinkers alongside one another helps demonstrate the unifying (Romans 8:1–3[4]), liberating, and revelatory power of pneumatology in an increasingly globalizing world. If the Holy Spirit is indeed the uniter of persons and communities, then to rethink pneumatology or to develop novel appraisals of it is to reassess, simultaneously, ecumenical unity.

2. A Relational and Ethical Context of Pneumatology

When the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work is limited *only* to individual persons, a critical moral piety can arise at the expense of the inter-social elements essential to ecclesiological life. Perhaps one reason for this is that we have envisioned the work of the Holy Spirit as cut-off from one of her primary roles—the witness and unification of persons. The Spirit, of course, is not the ontologically abstract or metaphysically effervescent "thing" we often imagine, but rather the very way and person of God who interacts with humans by connecting them, mediating their often-conflictual relationships, and creating a unified social ethic. In such a context, pneumatology should help dispel us of both our propensity towards abstraction, and our beloved, but individualist, modern ontologies. Put more polemically, the perennial question of Christian social ethics in an ecumenical context is not only how Christ is a moral exemplar, but is also creatively connecting churches as "Emmanuel, meaning the God of relation" (Raschke 2008, p. 31).

Pneumatology provides us therefore with a better appreciation for "relations" according to a sphere of human meaning whereby the self-other relation is ever active. As such, it helps provide a grounding "realization" and mediation of Christology in the life world; namely, through a functional social ethics of similarity via difference (Wagner 1995, p. 119). When it comes to difference, there of course are essential distinctions to be made, especially between "division" and "non-acceptance" and between "unity" and "uniformity". Uniformity can delimit how others can affect, impact, and "differentiate" us: "The desire for uniformity is the opposite to the desire for unity" (Noble 2018, p. 21). We instead should seek "unity", which helps establish a practical social ethic that can grant meaning to the connections between persons via the Holy Spirit. This is one reason why Pentecostals will begin with the orthopraxy that begins with right actions. These connections demonstrate the co-presence of self and other. Via the "gifts of the spirit", practitioners realize that the gifts given do not "belong" to any one specific individual like any typical possession. These gifts are like small revelations that serve to connect us to God and to others. Such a pneumatology helps us see revelation as a product of God's own inter-triune communication and unity.[5]

The interconnections between individualism and pietism of course have Modern philosophical roots. Instead of prioritizing relations, we have tended to prioritize "things" in their unchanging nature or *esse*, often in order to make estimations and assumptions about how they will be "for us" in the future. Known as the "relational turn" in recent philosophy and theology, "relational ontology" argues that the priority does not belong to the substance of things (a "substantivist ontology"), but rather a complexity of "relation" via a network of causes that connect entities and persons. The human experience is based in intricate and intrinsic relations, such those on emotional, moral, logical, or inter-religious levels. Some relations are simple, while others are complex. Even down to the atomic level we know of collisions, causations, entanglements, energy fields—all relations (Wildman 2010, p. 56). In religious terms we think of love, communion, salvation, compassion, and even judgment in terms of relations. On the cultural level, we know relations express values, virtues, patterns of recognition, intimacies, identities, or nations—bundling us together in love, or binding us in common emnification. This relational turn of course is not entirely new (it has resonances, for example in both Leibniz' monadism or even ancient Hinduism). Yet, it has found novel cultural expression in recent years, indeed pointing to something new: "the basic vision of reality [has] shifted from giving priority to permanence to that of change. Substantive ontology was dead, and relational ontology was born" (Simmons 2014, p. 35).

Lacking the space here to go too deeply into relational ontology (which accounts for a wide variety of phenomenal relations in the world ranging from the Platonic "forms" or Kantian "categories"[6]), we might at least recognize that such a metaphysic may help in overcoming any strong overemphasis upon identity and individualism in modernism, and subsequently inspire connection to the world, nature, other people, and God. Of course, both entities and relations are equally important. It should not be necessary that we must

choose between *either* substantivist *or* relational ontology as correct/incorrect. Yet, it does seem that relational ontology provides opportunities both to balance-out our extreme prejudices for substantivist ontology, and to give the Christian community even more reason to rethink carefully the "relationality" of the Holy Spirit. It may be that our ignorance of relations, and perhaps false prioritization of substance over relation, is a by-product of our failures to acknowledge the work of the interconnecting God—the Holy Spirit. If indeed the "God-world relation is the metaphysical basis for all relations" (Wildman 2010, p. 59), and if we tend to lack creative appraisals of that relation (especially pneumatologically), then our acknowledgement of the unifying relations between churches, persons, and the Triune God-head would be limited.

3. Wariboko's Pneumatology Founded on Trinitarian Difference

As Nimi Wariboko emphasizes, there are various and necessary "splits" in those unifying relations. Wariboko offers a Nigerian Pentecostal Perspective that is highly influenced by American Systematic Theology, as well as Contemporary European Critical Theory. There are three ways in which we might characterize his contributions to rethinking the relationality of pneumatology: (1) God has a "split subjectivity" that marks a unique self-relation grounded in the work of the Spirit; (2) the unlikely praise of contradiction opens creative pathways between God and humans; and (3) we should accord priority to natality through the inter-relational "Pentecostal Principle". In *The Split God: Pentecostalism and Critical Theory*, Wariboko points to the positive potentials of Pentecostal Pneumatology today, especially in the context of protestant discourse, and in a way that challenges some of the most basic, metaphysical presuppositions of any systematic theology that would place "thought" before "practice". Via reflection upon the day of Pentecost, he provides an analysis for how the originary and founding gesture of the Christian church results by no means in a blind or flat unity, but rather a wild diversity that is reflective of the richness of what he calls "the split God". Through engagements in "microtheologies" of actual Pentecostal orthopraxy that help support these theoretical and analytic depictions, Wariboko examines how the pneumatological practices and presuppositions of Pentecostals/Charismatics (e.g., the spiritual discernment of miracles, a more playful engagement with the differences between the sacred/profane, and the bodily freedom of worship practices) demonstrate the gaps in a "split reality" that help empower humans towards freedom from calculation via grace.[7]

The celebratory claim for Pentecostal pneumatology is that the paradigm of "multiple tongues" at Pentecost relieves us of needing an all-inclusive "systematics" that is harmonious (Wariboko 2018, p. 33), whole, cohesive, and decoupled from culture.[8] This classic, systematic hermeneutic is flawed because the very nature of God is "split" in a way that this God is internally diverse, often unpredictable, and sometimes even contradictory. Wariboko harmonizes with relational ontology in this regard, namely, by insisting upon a dynamic relation over substance. Such an acceptance has helped aid the diverse growth (Wariboko 2018, p. 33) of Pentecostalism over the last 50 years. A Pentecostal pneumatology that begins with the Holy Spirit and Triune life can teach that the God whose very subjectivity is "cracked" (Wariboko 2018, p. 37) is much more relatable than some traditional depictions of a God, whose self-enclosed unity or integrity would serve to limit any value of God's relation with the world. A split God, on the other hand, bears an internal otherness that prioritizes relation in their very identity and personhood.

Of course, it is not novel to claim that God is the "greatest" or "highest" expression of otherness. However, to point to an internal otherness within God as a "split subjectivity" opens new pathways for thinking about relational pneumatology. The split image of this God entails not only that God is "structured precisely around an openness" to alterity, uncanniness, or uncanny strangeness (Wariboko 2018, p. 515). It also has an analogical effect upon how humans relate with others. By pointing to how otherness is one of the *founding features* of Triune Godhood, it inverts the paradigm of needing to base theological claims upon sameness. Instead, we might begin Pneumatology in this *open* way; especially

by accepting the enigma of Otherness instead of trying to domesticate or "integrate" it into *our* (possessed) concept of the whole of reality. Otherness is not "an obstacle", and even God has this fundamental experience of extreme otherness: "What is familiar is ultimately grounded on strangeness: God moves in mysterious ways, the unfinishedness of reality means that it is also a stranger to itself, and the believer is indeed a stranger to herself" (Wariboko 2018, p. 515). God is elusive to Godself, yet this is precisely what demonstrates for us the importance of the founding gesture of creative diversity.[9]

3.1. In Praise of Contradiction

A *second feature* of Wariboko's (relational) pneumatology is that it embraces disharmony and even contradiction. This, of course, has social trinitarian implications for both God the creator and God the Son. This split God can inhabit incarnationally the "in-between" of the transcendent/immanent. If the Holy Spirit truly performs miracles, then our theologies are faced with the daunting task of accepting that, for this God, multiple incompatible possibilities exist that may even appear to be contradictory. Thus, Wariboko seeks to turn the critiques many pose against Pentecostalism (such as their "inconsistencies, unorthodox practices, and orientations to be explained", Wariboko 2018, p. 39) into their very "positive condition". Pentecostal pneumatology is characterized by the attempt to live-out the theological reality of being made in the image of such a "split God".[10]

Again, instead of bemoaning contradictions, or surrendering the theological enterprise altogether, Wariboko thinks that this can inspire awe at the transcendent other for whom we await to penetrate the natural world miraculously. The creative Spirit who created the "order" of nature purposefully built within it an "ontological incompleteness" (Wariboko 2018, p. 54). This incompleteness provides essential "cracks" that allow this split God to enter nature at unpredictable points and bring about unforseeable miracles.[11] God is not some "master-signifier guaranteeing the harmonious order of reality" (Wariboko 2018, p. 58). Rather, God enchants us through the disruption of the wooden "orders" of reality we like to erect.[12]

Although Wariboko is influenced by Western "Liberal Christianity", his concern is that traditional "death of God" theologies, which properly drew attention to the inauthenticity of fundamentalist movements, failed to offer any viable or practical alternative.[13] Instead, in many cases, such theologies turn out to be just another form of fundamentalism: in believing they may have a "comprehensive (All) notion of reality or God" (Wariboko 2018, p. 62), they have become fundamentalists. Where Liberal Christianity failed, Pentecostalism has thrived: "While still believing in their capacity to penetrate the noumenal realm, conservative Pentecostals did what the liberal Christians could not do; they transformed the epistemological obstacle to positive ontological condition: the gap between us and God has now become a positive feature of God" (Wariboko 2018, p. 68). Pentecostal theology, in his view, can avoid the critique of fundamentalism, while both (A) maintaining the infinite qualitative difference between God/humans; and (B) reinvigorating faith with a new ontology of divine, relational activity. These were two of the founding aims of mid-20th century Liberal Christian Theology.

This comes back to how Wariboko celebrates how reality is essentially fractured: "the gap between us and God has now become a positive feature of God" (Wariboko 2018, p. 68). It is true that Pentecostalism often operates in a theologically "promiscuous" way, projecting "the threatening image of a community with uncontrolled boundaries" (Wariboko 2018, p. 21). Yet this uncontrollability, diversity, and possibility of emergence is the product of the natality and creative work of the Holy Spirit. Wariboko points to such natality as the "pentecostal principle": the capacity to always begin again. This principle is an expression of the gift of divine freedom to not be bound by anything—not even logic. This natality is entirely consistent with what others have interpreted to be one of Pentecostalism's defining characteristics: a "radical openness to God" (Smith 2010, p. 33) to bring about another "breakthrough", another event of creation, another break with the past.

Although at times Wariboko's theoretical language is unfamiliar and lacking explanation, and in some cases borrowed from thinkers whose primary motives are antithetical to Wariboko's aims, his approach demonstrates that difference and creativity are what drive unity and help overcome the xenophobia of newness. It is not the cohesiveness of a community's affirmative beliefs about itself, its God, and world that, in the end, can unite them with other diverse communities. Rather, the beautiful "enigma" of unification of a culture with any other culture will be found (borrowing from Žižek) in the overlapping of those communities' *weaknesses*, and blind spots. That is, their weaknesses provide the universal context of hopeful transformation via diversity. The gaps, weaknesses, and inconsistencies make room for the experience of the miraculous "God-drenched world of the expected unexpected" (Wariboko 2018, p. 418).

3.2. The "Pentecostal Principle"

The *third feature* of Wariboko's work that helps us think about the relationality of pneumatology appears in his depiction of natality in the "Pentecostal Principle". There is a relational–creative effort of not simply connecting persons, but also having a social influence upon "structures". This creativity is ever *disruptive* of the status quo, and this is why even liberal theology is critiqued for its dogmatic and fundamentalistic insistence upon a "closed reality". Tillich, using Jaspers' language of "boundary situations", developed his "protestant principle" to determine that there is no way to make "absolute" claims about "relative" reality. This drove a wedge through reality, in essence.

Wariboko admires Tillich's work yet insists upon a different principle that is more reflective of everyday Pentecostal ecclesial practice. This "Pentecostal Principle" is the constant "capacity to begin" (Wariboko 2012, p. 1) and access to an open-ended and constant renewal. Reflective of emergence theory, creation is a "pure means" that prioritizes "possibility" over actuality, yet in a way that does not denigrate the material world. (Wariboko 2012, p. 212) The material world thus becomes "charged" with the Holy Spirit's original and continuous initiation of creative freedom. Thus, Wariboko's ecumenical gesture is to employ pneumatology to insert some "Catholic substance" into the "protestant principle", and to draw attention to the necessary tension between relational ontology (relativity) and substantivist ontology (absolutism) through bridging the noumenal and phenomenal:

> "The Pentecostal principle is the power of emergent creativity that disrupts social existence, generates infinite restlessness, and results in novelty. The notion of the Pentecostal principle rethinks the idea of the Protestant principle as the spirit of creativity, the creative transforming energy that operates within the structures and throughout the process of creation as its law of motion". (Wariboko 2012, p. 44)

The insistence upon a certain wild diversity therefore is relevant not only for Pentecostals, but for all Christians. That is, Christian diversity is not antecedent to, or happenstance of, but rather *central* to the Christian experience. This pneumatology represents the deconstructive hope to maintain tradition while simultaneously making space for newness in a "paleonomic gesture" that simultaneously "erases and preserves the Christian tradition". It maintains its "old name in order to launch a new concept" (Wariboko 2018, p. 82). This penchant focus upon newness and creation helps make sense of how Pentecostals often are accused of dancing too close to the threatening flame and "boundary of heresy" (Wariboko 2018, p. 82). Their pneumatology seems to weave in and *out* of Christian tradition or orthodoxy.

The Pentecostal Principle helps us acknowledge that generation and creation are essential to developing a relational pneumatology. Distinct from past systematic theologies that seek to capture God as an "idealized image" in "theological tomes", this pneumatology expresses the opposite—a creative distortion of "the reality or traditional notions of God in order to accent other features that resonate . . . [in] intensive participation in the divine being" (Wariboko 2018, p. 92). This pneumatology is more like Expressionism than Impressionism. "Impressionistic" Theology would attempt to capture and describe

reality by taking a "photograph of God" in a present moment so that it later can be shared and appreciated (Wariboko 2018, p. 92). In contrast, an Expressionistic Theology seeks an existential experience and alteration of reality so as to stir-up new moods, affects, and inter-social perspectives. Overall, Wariboko contributes to rethinking relationality by insisting upon (1) the Trinitarian focus upon God's "split subjectivity" mediated by the Spirit, and as an inspiration for humans; (2) the freeing affirmation of how what may seem "contradictory" can open new inter-relations between God and humans; and (3) emphasizing (in the "Pentecostal Principle") the inter-social need for natality, new beginnings, and breakthroughs.

4. Amos Yong's Polyphony and Relational Diversity

Although similar to Wariboko when it comes to relationality, Amos Yong employs a different style and means by which to think about pneumatology. Yong bridges a vast number of Christian identities (e.g., Chinese, American, Pentecostal) and provides a refreshing account of renewal theology that serves to bridge hospitably and, surprisingly, a number of perspectives we typically think are incompatible. His work furnishes an understanding of relationality via pneumatology through emphasizing the global diversity or "polyphony" of churches. Although Charismatic and Pentecostal church bodies are quite diverse, they can be critiqued for a more conservative and less "open" perspective on the topic of pluralism. Yet in many ways, their particular pneumatological approach, based on the very plurality of the "many tongues of the Spirit" that were "poured out" in the events of Acts 2, provides a model for a different kind of inter-relational openness to even those of other faiths. The diversity and globalization of language at Pentecost can be witnessed today in churches associated with charismatic movements. Necessary here is a deeper description of the role pneumatology can play in better understanding this diversity, not only for these communities, but also for the ecumenical church at-large.

Some may worry that Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Renewal Theologies are incredibly inconsistent. Over the last century, very little has been made available to make systematic sense of this movement as a cohesive whole. This has been further complicated by their aforementioned focus upon practice over doctrine. Yet instead of mourning these inconsistencies, Yong embraces them (Yong 2013, p. 242; cf. Yong 2005). We should praise these differences because they demonstrate not a fixed set of beliefs, but beliefs that still are unfolding, dynamic, and deeply reflective of a "polyphony of Pentecostal pneumatologies" (Yong 2013, p. 242). Perhaps even, and in many cases without knowing it, the Pentecostal God "turns out to be a Pluralist" (Smith 2010, p. 59).

Yong argues that an essential part of this polyphony and dynamicity is *relationality:* "At the heart of the renewal movement is a spiritually characterized by relational encounter with the living Christ through his Holy Spirit" (Yong 2014, p. 33). Further, Yong believes that this relationality needs to be unfolded more carefully not through theological investigations *of* the Holy Spirit, but more specifically, pneumatological theologies that can *interrogate the entire* theological project and ensure that it secures this relational background for systematic thought.[14] Yong is not alone here. Others (Pinnock 1996; Wariboko 2018) have called for how pneumatology challenges us to rethink the overall way we presume our theologies to be coherent, cohesive, and consistent. Although the classical confessions of the faith (at Nicene or Westminister, etc.) spend less time on the personhood of the Holy Spirit and the specificity of this relationality, they indeed affirm the Holy Spirit is the "Giver of Life" (John 6:63, cf. Article 3, Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed). As Giver of Life, the Holy Spirit connects through dynamic relationality. Thus, what we stand to gain by beginning with a relational pneumatology is the opportunity to rework the very idea of what it means to be "systematic". Such a relational approach also serves to restrengthen the trinitarian commitment: "given the relational character of the Holy Spirit (who is both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ) a pneumatological approach ought also to open up to a relational and Trinitarian theology" (Yong 2014, p. 32).

Inter-Relational Witness and the Gifts of the Spirit

Further supporting this praise of diversity and dynamic relationality is Yong's *Orthopathic* ("right emotions") pneumatology. This more "open" approach demonstrates the essential role the affective dimension of human life plays. Instead of the classic, Western Epistemological, cognitive–behavioral model of understanding the human, it makes more sense to imagine a more holistic approach that takes emotional life just as seriously as it takes thinking and logic. This provides another grammar of articulating the already active pneumatological theology built into the practices of those often non-Western, Charismatic, and Pentecostal movements. Yong's pneumatology engages all of these elements (polyphony, orthopraxy, relationality) in rich genealogies of Pentecostal pneumatology.

Such a genealogy begins with diversity from the very start. Although many trace the formal "birth" of the Pentecostal movement to the "Azusa Street" revivals in Los Angeles in 1906, contemporary charismaticism has multiple origins (Anderson 2004). Yet the two major streams that confluence in charismatic pneumatological movements are the Wesleyan and the Reformed streams. For Yong, their differences reflect centuries-long theological disputes, and in ways that their relevance for pneumatology is not immediately clear. The more Reformed stream's general emphasis of a high Christology of *justification* has focused on how the holiness of Christ is imputed through full salvation at a person's point of conversion. On the other hand, although not necessarily a Christology "from below", the more Wesleyan (or "Holiness") stream's focus has been more upon how souls get regenerated by the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit towards greater maturation and moral Christ-likeness (See here especially Menzies 2006).

This debate is especially relevant in consideration of relationality. The Holiness movements have emphasized the necessity of Spirit empowerment in a kind of "two step" conversion that has soteriological consequences as well; namely, via the Spirit Baptism reflective of the Spirit's empowerment for the purposes of mission and "witness" and continual grace found in Acts 1:8. Those associated with these movements creatively have sutured Spirit Baptism into the original four-fold gospel of Jesus as sanctifier, savior, healer, and king. Each of these four essential aspects also reflects a role for Spirit Baptism, and here the debates between these two streams becomes more acute: does the Spirit empower for witness (Reformed position) or *more so* for individual sanctification (Holiness position)?

This distinction is fundamentally indicative of those church's attitudes towards persons it deems to be on the "outside" of Christianity, and it is therefore relevant for thinking about inter-relationality and plurality. Those who recognize Spirit Baptism as a part of sanctification have a *less* social gospel, and more private, individual expression of spirit gifts. Meanwhile, those who see Spirit Baptism mostly as a part of witness situate Spirit Baptism as a means of empowerment for missionary representation on earth (Yong 2013, p. 246). Although Yong situates himself as a part of the Assemblies of God Church, he is quick to acknowledge that Spirit Baptism is for individual sanctification, the church, and for missional witness. Although the differences over Spirit Baptism can be a hurdle to ecumenical dialogue, Yong demonstrates that the very *plurality* and *polyphony* of differences such as these should be something to celebrate so long as these communities are open to dialogue, and do not emnify other Christian communities.

It of course is not novel to stress the importance of pneumatology for *communion* and inter-relationality. Orthodox theology has done this quite well for centuries. Yet, the originality in Yong's approach is how it helps us acknowledge that communion, and its ensuing ethics and ecclesiologies should be rooted in the sociopolitical reality of the early Church's "many tongues". The diversity of languages (which are not only spoken, but visibly seen and heard) establishes, from the very beginning, a celebration of the paradigm of diversity and inter-cultural interpretation. Languages (*Glossolalia)* are not simply "functional" or tools of media, but rather a combination of semiotic signs that represent the unique ways cultures express meaningfulness. Cultural differences at times get too quickly misunderstood as ethical and moral differences that need to be dissolved. Although there is something to be praised about the universality of the Christian message

and the way it connects humans, Yong emphasizes how this connection is made possible precisely through diversity.

To summarize three positions that make Yong's pneumatology unique: (1) he attempts to draw connections with other inter-religious communities *precisely because* of his emphasis upon the diversity of tongues that express the outpouring of the Baptism of the Spirit. (2) He highlights an inter-relationality beyond the Church: the *Parousia* came about through following the Great commission. The tongues and languages were given for mission, and this sutures pneumatology to social change in the outside or "fallen world".[15] (3) He draws attention to how the Gifts of the Spirit are focused on activity over doctrine, "orthopraxy", and "orthopathy" are just as important as "orthodoxy", as they connect us to a *dynamic relationality* over static substance. This inter-relationality finds similarities in the Cosmic Pneumatology of Clark Pinnock.

5. The Cosmic Pneumatology of Clark Pinnock

Once dubbed the "Canadian Charismatic Pilgrim" (Studebaker 2010) and an "Evangelical Maverick" (Strange 1999), Pinnock theologized from a highly ecumenical and interdisciplinary approach deeply influenced by Charismatic theology. Despite being most known for his role in helping pioneer the "Open and Relational Theology" movement, he demonstrated a standing interest in unfolding the role of the Holy Spirit in thinking about relationality. From his dissertation on pneumatology in St Paul to his most "systematic" work, *Flame of Love*, Pinnock sought to reform pneumatology in light of Charismatic practice. Two aspects of Pinnock's pneumatology stand out for thinking about relationality via the Holy Spirit: (1) dynamic creation and imagination, and (2) interpersonal unity via newness and atonement.

As for dynamic creation, Pinnock challenges us to see how the Holy Spirit calls us likewise to create and expand our imaginations. Christ referred to the Spirit as the *giver* of life (John 6:63), and Pinnock points to this creative aspect of the Spirit, who *not only* "hovers over" the primordial waters (Genesis 1:2) and breathes into Adam's lungs (Gen 2:7) in some finished event of creation, but also still is creating today. In short, the Holy Spirit is a designer who helps us not only recognize the "difference between creator and creation" (Link-Wieczorek et al. 2004, p. 49) but also engage in creation itself. That is, creation is not simply "in the beginning" but continuous, active, and participatory. This demonstrates the Spirit's role of not creating chaos, but of continually turning "chaos into cosmos" (Pinnock 1996, p. 50). This broadens the perspective for pneumatology and furnishes a *telos* for her gifts. The central role of the Spirit is to help creation reach its goal, which is the transformation and renewal of this created order (nature, persons, relations) to reflect godliness and to establish connectivity of persons through Christ's redemptive work (Pinnock 1996, p. 60).[16] This emphasis demonstrates how Pinnock's "compelling ecumenical pneumatological advance gives a refreshing account of the prevenient Spirit's role in the creational process" (Swoboda 2013, p. 86).

The prevenience of gifts, love, and grace connects the "originary" creation act to the present and the future, sustaining creation that is an ever-giving life for all. One of the novelties of Pinnock's approach is a reversal of the order of how we typically understand creation in relation to redemption. Although we typically begin our systematic theologies foundationally with "the beginning" of the creation of the world, we often move on too quickly to focus on the redemption and unity of persons. This unfortunately results in over-emphasizing redemption at the expense of forgetting that the Spirit is *first* an imaginative creator of spaces. It makes sense to dwell on the overall vision of what is being redeemed and how. As Pinnock sees it, we need to retrieve these creative or "cosmic functions" for theology; namely, because "the cosmic functions (of the Spirit) keep before us the unity of God's work in creation and redemption. Spirit is the power of redemption only because he is first the power of creation". (Pinnock 1996, p. 62)[17]

Interpersonal Unity via Newness and Atonement

Pinnock's pneumatology also can be seen as expressing a unique, interpersonal unity. As a founding member of the "Open and Relational" theology movement, Pinnock holds to a theology that does not begin with the classic dogmatics of the doctrine of God's all-encompassing knowledge, power, benevolence, holiness, etc. Although some of these factors are causal of other important theological characteristics that result from Pinnock's Christology and pneumatology, many of these doctrines get deconstructed along the lines of subsuming them first under the "omega" qualification of God as loving and relational. This helps make sense of Pinnock's claim:

> "Let God not be defined so much by holiness and sovereignty in which loving relatedness is incidental, but by the dance of trinitarian life. And let us see Spirit as effecting relationships, connecting Son to Father, and us to God. Spirit is the ecstasy of divine life, the overabundance of joy that gives birth to the universe and ever works to bring about a fullness of unity. When we render God in this way, not only atheists might come to love him, but even Christians, for we ourselves often lack a sense of God's beauty and adorableness. God is the ever-expanding circle of loving, and the Spirit is the dynamic at the heart of the circle". (Pinnock 1996, p. 30)

Although dressed in non-traditional and even affective language, this approach to the Spirit as a "dancing" circle of uniting and dynamic love is reflective of Gregory of Nanzianzus' chosen metaphor for the mystery of the trinity—the dance of "circumincession" (*perichoresis*). "Dance" here is appropriate because it creates space and represents movement in relation to other persons, yet without sacrificing individual identity. This expresses the primordial nature of life and mirrors it into human relationality, participation, and reciprocity. For Pinnock, "Trinity means that shared life is basic to the nature of God. God is perfect sociality, mutuality, reciprocity and peace" (Pinnock 1996, p. 21).[18] This ideal transcendent society of interpersonal communion that does not leave persons alone in isolation is the kind of relation humans also should emulate. This runs contrary to any rugged individualism or "uncontrolled subjectivity" that limits our attunement to the Spirit's guiding of community (Pinnock 1996, p. 135; cf. Williams 2017).

These ideas of pneumatological creation and triune "shared life" provide us a different expression of unity. The Spirit plays a fundamental role in creating unity between God and humans. At-one-ment or *atonement* gives expression to unity through reconciliation (Romans 5:11), and this is primarily *a relational concept*, not simply one of soteriological justice or salvation. Atonement points to "the loving relationality into which the Spirit is drawing people" (Pinnock 1996, p. 88). By acknowledging the originary role of the Holy Spirit in establishing reconciliation and atonement, we might better grasp the complexity of the *very idea* of unity. Pinnock recognizes that although in some cases we might think of unity as "a relatively simple notion", it often is highly complex. Indeed, "The higher the entity, the more complex unity seems to be. Think of the unity of a work of art . . . Why expect divine unity to lack complexity? Trinity is a mystery, but it is not an irrationality. It epitomizes the complexity in unity that we find everywhere in experience" (Pinnock 1996, p. 29).

Pinnock carefully sits therefore between two prevailing tensions of divine mystery and divine anthropocentricism, between apophatic and kataphatic theologies. Instead of trapping us in not being able to speak of God, the complexity of God is precisely an invitation to creatively explore this personhood; namely, because this God is a personal God who binds Godself to the interests, projects, and problems of humans in history.[19] Consistent with Penetecostalism's ontological priority of grace and healing, Pinnock's "free-will" theology emphasizes human freedom and God's relationship with "the world" in which God kenotically invests Godself into creation. Pinnock's account seeks to not fall into a dualistic or even Gnostic trap of pitting the spiritual against the material. When such a pneumatology can truly prioritize inter-relation, unity, and creative dynamicity, and can

display how God's Spirit is available for *all* and not merely a "secured possession" for only the few "chosen", new doors are opened for ecumenical connectivity.[20]

To summarize Pinnock's position: to be relational is to be dynamic, and to be dynamic is to be connected to newness and creation. This approach to the Holy Spirit follows from Pinnock's emphasis upon the creation account, also ensuing from his conception of redemption via natality. The intimate entanglements of God-world-person demonstrate once again his interest in "a more relational model" (Pinnock 1996, p. 149). By focusing not simply upon "unity" for its own sake, but rather upon the shared goals of "new creation" (Pinnock 1996, p. 155), Pinnock insists we might arrive at a more sustainable unity (which always is in various *degrees*) as communities that creatively make transcendence together. A pneumatology of newness and change is expressive of becoming more aligned with the creative efforts of Spirit.

6. Conclusions: Toward a Relational Pneumatology

Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Renewal Pneumatology are emerging attempts to give description to the practices of those communities "committed to Jesus Christ and are grasped by the Holy Spirit" (Wariboko 2018, p. 93). This article has turned to recent and creative reappraisals of pneumatology in especially Charismatic thought *not* in order to *critique* other, past theological accounts, but rather more essentially to build bridges of inter-cultural possibility, precisely through the *relational ontology* provided by the Holy Spirit. We indeed are in need of more careful "reflection on the nature of spiritual ecumenism" (Link-Wieczorek et al. 2004, p. 308), and one thing to be learned from worldwide Spirit-driven movements is how the elevation of pneumatology can help *renew* Churches and theological education (Yong 2020). This growing sector of Charismatic Theology in particular attempts to breath new life and faith into struggling Churches worldwide, and therefore offers surprisingly novel spaces for understanding ecumenical dialogue. At least since the Second Vatican Council, Catholic theology has pointed to the need to more consistently acknowledge how the Holy Spirit is present already at the moment of creation (*Semina Verbi*), and still is creating and establishing the kingdom in this present *cosmos*. This is an inter-relational bridge that could be used to further connect these movements, networks, and traditions.

In conclusion, it is important to note that even among these three emerging Charismatic perspectives, there is a great deal of diversity. They represent how Charismatics should not be labeled "conservative or fundamentalist", but rather "radical and nonorthodox" (Wariboko 2018, p. 22). As an attempt to be radical, Pentecostal and Charismatic theologies cannot simply be dismissed as a cultural fad, or a temporary, passing movement. Perhaps the spread of these many Christian expressions of spirit-driven Charismaticism is a result of the core drive of *homo religiosus* or an "ideal expression" of a Bonhoefferian "religionless Christianity" via a return to pneumatology (Cox 1995). Perhaps Pentecostal pneumatology has had such a global spread not because it is *new* or *novel*, but for precisely the opposite reason: because it is radical and *primal*. The primal piety (healings, miracles, gift expressions), primal speech (multilinguality), and primal spirituality (surprising and spontaneous expressions of the spirit in church settings) of these movements can be interpreted as expressions of a *retournement* to certain Christian freedoms suppressed in Modernity (Cox 1995).[21] In this context, perhaps the "relational turn" or contemporary attraction of "relational ontology" also is an expression of what has been missing from the human project in a modern era so overly committed to establishing epistemological foundations in which truths, persons, and contexts are decidedly "unchanging" and self-sustaining. Or, put in theological terms, perhaps the radical return to pneumatology is a way to *retrieve*, or at least gain renewed awareness of, what Wariboko, Yong, and Pinnock each deem central to Christian experience: a creative and freeing, yet complex and relational, unity born of the recognition that the differences of other Christians (and of God) should not be seen as disabling threats, but rather as conduits of a creative and primal freedom.

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Notes

1 As Sawa recently summarized quite well, "A description of a Pentecostal spirituality in the broad sense should also recognise the following differences with respect to the Catholic or Reformation traditions: experience over doctrine, prayer and praise over the credo, references to life over theological deliberations, developing trust in God over the knowledge of catechism, and spontaneity over formulas. All these generate a new quality of spirituality". (Sawa 2021, p. 626).

2 "Today, in many parts of the world, under the influence of the grace of the Holy Spirit, many efforts are being made in prayer, word and action to attain that fullness of unity which Jesus Christ desires". *Unitatis Redintegratio* p. 4. See also Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (SPCU), *Ecumenical Directory, Ad Totam Ecclesiam, AAS* 1967, 574–92; *AAS* 1970, 705–24. *Directory for the Application and Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity n.d.). http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/documenti/testo-in-inglese.html (accessed on 2 February 2022)

3 Yong here refers critically to M. Horton's (1995) edited *Systematic Theology: A Pentecostal Perspective*.

4 "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death".

5 Here Wagner's depiction of pneumatology as a concretion of love and freedom is helpful: "Liebe, die in der Hingabe an anderes—Personen, Institutionen und Sachverhalten—zu sich selbst kommt, und Freiheit, die die nicht haltbare Alternative von Selbst- und Fremdbestimmung durch Selbstdarstellung im Fremden überwindet." (Wagner 2014, p. 391)

6 In support of a relational ontology, Wildman contests the validity of Aristotle's example of the keyring: "Aristotle thought that relations are ontologically subordinate to entities. We can think of the manifold relations attributable to a set of keys on a key ring—what they can unlock, whether we know where the keys are, and so on—but those relations only exist so long as the key ring itself exists. Moreover, the key ring's relations can easily be changed (say, by changing locks) without affecting the substance of the key ring. This is why Aristotle included relation on his list of categories as subordinate to the primary category of substance, which he interpreted as the bearer of all properties, including relational properties. Some idealist philosophers have argued that Aristotle erred when trusting common sense as a guide in this instance. In fact, the key ring's substance, *properly understood* (i.e., understood contrary to common sense), *does change* when its relations change. Change the locks and key ring is no longer useful in the way it once was, and this affects the substance of the key ring because substance is more than merely chemical constituents and shape". (Wildman 2010, p. 57).

7 For Wariboko, "Microtheology is an interpretative analysis of everyday embodied theological interactions and agency at the individual, face-to-face level. It is a study of everyday social interactions of individuals or small groups that demonstrate the link "ages between spirituality (practices and affections) and embodied theological ideas (beliefs)". (Wariboko 2018, pp. 102–3).

8 For Wariboko, not only do multiple languages create a kind of disharmony, but miracles can as well: "Because Pentecostals believe that there are cracks in reality, tears in the phenomenal curtain over the noumenal that allow "miracles" to eventuate or spirit-filled believers to access things-in-themselves, their actions cannot reflect a harmoniously ordered God". (Wariboko 2018, p. 58).

9 He continues "The point is that the enigma of the Other that Pentecostals think is an obstacle to integration with the Other is also an enigma within/of Pentecostalism. What eludes the Pentecostals' grasp about the Other eludes not only their own grasp about themselves, but also the Other's grasp about itself". (Wariboko 2018, p. 516).

10 Wariboko argues "that Pentecostalism's limitation to a split God, that is, the very practices, beliefs, rituals, and interactions that prevent Pentecostals from relating to or conceptualizing a harmonious, consistent God, is, at the same time, the positive condition to its access to a living, active, miracle-working God, and this partly explains its robust growth". (Wariboko 2018, p. 33).

11 For Wariboko, "The God, qua a notion of Christian God, who inhabits this "between" with them is imagined by Pentecostals to be cracked, a real deity and its fantasmatic supplement; in him multiple, incompatible possibilities exist. From an infinite distance, the notion of pentecostal God is crafted to inspire awe". (Wariboko 2018, p. 37).

12 Others have described this aspect of Pentecostal theology as an "enchanted" theology of creation that is "charged" with invisible or inconspicuous principalities and powers. Such a "nondualistic affirmation of embodiment and materiality" (Smith 2010, p. 41) serves to put into question the way we make clear-cut distinctions between the immanent/transcendent and the sacred/profane.

13 Wariboko hopes to reveal "that the God that 'died' in the 1960s and the God who was 'resurrected' in the 1980s are not the same. God is now a radically split God. Pentecostals have crafted from the materials of their everyday lives a notion of God that is not in (or cannot come into) full identity with Godself, and God is forever interacting with a reality that is ontologically incomplete. Time and again, we see Pentecostalism professing a traditional doctrine of God, yet its very practices continually set the stage for the unraveling, liquidation, or reconstitution of that doctrine". (Wariboko 2018, p. 24).

[14] As Yong claims, we need not simply "theologies of the Holy Spirit . . . rather, they should be pneumatological theologies". (Yong 2014, p. 32).

[15] Relevant in this context is how scholars have tracked racial differences among early American Pentecostal movements. As Alexander and Yong have argued (Yong and Alexander 2011), Black Pentecostal communities have been quicker to engage in social justice and civil rights movements than white communities.

[16] For Pinnock, "Spirit is the power by which this present age will be transformed into the kingdom and which ever works to bring about that ultimate fulfillment. As the power of creation, the Spirit does not call us to escape from the world . . . but keeps creation open to the future". (Pinnock 1996, p. 61).

[17] See here Wenk, who also recently argued for the necessity of retreiving the role of the Holy Spirit in creation. (Wenk 2022, p. 191).

[18] Pinnock continues, "As a circle of loving relationships, God is dynamically alive. There is only one God, but this one God is not solitary but a loving communion that is distinguished by overflowing life". (Pinnock 1996, p. 21).

[19] "God is bound together with us by choice. This is why he acts in history and relates to creatures. He loves to exist in dynamic relationship with the world. God has pledged himself to this situation so full of promise and of risk". (Pinnock 1996, p. 30).

[20] Swoboda fittingly asserts that "A truly pentecostal theology acknowledges that God's Spirit is not the secured possession of the Pentecostal church . . . when we revisit the Holy Spirit in all of creation, not merely the human community, we will find God's mission to bring prosperity, health, and vitality to all that God has made". (Swoboda 2013, p. 410).

[21] Cox (1995); see also Wariboko (2011). It also is of note here that such expressions of Christianity, despite concerns about its inclusive exclusivism in its models of Spirit Baptism, is often seen to empower "individuals apart from or alongside cumbersome institutions, authorities, and traditions" (Yong 2013, p. 256), and facilitate modernization of developing nations, and even democratization of economies. (Martin 2002).

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Article

Culture-Specific and Cosmopolitan Aspects of Christian Coexistence. A Postcolonial Perspective on Ecumenical Relations

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Abstract: This article wants to shed light on some of the cultural complexities of the ecumenical movement by putting it in conversation with postcolonial theory. It argues that the academic discourse of postcolonial theory and the ecclesial movement of ecumenism are siblings of sorts in as much as they both deal with the lingering consequences of past violence and with the tensions between particularity and universality. A growing awareness of the problem of postcolonial conditions in the ecumenical movement is briefly documented with reference to the journal VOICES/VOCES and Simón Pedro Arnold's suggestion of an 'inter theology' sensitive to the power dynamics and cultural intermingling in global Christianity. In a similar vein, Claudia Jahnel is arguing for an intercultural theology that takes processes of hybridization seriously and therefore needs to develop forms of 'vernacular ecumenism'. It is an ecumenism that materializes in countless Christian migrant communities around the globe. To understand and recognize the complexities in these postcolonial Christian identity formations, some kind of 'cosmopolitan ecumenism', as André Munzinger calls it, needs to be developed. This way, hybrid cultural and theological formations can be recognized, and hegemonic universalisms resisted.

Keywords: intercultural theology; World Council of Churches; migration; hybridity; postcolonial theory; cosmopolitan ecumenism; receptive ecumenism; vernacular ecumenism

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1. The Ecumenical Movement and Postcolonial Theory—A Brief Historical Outline[1]

The ecumenical movement, with its diverse theological branches, had a lasting impact on Christianity throughout the entire 20th century.[2] Milestones in the development of this movement include the first major missionary conference in Edinburgh in 1910, the World Conference on Practical Christianity in Stockholm in 1925, the World Conference on Faith and Order in Lausanne in 1927, the founding conference of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948, and the Second Vatican Council in Rome from 1962 to 1965. Last but not least, there were also many international ecumenical conferences in the Global South, which took into account the fact that Christianity had become a truly worldwide religion over the course of the 20th century, accompanied by—and this is significant for this article—an unmistakable shift in focus from Europe and North America to the Global South.[3]

The academic tradition of postcolonial theory is younger than the ecumenical movement. It began to take shape in connection with the struggle for liberation of the colonies of the Global South in the middle of the last century. The Caribbean psychiatrist and political philosopher Frantz Fanon can be understood as a decisive initiator of postcolonial thought. As early as 1952, in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon 1967), he identified the destructive psychological effects of colonial ideology on the self-image of oppressed ethnic groups.

However, postcolonial theory as an academic discipline began to establish itself only after the publication in 1978 of the book *Orientalism* by the Palestinian literary scholar Edward W. Said (Said 1979). Said's analysis of the image of the 'Orient' cultivated in the British West demonstrated that the liberation of (most of) the colonies did not eliminate colonial thinking, but that Western notions of superiority and related 'epistemic violence' in the form of ascribed identities continued to shape global relationships. At around the same time, a tradition of decolonial thinking developed in Spanish-speaking Latin America, which was in tension with the postcolonial thought developed in the French- and English-speaking regions of the globe.[4] A prominent thinker of the decolonial tradition is Walter D. Mignolo, whose overriding interest lies in the critical examination of the (exclusionary) underbelly of Western modernity. His recurring question is: at whose expense did Western modernity establish itself? (Mignolo 2021) Common to postcolonial and decolonial theories is the problematization of binary thinking, particularly in encounters between cultures.

Ecumenism and postcolonial thought are two currents that do not communicate with each other as a matter of course. If they are placed side by side, they represent an unequal pair of siblings. According to this metaphor, the ecumenical movement is the older sibling of postcolonial theory. What could this relatively new academic tradition of cultural theory have to say to an inner-Christian movement that is well over a hundred years old?

2. The Aftereffects of a Violent Past and the Global Context

Even this very brief juxtaposition of the 'two siblings' hints at both their crucial differences as well as certain points of contact. Ecumenical theology is a discipline that developed out of the ecumenical movement and examines Christian beliefs from different denominational perspectives. One of its main concerns is, and remains, the struggle for an understanding of Christian unity and its realization. That this struggle was closely linked to colonial expansion well into the 20th century is a fact that makes the dialogue between ecumenical theology and postcolonial theory particularly important. Postcolonial theory is a deliberately interdisciplinary endeavor that emerged from the *cultural turn* in the late 20th century and critically questions and exposes the smug universalism of Western thought. In it, the unveiling of (unconscious) hegemonic and colonial thought and power structures, as well as the revelation of various forms of resistance against these structures, play an important role. Its aim is not unity, but rather a description of specific (cultural) relationships that is as nuanced as possible and avoids binary attributions.

Despite all the differences between the ecumenical movement and the discipline of postcolonial theory, both have an explicitly ethical profile, and two common concerns can be identified. Firstly, they deal with the consequences of discord in the past that can lead to violence (confessional divisions or colonial oppression), whose aftermath can be felt and continues to make itself known even today. Secondly, they are animated by an awareness of the importance of the global connection between religious and cultural relationships, and thus—to various extents—by the tension between local contexts and global connections, between particularity and universality.

3. Ecumenism and the Colonial Consciousness

If one examines the aftereffects of violent discord in the past, a gradual broadening of perspective toward a critical stance on colonial relations can be observed in the ecumenical movement. I would like to document this widening with a few brief highlights. When an overwhelming majority of Christendom from the northern hemisphere was gathered in Edinburgh in 1910 and, in an apparently colonial spirit, set themselves the ambitious goal of winning over the whole world to Christ within one generation, the problem they had in mind was primarily that of *denominational* divisions.

The tone of the negotiations at the world mission conferences in Whitby in 1947 and in Willingen in 1952 was different. Here the focus was on *political* divisions: two world wars had caused irreparable damage to the 'Christian' world, and the Chinese Cultural Revolution had made mission in an important 'missionary territory' impossible. Against

this background, missions were reflected on anew as *missio Dei*, that is, not primarily as an institutional undertaking but as participation in God's work in the world.

The assembly of the World Council of Churches in Uppsala in 1968, however, focused on the discord caused by global *economic* and *ethnic* injustice. Martin Luther King Jr. was invited to be the keynote speaker but was assassinated before the assembly. In the discussions in Uppsala, the incompatibility between catholicity and racism was considered in an impressive way (Nausner 2018, p. 343). However, in Uppsala as well, colonialism as such was hardly discussed.

The fact that colonial imbalances had also caused discord in the ecumenical movement was finally thoroughly reflected in 1976 at the founding of EATWOT (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians). With its establishment, male theologians[5] of the Global South expressed their will to liberate themselves from the dominance of Western thinking and promote theology from the perspective of the 'Third World'. The magazine *Voices from the Third World*,[6] founded at the time, is still an important platform for the publication of theological voices from the Global South. In 2014 an issue appeared on the topic of liberation theology and postcolonial thinking,[7] reflecting an acknowledgment of the importance of postcolonial thinking for ecumenism in the Global South.

Together Towards Life—a document published by the World Council of Churches in 2013—recognized the historical interweaving of Christian mission activity with colonial exploitation and regretted 'that mission activity linked with colonization has often denigrated cultures and failed to recognize the wisdom of local people'.[8] It criticized the continuing Western hegemony in missionary initiatives and highlighted the connection between evangelization and colonial rule. This often leads to the assumption that '[w]estern forms of Christianity are the standards by which others' adherence to the gospel should be judged. Evangelism by those who enjoy economic power or cultural hegemony risks distorting the gospel'.[9] In this document, which was officially adopted by the World Council of Churches, there is a flash of awareness of the enduring impact of colonial thought and power structures. This persistence of colonial relations in altered and often very subtle forms is a major concern of postcolonial theory, which understands the 'post' in 'postcolonial' not in the sense of a chronologically delimited 'after', but in the sense of the *aftereffects* of the colonial.

In the magazine *Voices* mentioned earlier, these aftereffects are a continuous theme and are brought to the fore in a much more radical way than in *Together Towards Life*. This can be seen, for example, in an article by Simón Pedro Arnold, a Belgian Benedictine living in Peru, in which he advocates an ongoing process of decolonization since colonial patterns continue to exist in Peru in *neocolonial* forms. To this day, Arnold argues, colonial satellites are kept in a relationship of dependency on the empire's urban centers, which amounts to a form of neocolonialism and is often reflected in everyday life in the form of systemic racism (Arnold 2014, p. 16). According to Arnold, Christianity also plays a part in this, and even the discourse on universal human rights is sometimes interpreted as colonial paternalism, in view of the Western world's continuing position of power (Arnold 2014, p. 18). A thorough decolonization of Christianity in its complete suppression of indigenous spirituality is necessary today, not least in order to learn from the ecologically mindful way of thinking and living of indigenous peoples, a wisdom and spirituality that Arnold calls 'eco-ecumenism' (Spanish: *eco-ecumenismo*) (Arnold 2014, p. 21). From his specifically Peruvian perspective, Arnold applies ecological, cultural, and interreligious dimensions for the benefit of ecumenical discourse and advocates an 'inter theology' that is open to the polyphony of forms which the Spirit brings to life through the creativity of cultures (Arnold 2014, p. 26).

Both *Together Towards Life* and Arnold's call for the decolonization of theology unequivocally draw attention to the problematic aftereffects of colonial relations and insist on the importance of allowing a variety of (cultural) voices to express themselves. However, both texts still reflect a rather binary understanding of center and periphery, of Western and indigenous culture, etc.[10] Postcolonial theory and the resulting postcolonial theology attempt to break down such binary configurations in order to draw attention to the count-

less hybrid cultural and religious forms that are increasingly shaping cultural and religious coexistence in a globalized world. To get a finer feel for the complexity of cultural and religious coexistence, it is worth taking a careful and patient look at the borders, at the dynamics in the spaces between cultural and religious groups and communities.

Arnold also seems to encourage such a view when he speaks of 'inter theology' (Arnold 2014, p. 26).[11] This is a concept that emphasizes the significance of spaces in between and can be easily linked to the concept of intercultural theology, which has been discussed intensively in missiology in the German speaking area for several decades. The fact that missiology is being increasingly understood as *intercultural theology* demonstrates that the awareness of the cultural embeddedness of any expression of Christian identity is gradually gaining ground. It also reflects how the complex negotiation processes between these identities, i.e., the 'inter', are receiving new attention. The increased blending of denominational identities due to global migration also makes it clear that ecumenical theology can no longer ignore the challenges of intercultural theology.[12]

4. Local Ecumenism Faced with the Challenge of Postcolonial Hybridity

In a groundbreaking article that appeared already in 2008, Claudia Jahnel addressed the relationship between ecumenical theology and the *cultural turn*—for which postcolonial theory is also a well-known expression (Jahnel 2008, p. 11). Here, she is concerned with applying to ecumenical coexistence the insight—acquired in cultural studies after the cultural turn—that cultures do not encounter one another as monolithic phenomena, but that in such encounters—in the 'third spaces' in between—something new arises (Jahnel 2008, p. 12). The application of insights from newer cultural theories such as postcolonial theory makes it possible to avoid premature condemnation of so-called syncretistic forms of Christianity. A case in point is the generalizing Western attitude toward new hybrid church forms such as African Independent Churches (AICs). They are examples of mixing that occur in various forms in all processes of cultural development. In the context of the *cultural turn*, such processes of mutual permeation are referred to as *hybridization*, *bricolage,* or *melange*. From the perspective of cultural theory, the ecumenical movement itself, as well as ecumenical dialogue and theology, can thus be understood as 'contact zones', 'zones for negotiating differences, of transcultural traffic in different directions' (Jahnel 2008, p. 14). This means that the construct of a stable denominational identity appears in a new light. Jahnel suggests making productive use, for ecumenical coexistence, of cultural theory's insights into the impossibility of a 'pure' cultural identity, not least because it has long been obvious that even in the ecumenical movement, identity 'is not limited to a denominational-theological position'. Instead, 'theological issues mix with issues of cultural and national identity' (Jahnel 2008, p. 19).

Thus, identity-creating symbols of the Christian faith, such as the biblical canon,[13] cannot be understood as something unconditional and unambiguous from the perspective of the cultural turn, but always as being mixed with their respective cultural contexts and their practices. For example, the postcolonial theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that professing one's faith is as much a practical performance as a substantive statement, and that it is a misconception to think that a limited number of holy scriptures—such as a canon—could convey the immutable essence of religion to believers (Appiah 2018, pp. 37, 44). Such a dynamic view has lasting significance for Christian and denominational identity since it arises, as Jahnel puts it, 'in the interactionist-syncretic process of the permanent recreation of meaning' (Jahnel 2008, p. 23). Jahnel then points to several intercultural phenomena that further problematize an overly static understanding of ecumenical exchange. This includes the translation of the Christian message in the Global South by 'vernacular speakers', the formation of resistance groups within denominations (which could be described as inner pluralization), and above all, the phenomenon of the double or multiple denominational and religious affiliation of believers (Jahnel 2008, pp. 24–25).

Jahnel sees possible points of contact between the ecumenical movement and the insights of the cultural turn in the 'pneumatological turn' within the ecumenical movement,

that is, in the turn toward pneumatology. This turn, which started to emerge at the latest at the 1991 Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra, led to new possibilities of interpreting the uncontrollable processes of the mixing and differentiation of Christian and denominational identities (Jahnel 2008, p. 28). Jahnel sees the attempts to move away from notions of a homogeneous global unity and to emphasize 'living, concrete and decentered unity' (Jahnel 2008, p. 29) as initiatives which take the necessary transculturality of living unity seriously, and which can therefore withstand criticism from the cultural turn. Unity should be understood here as a concrete practice of culturally different identities that share and negotiate with each another in 'ecumenical spaces'. Unity as the overarching goal of gradual perfection should be abandoned (Jahnel 2008, p. 31). Global unity should not be determined monoculturally or one-sidedly but remain an object of negotiation. Instead, unity can be understood as practiced 'vernacular ecumenism', that is, as an exchange that—analogous to Homi K. Bhabha's 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' —questions the 'construction of a binary opposition between vernacular, concrete Christian communities [...] and the global-cosmopolitan ecumenical community' (Jahnel 2008, p. 32). A sustainable understanding of unity should not lose sight of the concrete conditions on the fringes and borders (Jahnel 2008, p. 33).

5. Migrant Communities as a *Locus theologicus* of Postcolonial Theology (Polak 2014)

In the texts on postcolonial theology that appeared in the German-speaking countries after Claudia Jahnel opened the ecumenical discourse to approaches based on cultural theory,[14] migrant communities have been repeatedly identified as a *locus theologicus* where the need for a new look at inner-Christian dynamics has become particularly obvious (Nehring 2018; Jahnel 2019; Nausner 2020b). At the heart of the 'Western Christian world', new community and theological configurations are constantly and increasingly emerging, which have been misunderstood by a traditional Western understanding of denominational and theological differences. For example, Irena Zeltner Pavlović shows how Orthodox Christian churches in the West must struggle with attributions of identity that act as forms of power. No matter how much they might be a part of Western society, they must deal with how others perceive them as belonging to the *Balkans*. The *Balkanism* that results from this attribution can certainly be associated with the *Orientalism* diagnosed by Edward W. Said (Zeltner Pavlović 2018, p. 228). It should be remembered that the Balkans were subjected to the colonization efforts of the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg monarchy for centuries (Zeltner Pavlović 2018, p. 229). According to Pavlović, Orientalism and Balkanism are linked by a traditional 'hierarchical evaluation from East to West' (Zeltner Pavlović 2018, p. 230). The fact that Orthodox Christian churches have to struggle with this hierarchy is the result of a binary essentialist juxtaposition of the *homo balcanicus* and *homo europaeus*. The hybrid character of each denomination is ignored here (Zeltner Pavlović 2018, p. 241). As long as denominationally, culturally, and theologically mixed forms of community are only perceived as an exceptional phenomenon, the ecumenical movement is doing itself a disservice.[15] This is because migration is not an exceptional phenomenon but an anthropological constant that can be used to observe basic models of the formation of cultural and religious identity particularly well. Thus, migrant communities are spaces where the convergence between the local and global context is revealed paradigmatically. This is because they reveal in a special way how Christian identity develops in a complex relationship between vernacular and cosmopolitan processes.

6. Global Ecumenism and Hybrid Identities from below

Cosmopolitanism is a concept with ancient roots that was famously revisited by Immanuel Kant with his dream of global citizenship (Weltbürgertum). Despite its legitimate emphasis on a universal right of every human being to have a place in this world, the concept has consistently triggered criticism, not least for its liberal presupposition that a universally 'original position' (Rawls) can be determined for all human beings regardless of their social and cultural context (Gahir 2016, pp. 46–48). A solemn emphasis on a

cosmopolitan identity is consciously or unconsciously easily accompanied by an attitude of superiority over 'putative provincialism' (Appiah 2006, p. xiii). While such critical observations need to be kept in mind, the world-relatedness of Christian and ecumenical identity—i.e., a relatedness to the whole world, the *cosmos*—must not be forgotten. This is also Henrik Simojoki's point of departure when, in his attempt to intertwine ecumenical learning and postcolonialism, he presumes, together with Ernst Lange, that the entire world must be the point of reference for Christian existence. The method of ecumenical learning is learning about the world as one's horizon (Simojoki 2018, p. 256).

In his essay 'Cosmopolitan Ecumenism?', André Munzinger shows that learning about such a global outlook does not have to come at the expense of concrete contextual or vernacular identities (Munzinger 2020). He believes 'that the cosmopolitan perspective is crucial for ecumenism since it recognizes people as equal citizens of the world'. However, following Jürgen Habermas, he emphasizes that particular and universal dimensions of validity must remain intertwined (Munzinger 2020, p. 188) and that ecumenism needs to hold together universal and particular principles (Munzinger 2020, p. 193). A certain dilemma is recurring: the ecumenical movement has impressively articulated resistance against ruling powers (Munzinger 2020, p. 194). This is manifested in the comprehensive efforts of the World Council of Churches for social, religious, and ecological justice worldwide. At the same time, this movement also bears joint responsibility for the formation of colonial and ecologically destructive structures (Munzinger 2020, p. 195). Thus, when looking toward the future, cultivating an awareness of inner plurality is of great importance since there is profound dissent *within* individual religious communities that blurs clear-cut boundaries (between these communities). The phenomenon of multiple affiliation, which can be observed first and foremost in migrant communities, is an example of this blurring: 'At the macro level', according to Munzinger, 'cultures are thus not homogeneous due to far-reaching internal differentiation processes; at the micro level, people hailing from different cultures form new cultural syntheses' (Munzinger 2020, p. 197). Munzinger refuses to understand multiple affiliations as a 'sign of pathological identity formation'. Instead, it belongs 'to the logic of migration and the globalization of narratives' (Munzinger 2020, p. 198). However, precisely the recognition of such a logic of multiple affiliations is a major and lasting challenge for an ecumenical discourse that remains attached to clear denominational categories or ignores power dynamics while excluding hybrid identities.

This challenge also applies to the movement of *receptive ecumenism*, which has established itself over the past fifteen years or so. It has developed a new method of ecumenical exchange characterized by a great respect for the richness of denominational and spiritual differences. Its focus is not so much on the active formulation of one's own identity, but rather on 'transformative receptivity'. This means that the conceptual clarification of what is one's own is placed aside in favor of a 'receptive learning' from others (Murray 2007, p. 289). The emphasis is not on asserting one's own identity but, following Emmanuel Lévinas, on paying attention to one's own responsibility in the face of Others (Murray 2007, p. 290). According to Paul D. Murray, one of the theorists of receptive ecumenism, one can only change oneself, and this is best done in the face of Others and through Others (Murray 2007, p. 292).

This ecumenical method of attentively perceiving the gifts of Others that transform the Self is something that can also be of great importance in the context of postcolonial plurality. However, Murray is clearly concerned with preserving one's respective identity and integrity. Receptive ecumenism, Murray argues, overall is 'about having evoked in us the desire to become more fully, more freely and more richly what we already are' (Murray 2007, p. 291). He does not seem to have in mind instances where true mixing takes place, or denominationally or culturally ambiguous identities and their associated power dynamics. It is the negligence of power asymmetries which Sara Gehlin criticizes in the project of receptive ecumenism. While she acknowledges the approach for its understanding of unilateral learning and receiving in the spirit of self-criticism, she also criticizes from a feminist perspective the associated and often unnoticed problem of the asymmetry of

power relations. (Gehlin 2020, pp. 198–99). Indeed, the awareness of the subject position of the conversation partners is crucial: Who is doing the listening? What about the question of equality and mutuality? Not least, what does an approach of vulnerable listening mean in a situation of power asymmetry? What are the risks of directing the focus exclusively 'toward unilateral learning and receiving in a spirit of self-criticism?' What does such self-criticism lead to in 'the absence of mutual exchange in receptive ecumenism.' (Gehlin 2020, p. 198) She thereby draws our attention to the fact that denominational, cultural, and creaturely boundaries never simply are innocent zones of transformation, but always also fields of contestation and power struggle. Questions of justice and equality need to be asked as well as questions of asymmetry and mutuality at the boundaries of encounters (Gehlin 2020, p. 210). Boundaries are never only what one partner in the encounter perceives them to be. They are always also zones in which power inequalities come to the fore. Therefore, a certain kind of border thinking needs to be practiced (Mignolo 2021) that has equality and mutual accountability as a goal (Gehlin 2020, p. 204f).

Henrik Simojoki has power dynamics in mind when he points out that hybridization is a necessary occurrence, but that people—and I would add especially people in power—do not wish to perceive hybridization processes in either the cultural or the religious spheres. They are perceived as disturbing. Indeed, such processes should not be presented as being too harmonious. Instead, the emergence of hybridity, as described, for example, by Homi K. Bhabha (Bhabha 1994), is always also an expression of a political and cultural struggle that should be taken seriously. This is reflected above all in the context of migration, and thus also in the context of migrant Christian/ecumenical communities (Simojoki 2018, p. 267). It is therefore of importance for ecumenical learning to give individual (hybrid) voices 'from below' the right to narrate. This is in line with a 'right to narrate' of migrants which Bhabha calls for (quoted in Simojoki 2018, p. 269). The vernacular and the cosmopolitan are held together by this postcolonial strategy, which also could be fruitfully applied to ecumenical learning. After all, hybrid voices belong together in real life, as Simojoki argues: 'Because in a world that is becoming increasingly globalized also at the local level, instances of exclusion (author's note: of hybrid voices) accompanied by the suppression of others will immediately become noticeable' (Simojoki 2018, p. 270).

On the one hand, a cosmopolitan ecumenism that is conscious of the unequal power relations of inner hybridization can maintain loyalty to the formation of particular and hybrid identities without losing sight of the global character of World Christianity. On the other hand, it can demonstrate that 'loyalty to one's own identity does not have to come at the expense of loyalty to people of other beliefs and traditions' (Munzinger 2020, p. 199). Here, we see the emergence of a comprehensive understanding of ecumenical and thus Christian identity, which constructively opposes a polarizing understanding of identity and instead sees identity as an expression of non-exclusive participation in different communities (Nausner 2020c, pp. 270–72). A postcolonial view of ecumenical relations can help, firstly, to acknowledge the growing hybrid cultural and theological forms of Christian identity as legitimate, and secondly, to recognize the dangers of hegemonic understandings of universality.

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Notes

1 This is a translated, enlarged and revised version of an article in *Ökumenische Rundschau* 70 (Nausner 2021).

2 I focus here on some milestones in the ecumenism of *mainstream churches*. I am aware that inner-Christian 'ecumenism' understood more broadly encompasses a much wider variety such as the *World Evangelical Alliance*, as well as the many Pentecostal and indigenous movements whose global importance Henning Wrogemann points out repeatedly. (cf. Wrogemann 2016, p. 17).

3 See *Together Towards Life. Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, para. 5. Available online: https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/Together_towards_Life.pdf (accessed on 24 June 2022).

[4] Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, a prominent representative of *decolonial* thinking in Europe, points out that despite all the emphasis placed on the new *postcolonial* discourse, it should not be forgotten that decolonial thinking, with its roots in the Latin American anti-imperialist movement of the 19th century, had already reflected extensively on many of the concerns of postcolonial thinkers. (Fornet-Betancourt 2018).

[5] In the beginning it was only men. In 1981 the first female theologians were admitted to the association. In 1997 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, a tireless promoter of women in theological discourse—especially in the Global South, became the first female president of EATWOT. An example of her commitment is the anthology *Women in Religion and Culture* (Oduyoye 2007).

[6] See http://eatwot.net/VOICES/ (accessed on 24 June 2022).

[7] See the 2014 issue Theologies of Liberation and Postcolonial Thought. *Voices From the Third World* 37. Available online: http://eatwot.net/VOICES/VOICES-2014-1.pdf (accessed on 24 June 2022).

[8] *Together Towards Life*, para. 27.

[9] Ibid., para. 98.

[10] For a critical appraisal of *Together Towards Life* from the perspective of postcolonial theology see Nausner (2015).

[11] For the importance of the experience of cultural borders for ecclesiology in general and Methodist ecclesiology in particular see Nausner (2010).

[12] Hendrik Pieterse reflects on what this challenge could mean for Methodist theology and proposes a new appreciation of the intercultural potential of the two classic Methodist ecclesiological structural elements of 'connection' and 'conference'. According to Pieterse, cultural-religious plurality should not be seen as an obstacle or failure, but rather as a gift from God that challenges people to see the spaces between cultures as sites of theological creativity. See Pieterse (2021).

[13] Judith Gruber deconstructs the notion of the Christian canon as monolithic and instead describes the canon as an 'act of intercultural theology' (Gruber 2018, p. 133).

[14] For an overview of texts on postcolonial theology in German-speaking countries in recent years see Nausner (2020a).

[15] Similar things can be said of the still hesitant communication between the ecumenical community of the traditional churches and the worldwide Pentecostal movement. Henning Wrogemann tirelessly points this out and, in his three-volume work on intercultural theology, consistently integrates voices of Pentecostal theology into the ecumenical dialogue, which he wishes to have understood more broadly than is the case in the practice of the World Council of Churches. Unfortunately, his work lacks a more thorough examination of postcolonial approaches, and he repeatedly engages unfair polemics against what he believes to be elitist approaches such as those of contextual theologies or the theology of religions.—See Wrogemann (2016, pp. 348–60).

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Holism of Religious Beliefs as a Facet of Intercultural Theology and a Challenge for Interreligious Dialogue

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Abstract: Religious beliefs are intertwined with religion or religious tradition. This article argues for a holistic understanding of religious beliefs and suggests that the formation and maintenance of religious beliefs are holistically sensitive to the background information, which includes the culture's meaning–value system. Beliefs embed appreciation of this background without the believer being explicitly conscious of how it has shaped them. This presents a problem for interreligious dialogue. In an interreligious dialogue, actors rarely recognise that one or more actors have no direct and unmediated access to this background. Any model of intercultural theology must thus understand religious belief holistically if it purports to facilitate interreligious dialogue. Holism is a vital epistemic and pragmatic facet of intercultural theology. Intercultural theology can use several strategies that could circumvent this problem—for example, analogies, metaphors, narratives, and even jokes. These are important for two reasons: First, they allow us to recognise that someone lacks an understanding of a cultural background; second, they effectively convey relevant aspects of a cultural background. The article concludes by outlining the significance of epistemic humility for interreligious and intercultural understanding.

Keywords: religious belief; culture; background information; epistemic virtues; humility; interreligious dialogue

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1. Introduction

This paper discusses the holism of religious beliefs, by which it means a vast body of background information that influences the expression and understanding of these beliefs. Holism of religious beliefs is relevant for both intercultural theology and interreligious dialogue. This is because background information consists of culturally determined contents. The paper offers several arguments. First, it explains the process behind the holistic formation and maintenance of beliefs, including religious beliefs. During this process, background information is not consciously represented, but nevertheless influences one's religious beliefs and their expression. This background information remains indiscernible so that, in communication or dialogue, it is hard to determine when one or more actors do not access, understand, or appreciate it. By revealing the holistic formation of beliefs, cultural influence on religious beliefs becomes apparent and can be consciously acknowledged. If intercultural theology purports to facilitate interreligious dialogue, it should thus acknowledge the holism of religious beliefs as a vital epistemic and pragmatic paradigm. After establishing the importance of holism for interreligious dialogue, this paper proposes several strategies for actively expressing background information, i.e., the use of analogies, metaphors, prompted and guided self-awareness, stories, other narratives, or even jokes. These are important for two reasons: First, they allow us to recognise that someone lacks an understanding of this background; second, they effectively convey relevant aspects of this background. In the conclusion, the relevance of epistemic virtuousness and the virtue of epistemic or intellectual humility, in particular, are emphasised. It is advocated that humility enables one to overcome limitations in the understanding of religious beliefs. It also fosters effective strategies for interreligious and intercultural understanding.

The paper proceeds as follows: The next section discusses the holistic nature of beliefs and explains the mechanism underlying the influence of background information. The third section focuses on how this mechanism operates within the domain of religious beliefs and culture. Cultural background is commonly implicit in religious beliefs, which bears consequences for interreligious dialogue and intercultural theology. A way to address and overcome the lack of awareness of background information in interreligious dialogue is to use different strategies for conveying religious beliefs in a more comprehensive manner. One strategy, which is described in the fourth section, is the use of stories or narratives. The final section investigates the role of epistemic virtues and, in particular, epistemic humility for recognising holism and for establishing an apt understanding of religious beliefs.

2. Holistic Character of Religious Beliefs and Background Information

There are several ways to understand religious beliefs. One can begin by simply bifurcating all religious phenomena into two broad categories, as Durkheim does when he writes that they fall "into two basic categories: beliefs and rites. The first are states of opinion and consist of representations; the second are particular modes of action. Between these two categories of phenomena lies all that separates thinking from doing" (Durkheim 1995, p. 34). According to Durkheim, religious beliefs are understood as representational states, e.g., as genuine beliefs. Some authors argue against this, maintaining that religious beliefs must be approached in terms of other mental states or attitudes, such as hope, commitment, or faith. Some of these are not reducible to beliefs, even if they can be sometimes understood as doxastic and belief-entailing (Audi 2011, pp. 51–52). Another possibility is to understand faith as a mediator between religious experience and religious belief.

I intend to understand belief as an intentional doxastic mental state that includes a commitment towards its contents. This essentially means that the reality is such as the belief represents it to be. Consequently, a belief has a constitutive goal, which is truth; in believing, we are aiming to believe the truth. While belief can also have other epistemic goals, such as knowledge, understanding, avoiding falsehoods, believing in accordance with the intellectual virtues, etc., and while some of its goals might be pragmatic (survival and contributing to the satisfaction of biological needs, survival and reproduction, satisfaction of desires and wants, etc.), not much of what I will say in this paper depends on such an understanding. Even if religious convictions or attitudes are not equated with beliefs, the questions about the relation between culture and religion and its consequences for intercultural theology and interreligious dialogue arises. This makes the proposal in this paper relevant in both cases.

Religious beliefs can be understood as beliefs that pertain to the divine or the sacred. Durkheim claims that such religious beliefs "display a common feature. They presuppose a classification of the real or ideal things that men conceive of into two classes—two opposite genera—that are widely designated by two distinct terms, which the words profane and sacred translate fairly well. The division of the world into two domains, one containing all that is sacred and the other all that is profane—such is the distinctive trait of religious thought. Beliefs, myths, dogmas, and legends are either representations or systems of representations that express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers attributed to them, their history, and their relationships with one another as well as with profane things" (Durkheim 1995, p. 34). It is not my intention here to reduce religion or interreligious dialogue to religious beliefs in any way. In some understandings of interreligious dialogue, beliefs play a minor role and are subordinate to building relationships and other practices. Nonetheless, it is impossible to disregard the role of beliefs in religious traditions. Since cultural context—on which I focus in this paper—clearly impacts religious belief, I am structuring my arguments in this vein. I am aware that this, in itself, is not a proposal for prosperous cultivation of interreligious dialogue or its sensitivity to cultural context, for that matter. However, religious beliefs are a vital part of interreligious dialogue and, therefore, deserve attention. While research—especially research focusing on religious identity—

sometimes does reduce religion, religious orientation, or other religious phenomena to beliefs, this is not my position; nor do I claim that cultural tenets of one's identity are always in alignment with religious ones (Edwards 2018, pp. 202–4). What I argue is that religious beliefs are interrelated with other aspects of religiosity and culture.

The central thesis of this section is that beliefs (including religious beliefs) are sensitive to background information. They are sensitive to background information because it impacts them during their formation and maintenance. Consequently, this impacts the understanding of beliefs and their expression as well. Another important aspect is that this background is present only implicitly.

Let me illustrate this mechanism with an example of understanding a joke. To understand a joke, one must appreciate relevant background information even if very little of it is explicitly present in the process of telling and understanding the joke. What is also relevant is that in getting the joke, one can form beliefs that enable the joke to be understood. The process of forming these beliefs is, and must be, equally sensitive to the relevant background information.

Consider an example of a cartoon that was published in the New Yorker magazine (I will only describe it here, but the punchline should be clear). The cartoon depicts two older women at a graveyard in front of a tombstone with the inscription "RIP—James Frost; 1969–2014 'Loving son'". One woman is holding the other in a supportive gesture around her shoulder. The other woman despondently says: "He finally called, and it did kill him." Various items of background information need to be appreciated to understand this joke. If one would want to explain the joke to someone who does not understand it, they would need to mention that mothers usually encourage their grown-up children, and sons in particular, to contact them more often by saying: "Would it kill you to call sometimes?" Nevertheless, this is just the first piece of pertinent background information needed to understand the joke. Who are those women depicted in front of the tombstone? How old are they? Who was James Frost—the "loving son"? Who called whom? What is the "it" that killed the person? Why would a call kill a person? What is the family relation between the person lying in the grave and the person mourning? In the moment of getting the joke, very little of this information is consciously present, but it is needed to understand the joke. Moreover, it needs to be appreciated in that moment because getting a joke is an instantaneous experience. This means that one needs to instantly appreciate a wide range of pertinent background information, and one needs to understand why and how all of this background information combines holistically.

Fixation (i.e., formation and maintenance) of a belief usually happens in such way that it accommodates a vast amount of relevant background information. This must be done automatically and implicitly, and not by explicitly finding, fetching, and manipulating representations. Such accommodation is highly holistic, i.e., it may draw on any part of the background information available to the cognitive system and on global epistemic commitments (e.g., coherence, simplicity, plausibility). However, what mechanism enables this? This mechanism, framed for beliefs in general, was first described by Horgan and Potrč (2010) and termed the phenomenon of chromatic illumination. Here is a brief elaboration of what is meant by this term by using an analogy of a painting.

Imagine a visual scene that is illuminated by light sources that are not directly visible from the observer's perspective, but nonetheless significantly affect the overall appearance. Think, for instance, of the famous 1892 oil painting by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, "At the Moulin Rouge". Figures in the scene are illuminated in strikingly different ways. The women, for example, are more illuminated than the men: One woman is illuminated by lighting from the left, but outside the scene, another woman's face is illuminated by lighting from the lower right outside the scene, some faces by a peculiar light-induced greenish tint that blends with the green of the scene's background, etc. The light sources—they are of various kinds, at various places in the wider environment, and produce light with different chromatic characteristics—are not depicted. Nonetheless, they are implied by the figures and other elements in the scene that are illuminated. The visible scene presented

in a painting can be taken as representative of one's conscious experience, including the different ways in which items are illuminated. By contrast, the light sources represent that which is in conscious experience appreciated not by being directly represented, but rather by virtue of how it affects the character of what is there overtly (Horgan and Potrč 2010; Henderson et al. 2021).

Given introspective reflection, conscious experience often exhibits chromatic illumination by background information that is appreciated. Before turning to beliefs, let me return to our initial example, getting a joke. Consider again the cartoon from the beginning of this section. Getting this joke, or any joke for that matter, is an instantaneous experience. The background information must, therefore, be appreciated if one is to understand the joke. In the moment of getting the joke, very little of this information is represented, but it is nonetheless appreciated consciously via chromatic illumination that it exerts upon one's overall experience.

Getting a joke also includes the formation of certain beliefs. These beliefs are part of the background information that needs to be appreciated to understand a joke, e.g., beliefs related to the questions that I listed above. In general, fixation of a belief must accommodate a vast amount of relevant background information and must do so automatically and implicitly, not by explicitly fetching and manipulating representations from the cognitive system. This holistic character is relevant for the formation of beliefs, their understanding, and for communicating them to other individuals.

Most ordinary beliefs are formed in such a way that they are sensitive to pertinent background information, including expectations and epistemic commitments. Such fixation of beliefs is often overlooked because the process is usually common and unapparent. Consider the following example. Audi (1993, p. 130) writes that I, working in my study in the evening, see a headlight beam through my window. This supposedly induces in me a belief that the "car's light is moving out there" and that "someone has entered my driveway". These perceptually induced beliefs seemingly arise directly as a result of a perceptual state. However, to form beliefs (and even to move from the initial perceptual experience of light to a belief about the moving car lights), I must be sensitive to background information and must operate within a field of pertinent expectations. Reflecting on this example, one recognises the relevance of background information that the cognitive system possesses for forming a belief. Information that I need to appreciate is, for example: I need to know what time in the evening it is, how likely it is that a member of my family just returned with a car, recognition that the sound accompanying the light pattern is the sound of a car engine, etc. Antecedent information, it seems, influences the transition from a perceptual state, such as perception of a light patch, to a belief, such as that a car has entered the driveway (Henderson and Horgan 2011, p. 268).

Consider an even more elaborate example of the holistic character of belief fixation, an episode about the famous detective Sherlock Holmes from the story *The Red-Headed League* (which I quote at some length here for the purpose of demonstration).

> The portly client puffed out his chest with an appearance of some little pride and pulled a dirty and wrinkled newspaper from the inside pocket of his greatcoat. As he glanced down the advertisement column, with his head thrust forward and the paper flattened out upon his knee, I took a good look at the man and endeavoured, after the fashion of my companion, to read the indications which might be presented by his dress or appearance. I did not gain very much, however, by my inspection. Our visitor bore every mark of being an average commonplace British tradesman, obese, pompous, and slow. He wore rather baggy grey shepherd's check trousers, a not over-clean black frock-coat, unbuttoned in the front, and a drab waistcoat with a heavy brassy Albert chain, and a square pierced bit of metal dangling down as an ornament. A frayed top-hat and a faded brown overcoat with a wrinkled velvet collar lay upon a chair beside him. Altogether, look as I would, there was nothing remarkable about the man save his blazing red head, and the expression of extreme chagrin and discontent upon his features.

> Sherlock Holmes' quick eye took in my occupation, and he shook his head with a smile as he noticed my questioning glances. "Beyond the obvious facts that he has at some time done manual labour, that he takes snuff, that he is a Freemason, that he has been in China, and that he has done a considerable amount of writing lately, I can deduce nothing else".
>
> Mr. Jabez Wilson started up in his chair, with his forefinger upon the paper, but his eyes upon my companion. "How, in the name of good-fortune, did you know all that, Mr. Holmes?" he asked. "How did you know, for example, that I did manual labour. It's as true as gospel, for I began as a ship's carpenter". "Your hands, my dear sir. Your right hand is quite a size larger than your left. You have worked with it, and the muscles are more developed". "Well, the snuff, then, and the Freemasonry?" "I won't insult your intelligence by telling you how I read that, especially as, rather against the strict rules of your order, you use an arc-and compass breastpin". "Ah, of course, I forgot that. But the writing?" "What else can be indicated by that right cuff so very shiny for five inches, and the left one with the smooth patch near the elbow where you rest it upon the desk?" "Well, but China?" "The fish that you have tattooed immediately above your right wrist could only have been done in China. I have made a small study of tattoo marks and have even contributed to the literature of the subject. That trick of staining the fishes' scales of a delicate pink is quite peculiar to China. When, in addition, I see a Chinese coin hanging from your watch-chain, the matter becomes even more simple." Mr. Jabez Wilson laughed heavily. "Well, I never!" said he. "I thought at first that you had done something clever, but I see that there was nothing in it, after all." (Doyle 1995, p. 133)

This example illustrates the role of background information in the formation of beliefs well. Holmes forms several beliefs about Jabez Wilson that draw upon an assortment of background information. One additional thing to notice is that there are perceptually available facts that Watson (the narrator) does not detect, such as the fact that Jabez Wilson's right hand is bigger than his left, that his right cuff is shiny along a portion of the length of his forearm and that his left cuff has a smooth patch near the elbow, the fish tattoo with delicate pink scales, etc. Watson overlooks them because, at that moment, they do not seem relevant to him. Let us suppose that one would point these facts out to Watson, saying "Notice his hand . . . ". He would then more easily form beliefs about these facts, but he would still be missing the relevant interconnections between facts in order to form the same beliefs as Holmes. Conversely, it is also likely that, in forming his predictions, Holmes did not explicitly reflect on all the background information that contributed to the formation of his beliefs—at least not until the moment when he was asked to explain them.

To recapitulate, belief formation typically draws, holistically and abductively, from the believer's pertinent information. The mechanism that enables sensitivity to background information is chromatic illumination, where background information illuminates one's current experience, but is not directly represented in it. Finally, as I will further demonstrate in the next section, this bears important consequences for the formation, understanding, and communication of religious beliefs.

3. The Challenges for Interreligious Dialogue and Intercultural Theology

For the purpose of the argument, I outline the following key ideas about religious belief and culture (as far as intercultural theology and interreligious dialogue are concerned). Culture can be understood as part of the implicit background that affects religious beliefs, predominantly as part of the process of socialisation within a given sociocultural setting. It affects both the content of such beliefs and their epistemic status (e.g., their justification, fundamentality, relevance, etc.). Making the mechanism of chromatic illumination apparent enables us to better understand its influence. Culture can be understood as consisting of deep-seated values, core beliefs, orientations (Geertz 1973), rules, roles, assumptions, etc. It can be assumed that much of such cultural backgrounds cannot be easily accessed, i.e.,

represented and expressed explicitly. Chromatic illumination of religious beliefs, however, does make the cultural background more explicit and, moreover, makes the believer at least partly appreciate its influence when forming or expressing this belief. I will explain how.

There is a growing body of research about the cross-sections between culture and religion, especially concerning the question of how religious beliefs express cultural background. Often noted are modes of intercultural communication that are accompanied by misunderstandings between members of different cultures (Croucher et al. 2017; Wrogemann 2016, p. 13). Some researchers conceptualise this as a mode of mediation in communication. For example, Croucher et al. (2017) emphasise that religions "have relied on mediations through various media to communicate their messages (oral stories, print media, radio, television, internet, etc.). These media share religious messages, shape the messages and religious communities, and are constantly changing. We find that, as media sophistication develops, a culture's understanding of mediated messages changes. Thus, the very meanings of religion, culture, and communication are transitioning as societies morph into more digitally mediated societies" (Croucher et al. 2017, p. 7). It can be added that such digital and social media sophistications pose an additional risk of depleting contextual communication. Digitally mediated communication excludes much background information.

I mentioned above that culture affects religious beliefs (alongside religious practices and orientation) through an implicit background. If that is true, then understanding of explicitly expressed beliefs depends on this background. Research in intercultural theology offers plentiful evidence to support this (Wrogemann 2021). Consider, for example, an episode described by Wrogemann (2016) in his discussion of intercultural theology and intercultural hermeneutics. He describes an encounter between the Tanzanian Lutheran pastor Willy Samuel Mastai and European visitors, where the latter observed the pastor in his daily dealings with the parish members. Considering how a visitor would describe what he saw, one can see the striking similarity between the example of Sherlock Holmes described above (including the way in which Watson fails to grasp the situation) and the example of the Tanzanian pastor. Here are some excerpts from Wrogemann's description of the visitor's observations.

> All day long people have been calling on the pastor, looking for advice and help. [. . .] The next person seeking help is allowed to enter. Some of the people outside have been waiting for four hours already, as the pastor briefly explains. The middle-aged woman is smartly dressed; rings and earrings reveal that she probably belongs to the middle class. She takes off her shoes and positions herself in front of the pastor with a touch of bashfulness. A short conversation in Kiswahili follows. We three visitors are invited to stand in a circle and lay hands on the woman, on her shoulders. The pastor says an audible prayer for healing, perhaps two minutes long; a brief exchange of words takes place, and the woman leaves. A young man comes in; after a brief explanation, a prayer for blessing is spoken over him, and he leaves. It seems he did not want anything more than a blessing. [. . .] Then an older woman comes in, poorly dressed, thickset, and corpulent. The pastor already knows the woman. He estimates that this is the fourth time she has come. It seems that she suffers from the indwelling of evil spirits. The woman positions herself in front of the pastor. He instructs her in a few words to look him in the eyes, while he himself stares at her with a very grave expression. Half a minute. One minute. One and a half minutes. The woman repeatedly evades his gaze; she looks at the floor or past him. Abruptly, Reverend Mastai then lifts up his hand and places it on the woman's forehead and the upper part of her face. The exorcism begins, for only if she had matched his gaze would it have been an unmistakable sign that the spirit had left the woman already. The state of possession is not yet over; the evil spirit is still present within her. Therefore the pastor begins to say the prayer of exorcism. He prays out loud; his voice sometimes grows louder and then softer again. [. . .] The woman's body is

> seized with convulsions; she hugs herself, contorts herself, with her eyes closed or occasionally rolling about. She falls backwards; we bystanders catch her, only just managing to prevent her from hitting the floor. Choking noises ensue; sometimes she emits a loud scream; the woman is again seized with convulsions as if trying to spit something out. She is foaming at the mouth, trembling and contorted. Then she comes to again, takes four steps sideways, bent over, to where a little plastic bowl with sand is ready; she spits. Presumably, this kind of spitting out takes place frequently. [. . .] After a few minutes, the exorcism is over. The pastor asks the woman whether she feels any better; she nods casually, does not say much—and leaves. All of a sudden, everyday normality resumes—or at least, that is how I experience it as an observer." (Wrogemann 2016, pp. 4–5)

Clearly, the visitor is able to minutely observe the meeting of the pastor and the local inhabitants, but a deeper understanding of its context is beyond his reach. This is even more explicitly revealed in the discussion between the pastor and the visitors about exorcism. Pastor Mastai can answer their questions, explain the roles of these rituals, and explain which members of his society are most susceptible to evil demons and what the people believe about demons. For the visitors, however, much of what goes into the practice remains obscure (the same is true of the situation in which the roles are reversed, that is, when Pastor Mastai visits Germany and observes their religious life). Wrogemann uncovers the implicit presuppositions that guide understanding. One presupposition of the European perspective is that "practically every phenomenon of our realm of experience may be explained scientifically. . . . This way of thinking determines not just everyday life in Western society but also life in the church: in worship services, congregation activities, and diaconal institutions, a 'rational' manner of action sets the tone throughout—that is to say, one that does not account for the interference of any evil powers (spirits, demons, etc.)" (Wrogemann 2016, p. 7). This is one example of a background assumption or preconception that affects beliefs, but in an inexplicit manner. There are, of course, other aspects that are influenced by the implicit background and that chromatically illuminate standpoints in this encounter. These aspects could also be brought to the forefront—some by a direct request for an explanation, and others by conveying understanding and comprehension through a story, irony, overtones, analogy, a metaphor, etc. These aspects are part of a gradual process of "understanding in the sense of empathetic inward re-creation . . . the culmination of which is ultimately unattainable" (Wrogemann 2016, p. 43). For this reason, chromatic illumination frames such phenomena and enables us to unearth background assumptions, patterns, beliefs, etc. If the aim is to understand a particular religious belief or a stance, then the background information is vital. Religious beliefs are sensitive to background context. "The idea of God typically comes to people as part of a larger package that conveys some understanding of the place of human life in a wider frame of reference, the ways we can live lives of value in relation to that wider frame, and what fulfilment we can hope for. A response of belief or unbelief is to the total package" (Holley 2010, p. 48). One role of intercultural theology is to emphasise this holistic dependence and to find a way to illuminate the unexplored regions of religious thought. It is very hard to directly access background context in the formation, maintenance, or expression of a particular religious belief, but this is not to say that it is impossible. Moreover, I am not arguing that mediation must always be in a special or indirect mode of facilitation of understanding. Reflective self-awareness, too, might reveal cultural background.

4. Going beyond the Surface and Uncovering the Background

Given the role of the implicit background and cultural dimension in religious beliefs, the following question arises: How can background information be accessed to inform understanding and communication of religious beliefs? In the introductory paragraph, I wrote that there are several ways in which one can access background information, such as different pragmatic and communicative uses of analogies, metaphors, stories, narratives, tales, and even jokes. These are important for two reasons. First, they can effectively convey

background information; second, they reveal if someone has failed to understand them. I argued above that, in order to understand a joke, one needs to appreciate some background information. In telling the joke, this also applies to the intended audience. Someone who lacks awareness and appreciation of the background will not understand it. This also holds for beliefs. "To understand the particular judgments that people make, we often need to know the patterns of thought that lie in the background of their assessments" (Holley 2010, p. 3). Consequently, misunderstanding can be interpreted as a symptom of overlooking background information. This allows one to change one's communication. The same can be said of religious beliefs. If expressed explicitly, beliefs lack the wider context and can, therefore, become a source of disagreement, conflicts, intolerance, fear, etc. In this section, I suggest that communication of religious beliefs should consider chromatic illumination. For this, I will focus on stories or narratives, but the same applies to the other aforementioned means of communication.

Consider a story or a narrative that is part of historiography. Historical narrative is a form of interpretation, and its truth should be judged differently from the mere correspondence of a set of statements with reality. There are other criteria for the evaluation of historical narratives, e.g., coherence, suitableness, aptness, and metaphorical fittingness. A historical narrative is a construction that is indeed based on historical facts, but its meaning greatly surpasses those facts. A historian encounters, e.g., a set of descriptions of events, but these descriptions do not hold the same meaning as they do when placed into a narrative. This is why the same events have different meanings in different narratives. Hayden White writes the following: "Since no given set or sequence or real events is intrinsically 'tragic', 'comic', or 'farcical', but can be constructed as such only by the imposition of the structure of a given story-type on the events, it is the choice of the story-type and its imposition upon the events which endow them with meaning" (White 1984, p. 20). When religious beliefs are conveyed through a story, the meaning of the story surpasses the meaning of particular beliefs. The narrative's meaning emerges from the entire story and its presupposed background. This makes parts of the story, considered separately from other parts, lose some aspects of their meaning.

All of this, of course, applies to religious beliefs as well. Holley suggests that "belief in God does not arise as acceptance of an isolated proposition. The idea of God is ordinarily understood in relation to a larger story in terms of which people form some understanding of what human life is about and how it should be lived. Accepting the larger story means acquiring a way to interpret the meaning of everyday experiences. A believer views her experiences in the light of the story and evaluates choices in terms that the story makes intelligible. In other words, acquiring a belief in God is inseparable from acquiring a way of life" (Holley 2010, p. 3). Given that the larger story or a way of life cannot be fully elucidated, this makes chromatic illumination especially relevant. "Our stories shape our perceptions at different levels. At the highest level of generality, we have stories about the nature of human life and the world in which we live that I call life-orienting stories. [. . .] They put our lives in a context that enables us to interpret the significance of our choices and develop a coherent mode of life. Religious stories of this sort tend to describe the significance of our lives in relation to dimensions of reality that transcend ordinary empirical observation and verification. They speak of such things as gods or God or karma or Nirvana, invoking these transcendent realities as keys to making sense of our lives" (Holley 2010, p. 4). This raises not only the question of how one understands religious beliefs, but also the question of how one forms them in the first place. "Many of our most important beliefs are acquired not as individual propositions, but in contexts where we respond to an integrated complex of beliefs that come to make sense as a whole. Belief in God comes about as a response to a specific narrative about God, and it is only within such a context that the question of belief can be raised in a religiously significant way. Whatever doubts there may be about the whole complex of beliefs won't be resolved by breaking it into parts to decide about God in a context that insulates us from the possibility of religious engagement" (Holley 2010, p. 44).

I thus far discussed stories and narratives, but the other aforementioned communicative means share the same characteristics. Here are some reasons why: First, their understanding depends heavily on implicit background. Second, they can be used for testing if this background information has been understood. Third, they can be used to enrich understanding of other beliefs that are part of a larger whole. Fourth, they are explanatory, they transmit understanding, they can build upon the familiar, and they shed light on the less familiar. (For example, narratives have a certain persuasiveness that goes beyond mere logical deduction, encouraging the right understanding.) Fifth, they convey meaning that surpasses the explicitly stated meaning. Sixth, they allow for creativity and individual expression, as well as for efficient transmission of attitudes. Even though they often build upon ambiguity, they retain their inner logic, structure, and mode of understanding. Here is a beautiful example of such a role of a metaphor discussed by Ted Cohen. Suppose that someone says to you, "Miles Davis was a musical genius, and his impact on jazz was tremendous. Miles was the Picasso of jazz". To understand this statement, you need to understand its broader background context. If you do, the statement is richer in meaning than a more explicit description of Miles' music would be; even though it is ambiguous to some extent, you can build upon this metaphor. Now, suppose that one would ask: "If Miles was the Picasso of jazz, who is the Rembrandt of jazz?" Given the inner logic and meaning conveyed by the metaphor, not every answer will be appropriate.

Ruparell (2013) claims that the metaphor is a semantic generator and a hermeneutical tool that creates new semantic entities, which can establish an interstitial space between religion and theological horizons. He proposes the creation of such inter-religious metaphors as a basis for a new model of interstitial theology. The relationship between metaphors and narratives is also implied. "Metaphors allow us to refer beyond our own experience to a created narrative world. With this in mind, I suggest that inter-religious metaphors refer to the space in between the poles of the metaphor. [. . .] In the dialectic between the poles of metaphor, a shaky ground of newly created common significations is slowly built up. This ground is always being broken down, patched up, and re-examined by the force and flux created by the dialectic of metaphor. This liminal world—the collection of shared references making up Ricoeur's re-described possible world—is not a new Archimedean common ground, but a *mobile plane of intersection*, *a locus hibrida*, sustained by the metaphorical encounter. It is a boundary phenomenon, a shoreline, created between and at the edges of religious traditions, synthesized out of materials taken from both. It is, in effect, a bridge or framework upon which the conversation of religions can take place" (Ruparell 2013, p. 128). The strategy that is best suited for being aware of the implicit background, communicating it efficiently, and creating an interstitial space of understanding depends, of course, on the context of an interreligious exchange.

5. Epistemic Virtues in Interreligious Dialogue and Intercultural Understanding

When considering the formation of beliefs and other epistemic practices, one way to frame their execution and their assessment is to use the notion of rationality and overall epistemic virtuousness. Both concern how well the agent is doing in utilising the best means toward selected epistemic ends (knowledge, understanding, wisdom, etc.) and the evaluation of these ends (Horgan et al. 2018). In comparison, ancillary epistemic virtues, as they might be called, concern specific aspects of epistemic practice. These include specific habits of mind pertinent to belief formation and other epistemic endeavours, habits such as impartiality, intellectual sobriety, intellectual courage, synoptic grasp, epistemic conscientiousness, sense for alternative points of view, salience recognition and focus, etc. (Montmarquet 1987; Eflin 2003), and habits specifically fitting with integrity and understanding, such as intellectual integrity, honesty, humility, transparency, self-awareness, and self-scrutiny (Baehr 2011, p. 21).

For the rest of this paper, I will focus on humility as an epistemic virtue because humility is vital for recognising our own limits in understanding, including the understanding of religious beliefs. At the same time, it is central to our ability to share epistemic space

with others. Humility is usually understood as a moral and epistemic virtue. It is often referred to in discussions about intercultural and interreligious dialogue. In addition to treating it as a virtue, I will also show that it is related to specific conceptions of morality and rationality. I will propose an understanding of moral vision within which humility is not only a response to moral or epistemic limitations or errors, but is itself a form of moral and epistemic thought (Strahovnik 2017).

Humility is a complex and multifarious phenomenon and cannot be framed within a fully unified model. Kellenberger identifies seven dimensions that are generally associated with humility. These are: (i) having a low opinion of oneself, (ii) having a low estimate of one's merit, (iii) having a modest opinion of one's importance or rank, (iv) lack of self-assertion, e.g., in cases where one has made a contribution or has merit, (v) claiming little as one's reward, (vi) having or showing a consciousness of one's defects or proneness to mistakes, and (vii) not being proud, haughty, condescending, or arrogant (Kellenberger 2010, pp. 321–22). Relational humility is "a relationship-specific judgment in which an observer attributes a target person with four qualities: (1) other-orientedness in one's relationships with others rather than selfishness; (2) the tendency to express positive other-oriented emotions in one's relationships (e.g., empathy, compassion, sympathy, and love); (3) the ability to regulate self-oriented emotions, such as pride or excitement about one's accomplishments, in socially acceptable ways; and (4) having an accurate view of self" (Davis et al. 2010). Humility can be understood as an inherent psychological position of oneself or towards oneself, which includes epistemic and moral alignment, calibration, or situatedness (Cole Wright et al. 2016, p. 2). This means that we understand and experience ourselves as limited and fallible beings who are part of a larger creation and, thus, have a limited perception of the surpassing whole. All of this can be experienced in a spiritual connection with God or in an existential connection with nature or the cosmos. Humility, in this sense, restricts our experience of ourselves in terms of unapt exceptionality, special distinction, or superiority. It restricts our prioritisation of our beliefs and our understanding. Epistemic humility is a stance of appropriate, modest, and non-haughty perception of our mental abilities, advantages, and disadvantages that enables us to adequately evaluate ideas and positions with respect for those who disagree with us (Hook et al. 2015, pp. 499–506; Montmarquet 2005).

Humility is, therefore, vital for interreligious dialogue and interreligious understanding. Several empirical studies confirm this. Research on the relationship between intellectual humility and religious tolerance shows that individuals with a high degree of intellectual humility (especially in relation to religious beliefs) also exhibit a high degree of religious tolerance (Hook et al. 2017). Moreover, intellectual humility is a good predictor of religious tolerance in the sense that it is relatively independent of religious commitment and conservatism of religious beliefs. It also diminishes defensiveness towards those who do not share the same religious beliefs (Hook et al. 2017, p. 6). This is important for the contemporary world, in which religious differences often lead to tensions, conflicts, and even violence. In this, the perceived or attributed intellectual humility is similar to forgiveness (Zhang et al. 2015; Hook et al. 2015). Perceived humility contributes to regulation of social relationships, allows us to predict the reactions of those around us, and promotes non-selfish and solidary social relationships. Humility encourages forgiveness in a similar way to that of the "victim", who perceives the "perpetrator" as humble and more easily forgives wrongful behaviour (Zhang et al. 2015). Intellectual humility is important for establishing, maintaining, and restoring interpersonal and social bonds. "A high level of intellectual humility is an important virtue, especially for those individuals who are within their communities perceived as someone who has significant intellectual influence" (Hook et al. 2015, p. 504). In conjunction with honesty, humility leads to increased levels of integrity, sincerity, and loyalty, to collaborative and responsive behaviour, and to a reduction in the level of vindictiveness and manipulation. Humility is also related to (social and civic) responsibility, gratitude, compassion, benevolence and mindfulness, openness to others, and hope (Cole Wright et al. 2016, pp. 5–6). That is why it is important to cultivate

intellectual humility, especially in the context of interreligious dialogue (Zhang et al. 2015, p. 260).

Humility is central to interreligious dialogue, and it is one of its requisite conditions. Cornille emphasises that religious commitment—understood as identification and embracement of key religious practices and teachings—must be accompanied by humility. According to Cornille, humility is both an epistemic and a theological virtue that makes one aware that no knowledge or understanding is completely final. This encourages the individual to learn from the other (Cornille 2008). Such humility must be supplemented by empathy, interconnection, and hospitality. Crucial is the "recognition of the very possibility of change or growth within one's own tradition. This presupposes a humble recognition of the limited or finite way in which the ultimate truth is grasped or expressed within one's religion" (Cornille 2013, p. 21). In a similar vein, Moyaert (2019, p. 611) maintains that humility, alongside self-reflexivity, curiosity, and open-mindedness, forms basic interreligious literacy.

One can parallel intellectual virtues and epistemic reactive attitudes, including intellectual humility, with the way in which moral virtues, emotions, and reactive attitudes promote pro-social and moral behaviour. Moreover, intellectual humility is vital in dialogue because it emphasises participants' equal status and impedes pre-existing biases, stereotypes, etc. One aspect of humility thus concerns self-situatedness in epistemic space, as well as the status that we ascribe to ourselves and to others in it. It produces an accurate view of oneself and an awareness of one's limitations. In being humble, one's interpersonal stance is other-oriented instead of self-focused and is characterised by respect for others rather than by superiority or arrogance. It situates us in epistemic space with others, facilitating non-arrogant and solidary cooperation (Centa and Strahovnik 2020; cf. Kramer 1990).

The proposed argument can go even further. Humility can be understood as a mode of thought or a mode of life. The proposed view is based on the work of Raimond Gaita and on his understanding of saintly love, compassion, moral vision, and common humanity. Gaita (2011) begins with autobiographical reflections, one of which is about his father. Gaita reflects on his father's life story, especially on his actions and attitudes toward the madcap homeless man named Vacek, who lived in the wild on the edge of the estate. Gaita's father treated Vacek as an equal human being, and Gaita tells how his attitude was marked by the complete absence of all superiority or condescension, showing the full and humble recognition of Vacek's humanity. This, he says, was not a sign of a particular virtue, but of the fact that he saw him in a "normal light" because of the space of meaning that his father had established. The second reflection is about a nun whom Gaita met while working in a mental-health institution for patients with the worst illnesses. Before meeting the nun, Gaita admired hospital doctors who spoke of their patients as of someone with full human dignity (unlike most of the remaining staff, who saw them, at best, as "sub-human"). The nun, however, turned to all of the patients with saintly love and treated them as precious beings, with the purity of love for them as children of God. This opened a new moral level well beyond the recognition of human dignity. "The works of saintly love [...] have, historically, created a language of love that yields to us a sense of what those works reveal in any individual instance, in, for example, the demeanour of the nun towards the patients in the hospital" (Gaita 2011, p. 24). Gaita saw her actions not as overwhelming or awe-inspiring simply because of the virtue they reflected, nor because of the good that they had achieved, but because of their power to reveal the full humanity of the patients. Gaita grounds this understanding in the notion of saintly love (in relation to the sanctity of life or the dignity of a human being in the case of a nun) and in moral vision (in the case of his father), which are not to be understood as moral and epistemic virtues, but go far beyond that. The absence of condescension in relationships is humility, and the key to such humility is compassion. "The nature of charity or compassion depends on the concepts under which one sees those towards whom one responds charitably or compassionately. The concepts under which my father and Hora saw Vacek were historically constituted, I believe, by the works of saintly love, by the language of love that formed and nourished those works and

which was, in its turn, enriched by them. That was their cultural inheritance, although neither would have thought about it as I have just put it" (Gaita 2011, p. 6). Two levels are discernible in the quotation: One is the individual attitude and the other is the background or tradition that enables such an attitude. Religious traditions can be the source of a moral vision that enables humility, which allows for a deeper understanding of humility. It can be understood as a response to our limitations or mistakes that cause our moral wrongdoing or false beliefs. This deep understanding takes humility as a form of (moral and epistemic) thought, which establishes a unique space of meaning. Not being humble is not seen as a cause of an error, but as a form of an error.

All of this is crucial for interreligious dialogue and intercultural theology. "Honest and respectful dialogue nurtures humility and offers a corrective to the excesses of our own traditions. Dialogue can create trust and imbue a sense of security to help overcome the suspicion and fear our traditions have often instilled about the other. By forging bonds of support and solidarity across religious boundaries, people of religious good will can help overcome ethnic and national xenophobia" (Lander 2011, p. 150). It is necessary to focus on the potential of religions, religious traditions, and religious communities to foster humility (instead of, e.g., absolutism, exclusivism, or fundamentalism), in terms of both understanding and practice. Religious depth and authenticity encourage humble moral perception, which, in turn, allows us to overcome shallowness and superficiality. By following the examples (for example, of Jesus and the saints in Christianity), the depth of religion is a space of meaning that enables such humble perception. One can invoke sanctity, our being made in the image of God, and our relationship with God. Gaita argues that religion constitutes such a framework of meaning. "Think of how much of our sense of religious depth and authenticity is a function of our appeal to things in which we believe that form and content cannot be separated—art of course, but also prayers, hymns, religious rituals and so on. Appeals such as these and reflection upon them occur in what I have called 'the realm of meaning'" (Gaita 2011, p. 12).

In recent debates on epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), hermeneutical (in)justice is a form of this phenomenon. Hermeneutical injustice emerges from a gap in hermeneutical resources or from a gap in shared tools of social interpretation. This gap creates a cognitive disadvantage that impinges unevenly on different social groups. Disadvantaged members or groups are "hermeneutically marginalized, that is, they participate unequally in the practices through which social meanings are generated. This sort of marginalization can mean that our collective forms of understanding are rendered structurally prejudicial in respect of content and/or style: the social experiences of members of hermeneutically marginalized groups are left inadequately conceptualized and so ill-understood, perhaps even by the subjects themselves; and/or attempts at communication made by such groups, where they do have an adequate grip on the content of what they aim to convey, are not heard as rational owing to their expressive style being inadequately understood" (Fricker 2007, pp. 6–7). Here, the epistemic wrong lies in the fact that situated hermeneutical inequity prevents the victims of epistemic injustice to understand an experience. In this regard, the victim is wronged as a subject of social understanding.

The relationship between epistemic (in)justice and religion is complex (Strahovnik 2018). One entry point into this debate is religious identity, which can be linked to prejudices, thus creating or maintaining hermeneutical injustice. This is relevant for how implicit background information influences religious belief. Kidd proposes an explanation of the relationship between religion and epistemic injustice as follows: "Religious persons and groups can be perpetrators and victims of epistemic injustice. Religious persons and communities can commit or can suffer epistemic injustices. [. . .] A religious identity can invite others' prejudice and entail activities and experiences that others might find difficult to make sense of, while also shaping a person's epistemic sensibilities. The practices of testifying to and interpreting experiences take a range of distinctive forms in religious life—for instance, if the testimonial practices require a special sort of religious accomplishment or if proper understanding of religious experiences is only available to those with

authentic faith. But it is also clear that religious communities and traditions have been sources of epistemic injustice—for instance, by conjoining epistemic and spiritual credibility in ways disadvantageous to 'deviant' groups" (Kidd 2017, p. 386). At the same time, Kidd stresses the following: "A religious life is only possible if one can engage in testimonial practices and draw upon rich hermeneutic resources within an epistemically nourishing tradition. But such abilities to participate in those practices and access those resources can be corrupted by a variety of prejudices, generating testimonial silencing and smothering, and hermeneutic marginalisation" (Kidd 2017, p. 388). Of course, the religious aspect of identity (or its absence) is in no way exempt from epistemic injustice.

Reflections on epistemic injustice are relevant because they outline the role of understanding in our epistemic endeavours and our lives. Such understanding, including an understanding of religious beliefs, is hard to attain if one disregards background information, which affects beliefs. That is why specific epistemic virtues prove to be of central importance in attaining this understanding. First, they support apt formation and maintenance of (religious) beliefs. Second, they enable understanding of these beliefs. The holistic nature of religious beliefs and the importance of background information provides a particularly apt context for humility. Habits of mind such as this enable us to understand the relevant connection between our beliefs in a way that fosters understanding. Such epistemic virtues often become aspects of one's overall epistemic sensibility. They provide means for overcoming biases and prejudices and the elimination of irrational beliefs. Note that many of these phenomena are, most often, an aspect of the mentioned background information, which can and does operate in ways that do not confer proper justification onto beliefs that get formed. Third, epistemic virtues also offer an opportunity for improving oneself as an epistemic agent, e.g., to be more attentive to possible sources of bias, expunging prejudices, and reshaping the underlying cognitive processes and backgrounds. Their role in this regard is again related to how they interconnect particular beliefs with the background that supports them and how they further enable understanding.

In this paper, it was not my intention to argue for the impact of culture and cultural differences on religious beliefs and living faith. The latter is commonly known. My intention was to propose an understanding of the mechanism that reveals a cultural background in a specific instance of belief. Chromatic illumination is proposed as an answer to this puzzling challenge that is discussed in philosophy of mind and cognitive science (e.g., Fodor 2001). Furthermore, I argued that the cultivation of virtue allows for the development of apt moral, epistemic, and theological sensitivity to the background context of religious beliefs. In the paper, I highlighted the virtue of humility as a central virtue for understanding this background and for the awareness of one's own position in relation to it. One particular virtue must be supplemented, of course, with other virtues, which is often stressed by authors who discuss interreligious dialogue and intercultural understanding (Cornille 2013). This set of virtues embeds pragmatic tools for uncovering cultural backgrounds, as discussed in the paper. Lastly, I highlighted the interconnection with epistemic justice because the failure to appreciate the background context of religious beliefs represents not merely an epistemic failure, but also an injustice to other participants in a religious encounter. The inability to reflect on the background is itself hermeneutical injustice. This final section thus underlined the relevance of epistemic virtues and, in particular, epistemic humility for recognising and overcoming our epistemic limitations with respect to this background and for grasping our and others' religious beliefs.

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Article

The Apocalypse as a Cosmotheandric Communion: A Hindu-Christian Dialogue

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Abstract: Theologians have been engaged in the reflections of the eschatological in the social and moral conditions of the world for some years now, but the emphasis on the indisputable need for an interfaith dialogue at such a moment is evidently absent. Arguably, the apocalyptic times of pandemic, induced communal hatred, bilateral hostility, and racial discriminations, on a global level, which are also accompanied with many instances by increased charitable behavior and a heightened sense of human responsibility. This paper focuses on apocalyptic theologies in the context of Hindu and Christian settings in India and how they interact, creating the possibility for an interfaith dialogue. Based on Raimon Panikkar's neologism 'cosmotheandric vision,' the paper establishes a relation between intercultural theologies and interfaith dialogue. The apocalypse can be studied as being a constant reminder of the cosmotheandric nature of the universe, for Hindus and Christians alike, fostering a dialogue between the two religions, entirely cognizant of their hermeneutical differences. The moment of apocalypse can be analyzed as a point of cosmotheandric union and absolute togetherness, wherein cultural and religious differences disappear with the consciousness of the whole, the One.

Keywords: Raimon Panikkar; pandemic; apocalypse; interculturality; religion; interfaith dialogue; cosmotheandric

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1. Introduction: COVID-19 and Its Apocalyptic Overtones

Pandemics have a history of being related to apocalyptic narratives throughout the world. The Black Death, an uncontrollable spreading of Bubonic Plague from far Asia to Europe in the fourteenth century, saw many comparisons with apocalyptic notions in Christianity. Simon Dein, in his article "COVID-19 and the Apocalypse: Religious and Secular Perspectives," quotes R. Lerner and F. Dwyer as he writes, "While bad air, divine punishment and witchcraft were postulated causes, for many the Black Death signaled the end-times" (Dein 2021, p. 6). He further mentions the connections that were drawn between the 1918 Spanish flu epidemic and the "ideas of sin and of eschatological sign of Christ's second coming" (Dein 2021, p. 6). Many other pandemics in previous times have also been interpreted as apocalyptic in nature. However, the uncertainty of life, petrifying fear of death, and innumerable speculations about the end of the world that people have seen developing during COVID-19, are incomparable. The COVID-19 pandemic was declared by China on 31 December 2019. It has been two-and-a-half years, the virus has developed many variants, and has led to a disastrous rise in infected cases and deaths. While vaccinations have provided some immunity against the respiratory syndrome, a definite end to COVID-19 has not yet been affirmed. These conditions have led the world population to ponder religious narratives of the end times.

Jerry L. Walls mentions in the introduction of *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, that "The desire to know the future is only natural and takes on even more urgency in times of uncertainty, disaster, and calamity" (Walls 2009). This appropriately explains the urge of scholars to interpret apocalyptic theology in order to uncover and solve the deeper

questions. Jason S. Sexton in his article "The Critical Study of Religion and Division in the Age of Covid-19" also talks about the significance of religious scholarship maintaining its "relevance in the contemporary world" in times of tragedy (Sexton 2021, p. 170). The critical engagement of scholars of religion is essential at the present moment to logically interpret the religious narratives dealing with pestilence and death, and to counter misinterpretation.

The word apocalypse has its origin in "two Greek words, *apo*, which means 'from,' and *kalypsis*, which means 'covering.' Thus, an apocalypse is an uncovering, or a revelation of what could not otherwise be known" (Walls 2009). Paul O'Callaghan also affirms in his article that "The term *apokalypsis* (usually translated as 'revelation') has undeniably eschatological connotations" (O'Callaghan 2021). The global crisis that has recently struck the world has initiated many novel discussions on the apocalyptic overtones of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Not only has the pandemic brought forth the idea of apocalypse as the end of all that exists, it has also stirred conversation on the revelatory aspect of the apocalypse. The article "COVID-19: A Critical Ontology of the present" mentions that "it is the haunting image of the end (apocalypse) which informs people's ability to find a new thread (a new beginning) at the end of the line. However, apocalypse needs to be understood here not in the widespread understanding of the word as the end of the world as we know it, but more pertinently along the lines of its Greek etymological sense *apokalyptein*; as '*uncovering, disclosure, and revelation*'. On this interpretation, the current pandemic is the occasion to embrace a hermeneutic of suspicion and move beyond, behind, and beneath the surface of the event at hand" (El Maarouf et al. 2021, p. 73). Thus, the apocalyptic imaginary of the COVID-19 pandemic requires us to think beyond the visible end, as an unveiling of a new start. In this article, the purpose of arguing for the apocalyptic nature of the COVID-19 situation is not to reiterate the cataclysmic event but to reveal the possibilities of interpreting the impending apocalypse as a way of bringing humanity together, to unite people. This article interprets the pandemic of COVID-19 as an apocalyptic event aimed at revealing the cosmotheandric nature of reality. Keeping in mind the brevity of this research article, the focus remains on apocalyptic theologies as understood by Hindus and Christians in the context of India.

2. Apocalyptic Theologies in Hinduism and Christianity

The advent of COVID-19 and its horrific growing presence throughout the world has resulted in blatant parallelism between the present crisis of death and destruction and the end times. Be it Hinduism or Christianity, comparisons with religious counterparts have been evident. As discussed above, people do tend to turn to religion in times of uncertainty and difficulty to find answers to their trials and tribulations as "When one is unable to master, intervene and control the situation, religion offers a series of solutions" (Anthony et al. 2021, p. 554). The COVID-19 pandemic made people revisit apocalyptic theologies within their religious and cultural communities, correlating eschatological imageries as mentioned in religious narratives, with real-life scenarios. Prof. Emeritus Dr. Kuncheria Pathil has described how "Theologizing takes place when believers search for answers in the midst of their struggles and agonies where they feel the pinch of their faith and the cost of discipleship in Christ" (Pathil 2012, p. 682). He further notes that "Every authentic theologizing is contextual, experiential and existential anywhere and anytime. Context is a constitutive element of theologizing" (Pathil 2012, p. 682). Culture affects the process of theologizing, and it has certainly influenced the comprehension of the apocalyptic theologies in the COVID-19 outbreak.

The question of existence and non-existence has been one of the major philosophical enquiries of Indian schools of philosophy. While there is no canon of apocalyptic literature in Hinduism, multiple narratives are scattered throughout Hindu texts. The apocalyptic notion in Hinduism is entirely associated with the continual creation and dissolution of the world. On the one hand, the creation hymns in the Vedas (*Nasadiya Sukta* and *Purusha Sukta*) attribute the primordial creation to an unknown entity, self-manifesting from darkness; on

the other hand, creation is believed to have developed from the sacrifice of the primordial being, *Purusha*. The later Hindu texts like the *Manusmriti* and the *Bhagavad Gita* speak of Brahma, one among the trinity[1], as the creator of the universe. Due to the cyclical nature of time in Hinduism, the religion does not have one beginning and one end, but many creations and many destructions. Anindita Niyogi Balslev writes,

> In any case, the idea of repeated creation and dissolution is so widespread that it may be taken as characteristic of the Hindu conceptual world. The epic *Mahäbhärata*, the *Bhagavad Gña*, the *Puränas*—all accept this view. In the grand cosmological model that emerges, each world cycle is measured in astronomical figures; a world cycle *(kalpa)* is said to be 4320 million years. Huge time scales are used, and each world cycle is divided and subdivided into periods called *manvantara, mahāyuga*, and so on. The *Bhagavad Gītā* describes each world cycle metaphorically as a "day" of Brahmā, symbolizing cosmic activity, followed by the state of *pralaya* (dissolution) as his night, the state of cosmic rest. (Balslev 1990, p. 50)

One *kalpa* (aeon) or day of Brahmā is divided into thousand cycles of four *yugas* that are *Satya*, *Treta*, *Dvapara*, and *Kali Yuga*. The present age is considered to be *Kali Yuga* which began when Lord Krishna ascended to heaven after the Kurukshetra war. As mentioned in *Manusmriti* "In the Krta Age, the Law is whole, possessing all four feet; and so is truth. People never acquire any property through unlawful means. By acquiring such property, however, the Law is stripped of one foot in each of the subsequent Ages; through theft, falsehood, and fraud, the Law disappears a foot at a time" (Olivelle 2004, p. 18). There is an evident decline in the moral values and ethics with each successive age and an increase in evil acts, incurable diseases leading to a progressive shortening of time spans. Therefore, the pandemic in India escalated the use of the phrase "It is *Kali Yuga*" as similar incidents were seen happening with each passing day. The prophecy, as mentioned in the *Mahabharata* and *Kalki Purana*, highlights the coming of the tenth *avatara* of Lord Vishnu, *Kalki*, towards the end of *Kali Yuga*. Interestingly, while some people have imagined COVID-19 as the tenth *avatara* "meant to save humanity from itself and take us into a new epoch" (Sundar 2020), many have understood it as a signal of *Kali Yuga*.

The apocalyptic theology in Hinduism has also developed enormously with relation to the theory of *karma* as mentioned in the *Bhagavad Gita*. The notion of *karma* guides the daily lives of people in India and has even caused the belief that the pandemic is a culmination of collective bad *karma*. Shanthi Van Zeebroeck has argued that COVID-19 is a result of "karmic repercussions" (Van Zeebroeck 2021, p. 7). The author explains how *karma* does not simply refer to action but also to the result of the action; and these reactions are carried forward in the cycle of *samsara* or rebirths. Hrodrigues elaborates, "The idea of *karma* suggests that a transcendent substance is generated and follows the soul based on one's thoughts and actions. The Upanishads describe *karma* as being accumulated and even transferred from one life to the next; this cosmic "trail" influences one's subsequent lifetime and form" (Hrodrigues 2015). This notion has been widely seen in light of the pandemic and its apocalyptic overtones by the Indian cultural community.

In addition to this, the term apocalypse is also juxtaposed to the notion of *Maha Pralaya* in Hinduism, as can be found in *Shatapatha Brahmana*. The *Maha Pralaya* is the moment when a flood sweeps away everything that exists. It is the end of the *Yuga Cycle* which is followed by a deep sleep or inactivity. According to the *Bhagavad Gita*, at this moment, the manifest merges back into the unmanifest, the supreme reality, *Brahman* (Johnson 2008, p. 38). This journey of the *atman* to the *Brahman* at the end of time reflects the nature of Oneness of all that exists and the common principle of the divine. This is also referred in the Upanishadic dictum of "*tat tvam asi*" (Radhakrishnan 1953, p. 458). which is translated as 'that art thou.' The *Maha Pralaya* leads to the dissolution of everything at once, but this article does not signify the complete destruction of the world through its usage of the term apocalypse. This article draws on the apocalyptic nature of the COVID-19 outbreak in terms of not just the unimaginable disease and death, but also its revelatory character.

Moving on, unlike Hinduism, Christianity has a canon of apocalyptic literature that includes several apocalyptic works. This article has extracted its biblical resources from Matthew 24 and Book of Revelation. The pandemic was comprehended by many Churches as the beginning of the apocalypse, the divine revelation. The Gospel of Matthew states, "For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs" (Matthew 24:7–8). He adds that even though there will come many false prophets, "But the one who endures to the end will be saved" (Matthew 24:13). Furthermore, the coming of the Son of Man is mentioned, "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Matthew 24:36). Hence Jesus advises all to stay vigilant and be ready for the coming of their Lord. Hence, pandemics and pestilences are indicated before there is a second coming of Christ.

The last book of New Testament Bible, Book of Revelation is considered one of the primary revelatory texts. It must be considered that "many have taken the text as a literal description of the times while others have used it as a revelation of divine will" (Dein et al. 2020, p. 2). The symbolism presented in Revelation indicates conditions during the end times. Revelation 6:8 refers to the fourth horseman of the apocalypse as the harbinger of death and disease: "And I saw, and behold, a pale horse, and its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him; and they were given power over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth" (Revelation 6:8). The succession of orderly disasters is unleashed with the seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls and two beasts, before the final judgement takes place "And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books" (Revelation 20:12). The Apocalyptic Prophecy ends with the creation of new heaven and a new earth after the first things had passed away. John writes, "And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new"" (Revelation 21:5). It is the present situation of COVID-19 that has made some Christians believe that the pandemic is the plague mentioned in Revelation and the second coming of Christ is inevitable (Dein et al. 2020, p. 2).

If we juxtapose the Hindu and Christian apocalyptic theologies with the present scenario of a virus-stricken world, the imminent end of the world seems plausible if not immediate. However, this apocalypse is "a sign from God redirecting humanity on the right path before the ultimate clash between the forces of good and evil" (Dein 2021) as remarked by the Evangelist pastor, Gerald Flurry. The right path can be interpreted as one filled with faith, love, and solidarity, especially indispensable in the catastrophic times, as discussed in the succeeding sections. This interaction between the apocalyptic theologies of two entirely different religious communities, in the context of the pandemic, puts them within the same space where both yearn for solidarity, hope, and communion. The pandemic is an apocalypse, a divine revelation signaling towards a new beginning, a coming together of humanity, of Hindus and Christians. This communion is only possible through dialogue of Hindus and Christians. Let us delve deeper into why an interfaith dialogue is necessary in India when the pandemic seems to evoke an apocalypse.

3. Why Do We Need an Interfaith Dialogue?

In India, the spread of COVID-19 must be viewed in association with communal hatred, racial discriminations, and multitude of other conflicts. The pandemic carried with itself a wave of othering and blame targeting the minorities across India as well as globally. Although fake news has a major role to play in this escalated tension, the aggression, disrespect, and violence did much harm to the already infected population of India. Rageshri Dhairyawan, in her review of Rachel Clarke's book *Breathtaking: Inside the NHS in a Time of Pandemic*, writes about the COVID-19 pandemic that "for Clarke, it has exposed deep-seated social inequalities, our hubris in the belief we can control nature, and shown us what is essential and what is superfluous" (Dhairyawan 2021). The pandemic brought forth the prejudices held by people in multiple ways. Christopher Summers has highlighted the condition of Indian Christians living in rural areas who were not provided

equal amounts of aid during the pandemic. Out of the people they reached out to, "between 80–90 percent of these believers experienced discrimination in government aid or were denied aid completely" (Summers 2021). Moreover, Tablighi Jamaat, a global evangelical Muslim organization, conducted a religious congregation in March 2020, before the nation-wide lockdown. The congregation was soon accused of causing a spike in COVID-19 cases all around India as it did not follow protective norms. The Nizamuddin Markaz headquarters in Delhi was sealed with the attendees still inside, and they were tested multiple times, as reported by Al Jazeera. The panic and the fear created due to this led to an incontrollable othering, particularly islamophobia. Muslims were othered by majority population as they were viewed as potential virus carriers. People stopped buying goods from shops owned by Muslims and started to maintain an uncomfortable distance. These two incidents should suffice to support my argument on why an interfaith dialogue is needed in India.

COVID-19 has not just attacked human bodies, but also attacked and aggravated the smoldering social evils. Racism, casteism, and gender discrimination are lived realities that were already hard to tackle in a normal daily-life routine. Dealing with such discriminations while trying to stay alive in the middle of a pandemic is not an expected or ideal scenario for anyone. An epidemic or a pandemic calls for an enhanced sense of unity and harmony. It needs solidarity and not othering. Interfaith dialogue offers such connectedness and encourages the values of duty and positive actions in people. In addition to this, the cultural diversity of India also calls for dialogue. The religious and cultural complexity of India needs human communication to eliminate conflict and generate mutual respect. This will be discussed further in the next section.

Interestingly, an interfaith dialogue is indeed possible in India, as was witnessed during the hardships incurred by the pandemic. Dialogue as a form of solidarity and humanity was visible in many parts of India. Acts of kindness ranged from delivering home-cooked food and medicines to the quarantined to arranging oxygen cylinders for those in need. These empathetic acts of people provide hope for the possibility of interfaith dialogue, which could be used for unifying the Indian population. Faith-based communities all around India stepped forward and carried out relief work irrespective of any social denomination. Rev. Joshuva Peter, executive secretary of the United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India, explained in one of his interviews how all the member churches "have been approached individually to make necessary arrangements in their hospitals to face any critical situation that may arise" (The Lutheran World Federation 2020) and have also helped in providing space in their educational institutions to set up isolation wards. There have certainly been many challenges arising from preconceived prejudices and deeply ingrained stereotypes, but this has not affected the implementation of relief activities. As Mujtaba Askari, the founder of Helping Hand Foundation, remarks, "the antidote to hate can never be hate. It is love and compassion" (Thange 2020).

Moving on, the theological understanding of the end times in different religions can lead to a situation of panic and fear, resulting in a variety of religious and non-religious sentiments. An interfaith dialogue is pertinent to remind one that "In the face of situations that present risk of extreme thinking and behavior, religious leaders can instill sensibility and hope in their constituents with sound theological and spiritual explanations to make sense of the events in order to maintain spiritual and emotional balance" (Le Duc 2021, p. 2). Although the above discussion presents an argument that an interfaith dialogue is essential and possible in the apocalyptic situation of the present times, let us interpret how this can be undertaken given the interculturality in India.

4. Interculturality and Interfaith Dialogue

It is necessary to acknowledge the cultural diversity of India when we talk about an interfaith dialogue in the Indian setting. To understand how an interfaith dialogue could take place between the Hindus and Christians residing in India, it is indispensable to talk about interculturality and intercultural theology. How do Hindu and Christian apocalyptic

theologies interact in the cultural context that they are placed in India? How can these intercultural theologies facilitate a dialogue?

Before I begin my argument, we must deliberate over the terms culture, interculturality, and intercultural theology. While Volker Küster highlights the abundant definitions that culture has acquired with time (Küster 2005, p. 418), Thor-André Skrefsrud mentions the prevalent understanding, that "culture refers to a group of people who live together within the same territory and within the same national borders. Culture defines people as a national unit, distinguishing them from other groups of people" (Skrefsrud 2018, p. 46). Interculturality is explained by Raimon Panikkar as taking place naturally and involuntarily. He writes, "interculturality is inherent to the human being and that a unique culture is as incomprehensible and impossible as a single universal language and as one man alone. All cultures are the result of continuous mutual fecundation" (Panikkar 2011, p. 30). Cultures cannot exist in isolation. Assimilation and acculturation are inevitable. Hence, interculturality refers to the communication and relationship among different cultures where they respect each other's cultural diversities, even when they do not agree with them. The term intercultural theology can be understood following the above definition of interculturality. However, it has also been referred to in various other ways. David Cheetham interprets intercultural theology as a "way of thinking" (Cheetham 2017, p. 143) and William Sweet argues that it is an approach for "deeper understanding of other theologies, perspectives, and discourses" (Sweet 2022, p. 92). Sweet's article is formed on Pope Francis' phrase "We need bridges, not walls!" to highlight the need of human communication and dialogue. He further argues that intercultural theology "seeks to remind theologians about bringing to consciousness, and reflecting on, one's own context and situatedness and "place"" and "calls on theologians to create such a space" (Sweet 2022, p. 84) where dialogue and theologizing could occur. This space has been mentioned by the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha as the "third space" between cultures, by Volker Küster as the "in-between" space (Küster 2005, p. 417), and by Panikkar as "*terra nullius*" (no man's land) (Panikkar 2011, p. 10). This space acts as the contact point of all cultures, and makes interfaith dialogue possible. This will be argued for further later. At present, we must return to intercultural theology.

Intercultural theology is primarily a term which developed in relation to Christianity and the crisis of mission after the emergence of the third world. The term came into use only after the 1970s and became popular with the book "Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity" by Walter Hollenweger, Hans Jochen Margull, and Richard Friedli. Volker Küster's definition of intercultural theology is helpful here to understand its Christian roots. He writes, "Inter-cultural theology explores the inter-confessional, inter-cultural and inter-religious dimensions of the Christian faith" (Küster 2005, p. 429) Regardless, this theological approach has been used by many theologies to undertake studies on culture, religion, and philosophy. Some of the major scholars of intercultural theology include Raimon Panikkar, Michael Amaladoss, Ram Adhar Mall, Frans Wijsen, Judith Gruber, and Walter Hollenweger. Panikkar has written extensively about interculturality beyond Christianity and intercultural theology and its role in the meeting of different religions. In this article, I draw on Panikkar's writings to interpret the close relationship between interculturality, intercultural theology, and interfaith dialogue.

It is inescapable to consider here the wide plethora of meanings that the term "intercultural" carries. As Henning Wrogemann highlights, "Intercultural theology is not only about 'culture'; rather, this term also covers other categories such as context (economic, social, societal, ecological, religious, etc.) and locality. Such a technical term has to be succinct; it cannot represent all these aspects in and of itself. However, it must be clear to those who use the term that 'intercultural' does not only refer to 'culture' in the narrow sense" (Wrogemann 2021, p. 1). A similar argument was proposed by Panikkar much earlier in 2011, when he said "Interculturality represents the relativity (not the relativism) of everything human, and therefore of these three notions" (Panikkar 2011, p. 9), meaning, religion, philosophy, and culture. Hence, culture is an amalgamation of what exists and

defines a set of people belonging to a specific space. Culture is contextual. In case of India, there is the wider concept of Indian culture and the delineated cultures of different religion and those of various divisions of any specific religion. These cultures are informed by time and space.

Volker Küster argues that "Culture and religion are mutually related and penetrate each other. Thus religions maintain different forms in different cultures. A culture can be multi-religious and a religion can be multi-cultural" (Küster 2005, p. 419). This interdependent relationship between culture and religion supports our argument on how intercultural theologies facilitate interfaith dialogue. In case of India, the cultural versatility evident within religions as well as the different religious population of "Indian culture" points toward the need of dialogue. There cannot be a dialogue without a deep understanding and respect among the multifarious cultural theologies. India as a culturally pluralistic society needs to acknowledge that "Each culture is a world" (Panikkar 2011, p. 14) and every culture "has its own centre, elusive, mobile and contingent as it may and should be" (Panikkar 2002, p. 8). This means that the various cultures cannot be understood as a singular entity and acknowledging their epistemological and hermeneutical differences is imperative for any potential contact among them.

One cannot ignore the centrality of language when we speak of culture and its indisputable function in carrying out any dialogue between religions. India's plurality of cultures also indicates the plenitude of languages across the country. While there are twenty-two languages in India that are accorded official status according to the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India, hundreds of languages and dialects are spoken around the country. Hence, interculturality in India is contingent on the continuous interaction between languages of different cultures and religions. However, that does not mean that this interaction is free from any troubles. Panikkar states that,

> Interculturality is problematic. The very moment that I open my mouth to speak, I am obliged to use a concrete language, and thus I am completely in a particular culture; I am on a land which already belongs to someone. I am in my culture, cultivating my land, speaking my language. And if I must, moreover, be understood by my readers, I must necessarily enter a land which is common to all. (Panikkar 2011, p. 10)

Here, Panikkar is pointing towards the link between language and culture and how the situatedness of individuals complicates the process of interculturality and therefore dialogue, which needs a no man's land. This leads us to ponder whether language affects interfaith dialogue. One cannot deny that communication is not effective unless it results in comprehension, which is dependent upon the language used for communication. Whether the language used is perceived by all the members engaging in a conversation is essential for a dialogue to happen. Until the members comprehend what is being said, it is difficult for them to reach a level of mutual respect and transformation. This understanding is not only limited to a literary analysis but is inclusive of the hermeneutical differences that exist between the terminations used by various religions for a similar religious concept or tradition. Nonetheless, I argue that language is just a medium and true dialogue transcends language. Dana Graef writes in her article *Learning the Language of Interfaith Dialogue*,

> Two people look at the same tree, one calls it un roble and the other calls it an oak. There are as many different perceptions of reality as there are leaves on a tree–but the branches are covered in leaves, no matter what you call them. Just as language offers us a way of expressing our experiences, religion shapes the experiences themselves. Different languages clearly have different vocabularies, but they express the same thing. (Graef 2005, p. 106)

Language is not an impediment to true dialogue as the latter is a divine exercise which seeks a cosmotheandric understanding of everything. Interfaith dialogue does not require explanation but demands experience. Until one journeys beyond one's own periphery into the land of another religion, culture, and language, dialogue does not occur. Panikkar

also travelled to Varanasi and lived among Hindus before even contemplating a Hindu-Christian dialogue. I argue that language helps describe different religious concepts across communities, but it does not directly affect divine experience and realization. Mutual respect does not depend upon one's comprehension of a language; it rather develops from a deep sense of shared humanity, informed by the presence of divine. Let us return to the relation between interculturality and interfaith dialogue.

Panikkar says, "In our times, the crisis of religion cannot be overcome from one single religion, and certainly not from one single culture. *The task is today urgently cross-cultural*, i.e., *interreligious*, because of the inextricable link between culture and religion" (Panikkar 2002, p. 5) and for this "We must seek a middle way between the colonial mentality which believes that we can express the totality of the human experience through the notions of a single culture, and the opposite extreme which thinks that there is no communication possible between diverse cultures, and which should then condemn themselves to a cultural apartheid in order to preserve their identity" (Panikkar 2011, p. 14). While different cultures understand reality differently, these intercultural theologies make space for conversation. As Panikkar states, "cultures are mutually incompatible but in no way . . . are they incommunicable" (Panikkar 2011, p. 30). The presence of multiple cultural communities does not eliminate but in fact multiplies the plausibility and need for dialogue as "interculturality is the locus of dialogue" (Panikkar 2011, p. 40), and this is what brings us to the plausible Hindu-Christian dialogue in these apocalyptic times.

5. Panikkar's Cosmotheandrism and Hindu-Christian Dialogue

The no man's land required for facilitating an interfaith dialogue between Hindus and Christians can be achieved through a comprehensive understanding of Panikkar's cosmotheandric vision. I propose that Raimon Panikkar's cosmotheandric vision of reality is an adequate way to conduct a Hindu-Christian dialogue. Panikkar's life and his interreligious and intercultural existence is apparent when he says, "I left Europe (for India) as a Christian, I discovered I was a Hindu and returned as a Buddhist, without ever having ceased to be a Christian." This has helped formulate his multireligious experiences and thoughts on interreligious dialogue. Panikkar believed in the meeting of people for any dialogue to take place and his proposal of a "cosmotheandric vision of reality" has been rightly addressed by Scott Eastham as "the mature fruit of all his multireligious experiences" (Panikkar 1998, p. viii).

What makes cosmotheandrism elemental for a Hindu-Christian dialogue during these apocalyptic times is the fact that it is not inherently associated with any religion. Panikkar's book *The Cosmotheandric Experience*, which explains his vision in detail, "unlike many of Panikkar's earlier books, is not a Christian or an India or a Buddhist study, but an interdisciplinary study" (Panikkar 1998, p. viii). This non-relation of cosmotheandrism to any religious community makes it appropriate for establishing a holistic dialogue.

Panikkar's question is: "Is it possible for our epoch to have a unified vision of reality?" (Panikkar 1998, p. 5) is answered by his explanation of the cosmotheandric principle which governs the entire concept of reality. Panikkar writes,

> The cosmotheandric principle could be formulated by saying that the divine, the human and the earthly—however we may prefer to call them—are the three irreducible dimensions which constitute the real, i.e., any reality inasmuch as it is real. It does not deny that the abstracting capacity of our mind can, for particular and limited purposes, consider parts of reality independently; it does not deny the complexity of the real and its many degrees. But this principle reminds us that the parts are parts and that they are not just accidentally juxtaposed, but essentially related to the whole. In other words, the parts are real participations and are to be understood not according to a merely spatial model, as books are part of a library or a carburetor and a differential gear are parts of an automobile, but rather according to an organic unity, as body and soul, or mind and will belong to a human being: they are parts because they are not the whole, but they

> are not parts which can be "parted" from the whole without thereby ceasing to exist. (Panikkar 1998, p. 60)

Panikkar's conception of reality does not intend to universalize religions and cultures. It acknowledges the differences that exist and formulates reality based on the relationality of the three elements that are constituents of all beings—divine, human, and earthly. He interprets the interconnectedness of everything by providing the example of the circle. He writes, "There is no circle without a center and a circumference. The three are not the same and yet not separable. The circumference is not the center, but without the latter the former would not be. The circle, itself invisible, is neither the circumference nor the center, yet it is circumscribed by one and inscribed around the other" (Panikkar 1998, p. 75). This relationship between the circle, center, and circumference can be compared to the divine, human, and earthly elements in that they cannot exist in isolation and are only meaningful when seen in context of the other two. God is considered God only because of the existence of humans and nature. It is interesting to note how most of the divisions are threefold in nature. Panikkar mentions this when he says, "It seems that envisioning all of reality in terms of three worlds is an invariant of human culture, whether this vision is expressed spatially, temporally, cosmologically, or metaphysically" (Panikkar 1998, p. 55). To provide a few examples: Heaven, Earth, Hell; Past, Present, and Future; etc.

The cosmotheandric vision is an integration of reality. A reminder that the three elements have emerged from the one source, the *purusha*—primordial being in Hinduism, as mentioned in the *Rig Veda*. This cosmotheandric "vision of totality" (Panikkar 1998, p. 55) points towards trinitarian/non-dualistic/*advaitic* notion of reality. Everything is related to everything and everyone is related to everyone. The One is the whole of which the Many are the parts, distinct but inter-independent. Cosmotheandrism is the foundation of interfaith dialogue for Panikkar as it reveals the divine relationship and non-dualistic presence of all. It is through this idea of reality as a harmonious whole that a dialogue can be generated between Hindus and Christians during these apocalyptic times.

6. Conclusions: Apocalypse as a Cosmotheandric Communion

As interpreted in the above arguments, the COVID-19 pandemic can be interpreted as an apocalypse, based on the symbolism mentioned in apocalyptic narratives. Let us try to comprehend the pandemic in relation with Raimon Panikkar's cosmotheandric nature of reality. The article "Models of Cosmotheandric Life-Experience in the Face of Coronavirus Pandemic: Empirical Research in the European Context" discusses the models of cosmotheandric life-experience and argues how different people experienced varying aspects of the cosmotheandric nature of reality during this pandemic. The article points toward connection and relationality in the context of its definition of life-experience as "the intense perception of the relational nature of our life and that of others in the face of the life-threatening disease" (Anthony et al. 2021, p. 551). The three models of cosmotheandric life-experience as explored in the aforesaid article are theocentric religious, cosmocentric spiritual, and anthropocentric secular. These are elaborated as interrelated models wherein

> The theocentric religious model included items closely associated with religious experience: religious belief, God's providence and sustenance, immortality and sense of hope, response of faith, call to conversion, prayer to life, initiatives of religious community, religious coping, life's meaning in religion and in caring for others, etc. The cosmocentric spiritual model of life-experience was represented by items referring to the presence of mysterious forces, sacred aspects of life, life's meaning based on knowledge, scientific approach, work, hope, etc. The anthropocentric secular model of life-experience encompassed items on life's meaning, empathy and care for other's suffering, and sharing anxiety, fragility and vulnerability; hope, values, ideals and achievements; physical exercises, meditation and yoga, etc. (Anthony et al. 2021, p. 561)

While the article presents its findings after intensive research based on data collection from several respondents belonging to variable age, sex, religious belonging, and literacy

levels, it is imperative to interpret these models in context of India before we argue that the apocalypse at hand can be interpreted as a cosmotheandric communion.

For the theocentric religious model, I would like to highlight the initiatives that were taken up by several religious communities across the country. Many faith-based organizations, guided by WHO India and UNICEF, helped set up quarantine facilities in their premises and instilled hope in people. These included but were not limited to "Catholic Faith, Art of Living, Jamaat-I-Islami Hind, All India Muslim Personal Law Board, Jamate-e-Ulema, All India Ulema Council, ISKCON, Isha Foundation, Rama Krishna Math" (WHO India 2020). In the state of Andhra Pradesh, religious leaders of all communities joined their hands in organizing relief activities during the pandemic. The joint statement declared that during this crisis

> all religions must seek ways to promote unity and solidarity so that humanity fights this collective challenge. At the heart of all religions is a spiritual conception of the human being that transcends the material body. This spiritual reality, which is called soul, is the source of divine attributes and virtues that allow human beings to demonstrate altruistic behavior. Religion teaches that all humanity is interconnected and interdependent: it is a family and cells of a single body (Agenzia Fides 2020)

This statement highlights the concept of Oneness and communion as understood by different religious communities of India. Moreover, the statement also sheds light on many characteristics of the theocentric religious model. It encourages a sense of community and draws on religious belief to declare the virtue of care as a religious one. Furthermore, several religious groups across the country also set up smaller-scale initiatives to help those in need, such as the Bilalpur New Youth Welfare Society, which is a group of seven Muslims "arranged the last rites for 210 Hindus and 73 Muslims who died of COVID-19" (Deshpande 2021) after their families refused to perform them out of the fear of infection. The members of the Gurudwara Behala in Kolkata engaged themselves in cooking free meals for those in need (Mint 2021). Several other similar incidents can be discussed in line with the theocentric model of the cosmotheandric life experience.

Moving on to the cosmocentric spiritual model, throughout the pandemic there have been several speculations related to the emergence of COVID-19. The speculations have been connected to the cosmos in both scientific and sacred/divine ways. Scientifically, the novel COVID-19 has been proven to "circulate in an animal habitat and then adapt and evolve to ultimately enter the human population. The source of COVID-19 is believed to be a seafood market in Wuhan, China, which sold both dead and live animals" (Bondell 2020). This relationship between the virus and the animals can be seen as representing the cosmic reality. In addition to this, there has also been research in relation to the spread, evolution, and mutation of the virus with the changing seasons. On the other hand, pandemics or any kind of sickness have been linked with the cultural and religious notions of evil spirits and even to the Christian notion of sin and the Hindu notion of *karma*, as discussed previously in this article. The scientific as well as cultural spiritual belief that if we continue to impose harm on the environment and its constituents, an equivalent reaction cannot be avoided sooner or later. Dr. Meena Mahajan, a spiritual speaker and coach based in India, views the pandemic "as not just a virus but a reminder about the unquantifiable loss humans has caused to the planet. The pandemic can easily be seen as a consequence of ignoring the emergency warnings given by nature. Countries shutting down overnight is a sign of nature being absolute" (News18 2020). A similar cosmic spiritual interpretation of the pandemic is mentioned by Larry Dossey as she imagines Mother Nature thinking "I'm sending a lethal virus to remind you of the unitary nature of your consciousness and its inseparability with the natural world" (Dossey 2020).

Further, the anthropocentric secular model of cosmotheandric life experience during the pandemic has been evident in the dynamics of care and empathy, as witnessed during the times of the apocalyptic pandemic. Situations like the pandemic bring forth the fragile nature of humanity. The article "Models of Cosmotheandric Life-Experience in the Face

of Coronavirus Pandemic: Empirical Research in the European Context" mentions that "a life-threatening disease exposes the human vulnerability, namely, the precarious condition of weakness, dependence, and lack of protection. Vulnerability in a way is the identity of every human being, a fragile synthesis of bodily finitude and infinite desire of the spirit" (Anthony et al. 2021, p. 557). This vulnerability creates the awareness of one's fragility. Prof. Ramin Jahanbegloo, political philosopher and Executive Director of the Mahatma Gandhi Centre for Nonviolence and Peace Studies at Jindal Global University, has written extensively on the fragile nature of humanity and civilization. He highlights that the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed fragility as "inscribed in the ontological constitution of humanity" where it is "the condition of being vulnerable and defenceless" (Jahanbegloo 2020). The fact that humanity and this civilization can end conveys the fragility that characterizes human existence. He adds, "But the coronavirus has, at the same time, also revived a sense of empathy that was concealed for half a century by utilitarian and materialistic modes of human life around the globe" (Jahanbegloo 2020). It cannot be argued that the race towards a materialistic living has given rise to incomparable selfishness and greed, which was only seen to be proven meaningless during the pandemic. The pandemic brought all of humanity to a point where they discovered their deep interrelationships through values such as empathy. We all found ourselves partaking in each other's joys and sorrows. Perhaps, as Prof. Jahanbegloo remarks, COVID-19 calls for a "genuine revolution of our everyday values" and a "global fellowship" (Jahanbegloo 2020). This idea is what is also behind my argument on the cosmotheandric communion at the apocalypse. This communion is "what the Czech philosopher Jan Patocka called the 'solidarity of the shaken'" (Jahanbegloo 2020).

While these models of cosmotheandric life experience are introduced as three separate models, their characteristics overlap in several ways. Through the examples given above, one can deduce the interconnected, interrelated, interdependent nature of them. Pope Francis in *Laudato Si* also "describes the God–cosmos–humanity rapport as 'interaction', 'interrelationship', 'interconnection' and 'interdependence'." (Anthony et al. 2021, p. 557). This notion of cosmotheandrism as introduced by Raimon Panikkar is what must guide all the humanity during these apocalyptic times. These are the crucial moments when one must awaken a cosmotheandric understanding.

I argue that the pandemic can be viewed as a divine revelation of Oneness and an urgent cosmotheandric communion. This communion calls for an "open horizon," in words of Raimon Panikkar, as it "offers a satisfying background for human understanding" (Panikkar 1998, p. 4). This open horizon provides a space for different perspectives to exist, by creating mutual respect among them, making dialogue possible. Panikkar highlights that "We cannot allow any religion, culture or fragment of reality—even if it is labeled a 'leftover' by a subsequent civilization, or a broken shard by some higher degree of consciousness—to be forgotten, neglected or thrown away, if we are to achieve that total reconstruction of reality which has today become imperative" (Panikkar 1998, p. 2). The apocalypse is a revelation of the connection and relatedness between different religions and cultures. When considered from the perspective of totality, everything is constituted of the same three elements: divine, human, and earthly. The present times call for an interfaith dialogue viz a viz intercultural theology to understand how the apocalyptic pandemic must be understood as an uncovering of the cosmotheandric communion. Unity at a time of apocalypse is a way to reach Oneness and integrate with the whole, the One. William Sweet remarks that

> So far as theology is a response to a call, intercultural theology, too, is an effort to respond to a "call"—a response to the divine and to the divine in others, to encounter, to engage, to show gratitude, and to share. To do this requires, first, as suggested above, vulnerability and humility about one's certainties, and, second, preparing oneself for, and to be open and ready and willing to, change and be changed. In this, then, it seeks to identify one's presuppositions, to reflect on

> one's assumptions and the context in which one does theology, and, as needed, to question and "take down walls." (Sweet 2022, p. 87)

The apocalyptic pandemic has presented multiple hardships that have brought people together, eventually leading to the sharing of their woes and commodities, but also resulting in an increased understanding of each other. This cosmotheandric communion dissolved presumed prejudices, revealing in turn the desire for a unification, a "wholeness," a journey back to the One, of which we are all a part. The COVID-19 pandemic can be interpreted as a communion of people that helped them look for the divine within each other, amidst the natural elements. This cosmotheandric communion was a reminder that reality constitutes ALL. Arundhati Roy, Indian author and political activist, in her article "The pandemic is a portal," reminds everyone that this pandemic "is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next" (Roy 2020). Therefore, one can either interpret the apocalyptic pandemic as a punishment or as an opportunity to reconcile and come together. This article has developed along the lines of the latter interpretation.

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[1] Trinity in Hinduism refers to Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh (Shiva).

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Invigorating Interfaith Consciousness for the Common Good: Reimagining the Role of African Religion and Pentecostalism in Contemporary South Africa

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Abstract: Contemporary South Africa reflects complex, diverse, and evolving religious realities. Changes continue to manifest at the confluence of encounters between various religions and rapid changes in social institutions that affect, in one way or another, various religions in the nation. These realities are typically embedded in sociocultural contexts and give clarity and meaning to religious experiences. In the post-apartheid era, the spirit of openness toward religious tolerance often dwindles when it comes to interactions between African religion and Pentecostalism. When people understand why followers of other religions believe and practice their rituals and sacraments, this knowledge may help dispel mis- and disinformation and thereby construct inter-religious common ground. Using an extensive review of the relevant literature, this article investigates some of the factors that may limit harmony between African religion and Pentecostalism in South Africa. After providing some definitions and historical context, we discuss the power and legacy of anti-apartheid interfaith solidarity. We also explore ongoing factors hindering interfaith engagements between African religion and Pentecostalism in South Africa. We then explore opportunities for interfaith dialogue in South Africa. Utilizing Walter Hollenweger's Pentecostal intercultural theology, we argue that expressive liturgy for biodiversity and sustainability, communal participation for reconciliation, and experiential spirituality focused on land care could provide a potential 'fourth' approach to interfaith dialogue for African religion and Pentecostalism in South Africa. This includes underappreciated albeit profitable interrelationships between Indigenous knowledge, traditional spirituality, and sustainable development. We also acknowledge some limitations and opportunities for future research. Finally, we offer a succinct concluding synthesis that recapitulates the paper's main points. This article aims to invigorate interfaith consciousness through meaningful thematization of pertinent issues, including the articulation and application of relevant intercultural theology.

Keywords: South Africa; African religion; Pentecostalism; interfaith engagements; sustainable development

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1. Introduction: Issues and Interrelationships Impinging on Interfaith Consciousness

As in many post-colonial nations in Africa, Christianity is the dominant religion of South Africa (Meiring and Meiring 2015). Pentecostal churches have particularly seen exponential growth over the last two decades (Burchardt 2017). Melissa Hackman (2018, p. 17) argues that "Pentecostalism is . . . a large part of postapartheid life for many South Africans." However, changes continue to manifest at the confluence of encounters between various religions and rapid changes in social institutions that affect, in one way or another, various religious traditions in the nation. These realities are typically embedded in sociocultural contexts and give clarity and meaning to religious experiences.

In the post-apartheid era, the spirit of broad-minded acceptance sometimes wanes when it comes to interfaith engagements between African religion and Pentecostalism. However, when people understand the tenets, rituals, and sacraments of other religions, this knowledge may help dispel mis- and disinformation and thereby construct inter-religious common ground (Freeman 2017; Kaunda 2016). Using an extensive review of the relevant literature, this article investigates selected factors that limit interfaith dialogue between African religion and Pentecostalism in South Africa. Using Walter Hollenweger's Pentecostal intercultural theology as our framework approach, we argue that expressive liturgy for biodiversity and sustainability, communal participation for reconciliation, and experiential spirituality focused on land care, are essential components of a meaningful 'fourth' approach to conceptualize and practice interfaith dialogue in South Africa. This article aims to invigorate interfaith consciousness through purposeful thematization of pertinent issues, including the articulation and application of relevant intercultural theology.

This article is organized as follows. To set the stage, we first discuss pertinent concepts and definitions, which we follow with a contextualization of African religion and Christianity in South Africa. Set against this background, we note South Africa's experiences with anti-apartheid interfaith solidarity and then interrogate the divide between African religion and Pentecostalism. Next, we introduce the concept of intercultural theology, which entails discussion of three essential aspects: (i) expressive liturgy for biodiversity and sustainability; (ii) communal participation for reconciliation; and (iii) experiential spirituality and land-care practices. We then acknowledge some paper limitations and discuss opportunities for future research. Finally, we offer a succinct concluding synthesis, recapitulating the paper's main points and future prospects.

2. Definitions

To avoid colonial connotations related to African 'traditional religions', we use the dynamic and singular terminology of 'African religion' within the South African context only (Steyn 2003). In this terminological use, African religion shall refer to the system of beliefs and practices that are integrated into the culture and worldviews of African peoples, in South Africa, regarding their perception of God (Mbiti 2015). Many African migrants to South Africa were originally Bantu-speaking people. They are the ancestors of the present-day 'Nguni people', namely the Zulu and Xhosa. Bantu-speaking people passed on African religion from one generation to another through oral history, folklore, stories, myths, and legends (Igwebuike 2020).

A few clarifying comments about the term 'Pentecostalism' also seem in order, as this descriptor can carry diverse connotations. For the purposes of this paper, in South Africa, Pentecostalism will be taken to encompass classical Pentecostalism, which teaches speaking in tongues *(glossolalia)* as the initial evidence of Spirit baptism; African Independent Pentecostalism, which combines classical Pentecostalism with African cultural practice; New Pentecostalism or Neo-Pentecostalism, which emphasizes spiritual gifts and the word of faith; and prophetic Pentecostalism or New Prophetic Churches, which focus on prosperity and personal prophecy, among others (Kgatle and Banda 2022).

Another differentiation is in so-called African Initiated Churches (AICs), namely churches founded by Africans, in Africa and without direct links to missionary "Godfathers" (Pobee and Ositelu 1998, p. 55). AICs, such as the Zion Christian Church, make up around 45% of the population in South Africa (Öhlmann et al. 2020, p. 11). While not considered Pentecostal, the Zion Christian Church does teach spiritual gifts (*charismata*) (Bvuma 2022). With millions of members, this church plays an important role in shaping the attitudes, values, and ethics of its membership (Frost et al. 2016, p. 1).

3. Contextualizing African Religion and Christianity in South Africa

African religion can be traced back to at least ca. 1500 BCE (Luyaluka 2017), expressing devotion through myths, folktales, songs, dances, liturgies, and proverbs (Awolalu 1976). There is also evidence of Christian communities in Northern Africa from 180 CE

(Wilhite 2017) and Eastern Africa from the sixth century CE (Castiglia 2022). Therefore, both religions can genuinely claim Indigeneity. In fact, Lamin Sanneh posits that Africans responded to Christianity in societies where "indigenous religion was strongest, not weakest, suggesting a degree of compatibility with Christianity" (Sanneh 2003, p. 18). This counters claims that Christianity was or is incompatible with African religion.

However, many 19th- and 20th-century Christian missionaries taught that an experience of God was only possible through Jesus Christ (Nxumalo 1980). The legitimacy of African religion blurred, even though there is evidence that it guided personal experience of God and preserved the cultural norms of ancestors (Awolalu 1979).

Missionaries often represented Christianity as superior and 'civilized' (Moscicke 2017; Gathogo 2008; Mills 1995). Some even perceived African religion with acrimony as a form of paganism (Wallace 2015). As Christianity reveres Christ as the ultimate sacrifice to bring God and human beings together (Baker 2016), Christians typically distanced themselves from rituals, such as animal sacrifices, performed in some African religion (Masondo 2018; Nel 2015). Pentecostals taught that life is a constant battle with the 'evil spirits' of African religion (Morton 2017). Several scholars argue that prejudice perpetrated against African religion compelled most Africans to adopt Christianity as a by-product of European colonization (Sarpong 2006; Falola 2002; Magesa 1997). This was partly why—often (un)knowingly—European Christian missionaries were able to promote colonial interests (Ferguson 2003; Pobee 1979).

According to Chingota (1998, p. 147), some missionaries adopted a policy of "religious vandalism", which included the suppression of African customs and belief systems. African religion was not freely expressed publicly (Mndende 2006). However, Christian converts were urged to denounce African traditional religion as idolatry, superstitious beliefs, and necromancy (Sanou 2013). Hence, some felt ashamed of their African religion, secretly practising African religious rituals while publicly professing Christianity (Masondo 2011; Ntombana 2015; Oduro et al. 2008).

Under apartheid colonialism (1948–1994), South Africa was incorrectly declared a mono-religious state as most of the population were considered to be 'Christians'. African religion was forbidden, and Africans were forcibly segregated from white communities (Lalloo 1998). Apartheid theology rationalized and justified the superiority of white Christians over Africans (De Witte 2010). African religion was not taught at schools (Mestry 2007), despite Christian biblical teaching in missionary and some public schools (Labode 2021). Therefore, many people see African religion as a worldview orientation primarily espoused by illiterates from/in rural communities and practised under trees and in bushes (De Lacy and Shackleton 2017).

Systemic segregation and discrimination in South Africa harboured in-group versus out-group religious dynamics (Dawes and Finchilescu 2002; Singh-Pillay and Collings 2004). In-group and out-group segregation can create and/or sustain discriminatory attitudes among citizens of different religious affiliations (Dobratz 2001; Duriez and Hutsebaut 2000; Jackson and Hunsberger 1999). Bettencourt et al. (2019) claim that in-group and out-group thinking can perpetuate divisions between members of different religions because it tends to limit opportunities for individual members of different religions to experience intergroup contact or interaction. In-group versus out-group discrimination in South Africa was "an insidiously divisive force" hindering interfaith engagements (Slabbert 2001, p. 131). It also fuelled cultural divisions between Africans in South Africa that, in turn, heightened antagonism between the religions (Southall 2016).

4. Anti-Apartheid Interfaith Solidarity

Pursuing the end of apartheid was a common objective for many religious leaders of South Africa, so they created an environment where the power of interfaith solidarity was evident. In 1984, the World Council of Religion and Peace–South Africa (WCRP–SA) was formed, fast becoming a nonviolent interfaith movement that generated conversation among religious groups that resisted apartheid. During the same time, dominee and

academic Gerrie Lubbe (2015) oversaw the South African chapter of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (now known as Religions for Peace), which he led from 1984 to 1994. By 1994, a multifaith coalition of religious groups had unanimously impelled the apartheid government to negotiate the formation of a new democratic state (Kurtz 2010).

Diverse religious leaders had successfully engaged the apartheid government through anti-apartheid movements (De Gruchy et al. 2005). Some of them even went as far as offering their place of worship as sanctuaries for anti-apartheid activists fleeing persecution (Ebrahim 2012). The formation of WCRP–SA, therefore, served as a significant catalyst that pulled South Africans of various faiths to willingly cross theological and racial lines to influence interfaith ethos even post-apartheid.

In May 1988, a special meeting was convened in Soweto to discuss the role of 'believers' in the struggle for justice and peace in South Africa (Esack 1997). The meeting was co-hosted by the WCRP–SA and the Institute of Contextual Theology. In that meeting, Albie Sachs, a prominent member of the African National Congress and a South African legal expert, raised the possibility of organizing a national conference of religious leaders to discuss the future of religion–state relations (Esack 1997). However, before the idea fully materialized in the form of a successful conference in 1990, namely the National Interfaith Conference on Religion–State Relations, various religious leaders came together for an interfaith peace march, in 1989, in Cape Town (Wren 1989). The march was a demonstration of the quality of leadership of religious leaders and their contribution towards the anti-apartheid struggle, and successfully brought together more than 35,000 South Africans from diverse religious backgrounds (Taliep et al. 2016).

The march, in turn, became a springboard for other peaceful marches across South Africa, as it was led by religious leaders representing a diversity of religious backgrounds and practices (Wren 1989). The march was considered the epitome of religious harmony in South Africa. Esack (1997) claims that without the kind of religious harmony that was seen in the 1989 interfaith peace march, the 1990 National Interfaith Conference on Religion–State Relations would not have been possible. That is why the principal objective of the interfaith conference was focused on the role that various religious communities could play in fostering harmony and ushering in a peaceful, democratic South Africa.

The advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994 brought about a new governing order (Henrico 2019). That same year, the South African Council of Churches (SACC) adopted a resolution on critical solidarity with the democratically elected government of the Republic of South Africa. This paved the way for the creation of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1996, including Pentecostal representatives and many other faith communities (Graybill 2001). While SACC changed its approach to politics post-apartheid, it remains true to its commitment of serving the people of South Africa in matters of public interest (Klaasen and Solomons 2019).

Religious freedom and equality were guaranteed to all citizens under the 1996 Democratic Constitution of South Africa (Amoah and Bennett 2008; Van Heerden 2007). Denis (2006) argues that African religion finally gained more visibility. Although religious diversity may nurture division and conflict in any geographic space (Wani et al. 2015), South Africa has thankfully not experienced any significant internal strife post-1994 that may be linked to religion. This is partly because of the country's history of solidarity that existed between various religious groups during the struggle against apartheid (Lubbe 2015).

Continuing the momentum of interfaith dialogue, the World Council of Churches Central Committee (2002) stated:

> "There is greater awareness of the interdependence of human life, and of the need to collaborate across religious barriers in dealing with the pressing problems of the world. All religious traditions, therefore, are challenged to contribute to the emergence of a global community that would live in mutual respect and peace. At stake is the credibility of religious traditions as forces that can bring justice, peace and healing to a broken world". (p. 3)

Encouraging interfaith dialogue in South Africa, Bishop Desmond Tutu (2013) added:

> "We are made for complementarity. We are created for a delicate network of relationships, of interdependence with our fellow human beings, with the rest of creation. I have gifts that you don't have, and you have gifts that I don't have. We are different to know our need of each other". (p. 22)

In 2014, the National Church Leaders' Consultation meeting encouraged further unity and interreligious dialogue across South Africa (Pillay 2017). Church theology condemning apartheid and accommodating religious differences began to emerge (Moodie 2020; McEwen and Steyn 2016). A call began to grow to reassess the damage done to African religion and reassert its rightful place in South Africa (Mokhoathi 2017; Mndende 2009). Researchers called, and continue to call, for far more interfaith dialogue and engagement (Mbaya 2021; Amanze 2020; Marumo 2016; Olademo 2008; Onuzulike 2008; Jebadu 2007). Having provided the context and previous interfaith engagement, we now focus on some continuing challenges for African religion and Pentecostal dialogue.

5. Interrogating the Divide between African Religion and Pentecostalism

Despite positive historic ventures in interfaith dialogue between followers of African religion and some mainstream Christian groups, there continues to be a divide between African religion and Pentecostalism. Since the beginning of South African democracy, there has been a rapid increase in the number of Pentecostal denominations which accept that the manifestation of the Holy Spirit will present in the form of miracles, signs, and wonders (Asamoah-Gyadu 2019). Colonized Christianity, which often neglected Spirit empowerment, contrasted with flourishing African Pentecostalism that embraced certain African religious cosmology and practices (Kgatla 2023; Nel 2019; Banda 2019; Müller 2016; Kruger and Saayman 2016). Similar to leaders of African religion, Neo-Pentecostal preachers, such as HQ Nala and Paseka Motsoeneng, practice exorcism, prophecy, and anointing of objects (Banda 2023). Allan Anderson (2018) argues that a key reason for Pentecostalism's wide appeal in South Africa is that it provides an acceptable alternative to supernatural divination that helps deepen people's Christian commitment. Kgatle (2021a) explains:

> "The manifestation of spirits in the context of the Holy Spirit should not be confused with the cultic tendencies as practised, for example, by the diviner . . . Pentecostals therefore do not worship the ancestors but are in confrontation with the ancestral powers and spirits through the power of the Holy Spirit". (p. 5)

Despite the incorporation of African religious practices into Pentecostal liturgy, there remain obstacles to meaningful interfaith dialogue. Francis (2007) argues that there is a distinct divide between African religion and Pentecostalism because believers on both sides of the divide pursue different self-interests and goals as they practice their religion. Scholars such as Olomojobi (2017) and Adamo (2011) believe the divide is perpetuated by ideological, historical, and/or cultural differences regarding the worship of God, the lordship of Jesus Christ, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Pentecostal churches also oppose animal sacrifices and veneration of ancestors (Wariboko 2017; Ngong 2012; Bae and Van der Merwe 2008).

On some occasions, African religion invokes the spirits of African ancestors as intermediaries to receive guidance from God (Okeke et al. 2017). The divide between African religion and Pentecostalism on the question of ancestors is also accentuated by the question of "what" and/or "who" may qualify to be invoked as an intermediary (ancestor) when seeking guidance from God (Van Dijk 2020). Prayer in African religion is sometimes seen to be incomplete without the pouring of libation to appease the ancestors. Some Pentecostals view this as worship of demons (Van Dijk 2020). Various other practices of African religion are also sometimes linked to evil powers such as witchcraft (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015; Onyinah 2011).

Furthermore, there are political and ideological reasons for the divide. In 2009, when the former president of the African National Congress, Jacob Zuma, became president of

South Africa, he branded himself with charismatic leadership, such as Ray McCauley of Rhema Bible Church, and many others. Soon, many Pentecostal and charismatic churches granted South African politicians the opportunity to address their congregations during Sunday worship (Frahm-Arp 2018). Churches became a publicity instrument for politicians to make Pentecostalism widely accepted, which was not similarly noted for African religion (Beyers 2015). Despite public affiliation with Pentecostalism, many South African politicians still secretly visited *sangomas*—clairvoyants who claim to have a supernatural ability to perceive future events (Thobane 2015)—to request charms to empower them to achieve political victories (Kleinhempel 2017). Political leaders were shy to identify themselves publicly with *sangomas*, thus promoting the notion that African religion was somehow evil or should be practised secretly.

Mndende (2013) claims there is a division between African religion and Pentecostalism regarding prosperity. Adherents of African religion typically believe that the role of ancestors is to look after the welfare of the living. In contrast, some Pentecostal leaders teach that invoking the spirits of ancestors may attract poverty into the life of a Christian (Kwateng-Yeboah 2019). Pentecostal preachers sometimes promise to improve the lives of their followers by delivering them from evil forces that hinder the material progress that they would enjoy through the power of the Holy Spirit (Van Wyk 2014). Such messages tend to be well received by the majority of South Africans who come from impoverished backgrounds and suffer from the legacy of apartheid colonialism (Kgatle 2021b). Conversely, even though African religion also professes to eschew evil (Ekeopara and Ekpenyong 2016), its message is not similarly well received.

There has also been some tragic exploitation and manipulation of Pentecostal congregants by corrupt leaders who attempt to either inculcate or villainize African religion (Mumo 2018). Kgatle (2020, p. 136) argues that prophecy in New Prophetic Churches is very similar to divination in African religion, with people paying a fee to receive a personal prophecy or openly "naming and shaming" witches in public forums. Kgatle (2022) adds that newer non-denominational Pentecostal churches seek to incorporate African religion, sometimes to the detriment of fundamental tenets of Christian doctrine.

Another hindrance to meaningful interfaith dialogue is posed by certain Neo-Pentecostal churches that tend to be suspicious of or even hostile towards family members and those who engage in African religious practices (Mavhungu 2000). One of the ways Neo-Pentecostalism deals with spiritual uncertainties is by strongly emphasizing the need to navigate life with faith and the commanding power of the Holy Spirit for personal protection against misfortune, crime, poverty, illness, death, affliction, and the powers of witchcraft. Sometimes, Neo-Pentecostal Christians wage 'spiritual warfare' against 'evil' family members who are suspected of practising witchcraft (Burchardt 2018).

Furthermore, the shift from classical Pentecostalism to Neo-Pentecostalism in South Africa encourages the rise of prophets, such as Shepherd Bushiri, who is considered a 'household name' of Neo-Pentecostal prophecy (Kgatle 2019a, 2019b). Such assertions of spiritual gifting are underpinned by the growth of his Enlightened Christian Gathering (ECG) in Pretoria. Asamoah-Gyadu (2013) claims that one of the reasons for the rapid growth of ECG was the church's ability to harness the power of television and social media. The viewership of the prophetic channels on various social media platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube, has amounted to more than eighteen million viewers per service (Kangwa 2016). By contrast, African religion does not tend to make use of social media platforms for promotional purposes (Togarasei 2015).

Regarding prophecy, Daneel (1993) holds that the source of the power of Neo-Pentecostal prophets is the Holy Spirit, as opposed to the source of the power of *sangomas* and *inygangas*, which is from ancestral spirits through divination (p. 150). However, Abioje (2010) claims that the act of prophesying in Neo-Pentecostal milieus is no different from the act of performing divination in African religion. Chimuka (2016) adds that just as Neo-Pentecostal prophets claim to speak mysteries under the influence of the Holy Spirit, diviners in African religion, such as *inyangas* (traditional healers typically specializing in herbalism)

or *sangomas*, also claim to speak mysteries under the influence of ancestral spirits (Cumes 2013; Van Binsbergen 2005). Even so, Bergene (2016) believes that Neo-Pentecostal prophets are progressively replacing *sangomas* as more and more people seek them for guidance. Again, this demonstrates that there are some aspects of lingering polarization between African religion and Pentecostalism.

Despite attempts to emphasize commonalities—such as comparing ancestral spirits in African religion to the Holy Spirit in Pentecostalism; or linking magic and divination in African religion to prophecy and healing in Pentecostalism; or associating dreams in African religion to personal revelation in Pentecostalism—Kgatle (2019a, 2019b) maintains that very little progress has been made to narrow the divide between the two. Although violent conflicts between African religious and Pentecostal groups are rare, so are efforts to engage positively. While many Pentecostal leaders selectively incorporate some African religious practices, there is little evidence of meaningful interreligious engagement. In the next section, we propose a possible way to advance interfaith dialogue between those from African religion and Pentecostal belief systems.

6. Intercultural Theology: A 'Fourth' Approach

Francis-Vincent Anthony (2003) has conceptualized churches of African origin as embodying a religio-cultural identity of a 'third' kind. He posits that these churches of African origin:

> "seem to be shaping a third religious identity ... In this endeavour the Christian identity and the African identity are neither totally rejected nor entirely embraced. Instead, an attempt is made to accommodate or synthesize elements of Westernized Christianity and African culture in the kerygmatic-cognitive, liturgical-expressive, koinoniac-structural, and diaconal-material sectors of their ecclesial-societal life. In this way, beliefs and values, symbolism and rituals, structures and roles of a third kind are being forged by the Churches of African Origin". (p. 32)

Building on Anthony's work, we propose an intercultural theology of a kind that seems suited to contemporary African religious expressions of faith and spirituality. Such intercultural theology draws inspiration from the multiple-worlds concept of the post-World War II era. To develop our conceptual approach, we briefly revisit the evolution of the multiple-worlds model.

The three-worlds idea was first articulated in 1952 by the French demographer Alfred Sauvy (1986). He posited that the people of the 'Third World' ('*tiers monde*') were similarly oppressed to people living at the bottom of the social pyramid in pre-revolutionary France, the so-called 'Third Estate' ('*tiers état*') and therefore had to fight for their rights (Sauvy 1952). In the Cold War era, a model of 'three' politico-ideological worlds made terminological sense: The concept of 'First World' was applied to capitalist countries aligned with the United States, primarily North America and Europe; the term 'Second World' referred to communist countries aligned with the Soviet Union, primarily Eastern Europe and Asia; the idea of 'third world' referred to developing countries that sought to forge their own ('third') path to development (Palieraki 2023). In the context of the African continent, the term 'Third World' typically referred to non-aligned African countries that were former colonies and had gained independence after World War II (Haslam et al. 2012).

The three-worlds model is now considered out of date. Moreover, the term 'Third World' is now widely perceived as pejorative because it tacitly implies that countries associated with this term are somehow inferior to 'First World' and 'Second World' countries. For this reason, preference is now given to terms like 'developing countries', 'nations of the majority world', or 'low- and middle-income countries', among others. Some scholars further purport that "it is more appropriate to conceptualize four worlds" (Hopper 2012, p. 28). The three-worlds model organizes countries according to their economic and ideological alignment and fails to account for sociocultural or theological identities. For example, Manuel and Posluns (2018) conceptualized a "Fourth World consisting of indige-

nous peoples, like the Indians of the Americas, the Lapps of northern Scandinavia, the Canadian Inuit and the Aborigines of Australia that are subsumed by majority cultures in the countries in which they live" (cited in Hopper 2012, p. 28). Hence, Manuel and Posluns (2018) argue that a 'fourth' model is needed to advance Indigenous interests, adding that such a "Fourth World" is not a "final destination" but "the right to travel freely, not only on our road but in our own vehicles" (p. 217). Accordingly, a 'fourth' model can be useful to trace, comprehend, and sustain the struggle for marginalized communities to thrive politically, culturally, and spiritually.

Building on these conceptualizations, our article proposes a kind of 'fourth' intercultural theology that aims to reimagine and reinvigorate African religion for the common good. The perceived need for such a 'fourth' kind of intercultural theology is nurtured by the authors' conviction that it is an unequivocal duty of contemporary humanity to honour and respect African religion en route to imagining and creating a world that may be equitably and enduringly shared and cherished. This entails recognizing, esteeming, protecting, and nurturing the spiritual practices and perspectives on place, culture, language, worldview, and identity. This paper considers African religion in the light of such a 'fourth' kind of intercultural theology.

Our focus is on possible ways to enhance interfaith engagements between African religion and Pentecostal communities. This affirms the stance of Pentecostal theologian, Kärkkäinen (2003), who views the religious 'other' as an opportunity to grow. Kärkkäinen (2003) states, "while salvation is ontologically founded on the person of Christ, its benefits have been made universally available by the revelation of God" (p. 25). In the following section, we utilize Walter Hollenweger's Pentecostal intercultural theology, which he describes as "responsible syncretism" that combines "story and analysis, dream and critical interpretations, for theological articulation" (cited in Anderson 2021, p. 39). Hollenweger's Pentecostal intercultural theology incorporates three main areas: expressive liturgy (storytelling and vibrant worship); communal participation (relationships and reconciliation); and experiential spirituality (visions, dreams, healing, and deliverance). Although Hollenweger was not specifically addressing interreligious engagement, we argue that this provides a potential 'fourth' approach that may helpfully underpin interfaith dialogue between African religion and Pentecostalism in South Africa.

6.1. Expressive Liturgy for Biodiversity and Sustainability

Engaging in interfaith dialogue through expressive liturgy makes sense in the context of biodiversity and sustainability concerns (Leal Filho et al. 2022a, 2022b; McMillen et al. 2017). Religious teachings that are oral, spontaneous, enthusiastic, flexible, and empowering are common to both African religion and Pentecostalism in South Africa (Webster 2022; Kgatle 2020). Mbiti (2015, p. ix) states that African religion "is wrapped up in the oral traditions and cultures of the people." Pentecostalism likewise transmits religious and moral values through storytelling and "testimonies of change" (dos Santos 2019, p. 378). Anderson (2021) explains that Hollenweger "saw the experience of the Spirit as a catalyst for the emergence of a new society where there is justice for all and hope for a desperately abused world" (p. 47). In 2009, the SACC developed a treatise entitled *Climate Change: A Challenge to the Churches in South Africa* (Conradie 2022). However, it did not expressly encourage African religion and Pentecostal interfaith dialogue on the issue. Given that climate change literacy in South Africa is still less than 30%, it is encouraging that some Pentecostal churches are providing teaching on nature and the environment (Kabongo and Stork 2022).

Recent research reflects a relatively harmonious interrelationship between traditional spirituality and transmitting knowledge for sustainable subsistence (Nelson and Shilling 2018; Granderson 2017). Moreover, scholars have repeatedly drawn attention to the underappreciated potential of local knowledge and spirituality to support sustainable development outcomes (Nelson and Shilling 2018; Nelson 2020; Fischer et al. 2022). Crucially, scholars have advocated for so-called reversals of learning whereby local communities,

which are sometimes denigrated simply as being poor, rather "teach the profligate and so-called 'developed' rich about the interwoven nature of frugality, modesty, contentedness, spirituality and sustainability" (Luetz et al. 2019, p. 132). Hence, there is a compelling rationale to harness the benefits of local knowledge through so-called reversals of learning and thereby leverage worldview understandings in support of sustainability and conservation practice (Athayde et al. 2017; Nelson and Shilling 2018; Nunn and Luetz 2021; Nalau et al. 2018).

Sadly, the potential of Indigenous worldview orientations to inform sustainable development continues to be widely dismissed according to the technocratic and monetary norms and standards of today's international economic system (Luetz and Walid 2019; Stein 2019; Telleria 2017). Given that native communities have sustainably subsisted for thousands of years suggests that it is high time to (re)discover sustainability and ecological conservation from their perspectives (Ellis et al. 2021; Leal Filho et al. 2021a, 2021b, 2022b; Schramm et al. 2020). More specifically, many traditional societies have a nature-immersive and ecocentric view of the world, wherein their environment tends to be appreciated or revered as sacred and 'en-spirited'. Such a cosmology can moderate the contemporary and quasi-ubiquitous anthropocentric view of the western world wherein nature is overwhelmingly conceived as existing exclusively or predominantly for the sake and benefit of humans (Luetz and Leo 2021; Walshe and Nunn 2012; Schlehe 2010). Appropriating expressive and vibrant liturgy in both African religion and Pentecostalism could tap into alternative values and thereby potentially access and transmit vital local knowledge for sustainability.

6.2. Communal Participation for Reconciliation

Both African religion and Pentecostalism involve maximum communal participation to shape spiritual identity and life activities, so this could also be used as a way to bring about reconciliation between communities (Müller 2018). Idowu (1973, 1996) asserts that African religion came into existence because African ancestors recognized the dwelling power of God in everything that God created for their wellbeing. This helped them to have the knowledge that enabled them to advance various customs that safeguard the relationship between community members. Similarly, Christianity acknowledges the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit that allows people to live in harmony together (Van de Beek 2013). Dubarry (2021) observes that in South Africa, Pentecostal communities "bring mutual support, emotional release, and help them to create a sense of commonality" (p. 12). Hollenweger (1972) calls these communities "islands of humanity." Even migrants in South Africa reportedly experience a "spiritual kinship" in Pentecostal community, described as a safe "umbrella" (Chimbidzikai 2021, p. 166).

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa enabled various religious communities to come together, both practically and virtually, in a spirit of reconciliation (Bvuma 2022). Addressing the nation on 26 May 2020, President Ramaphosa acknowledged the major role of religious communities in providing care, counselling, health clinics, food, and housing for those in need, especially during lockdown periods. These engagements with the state were supported by a wide range of religious communities that operated across faiths (Mpofu 2020). Video of an interfaith prayer meeting outside a Cape Town hospital went viral in January 2021 (Dean 2021). Interfaith solidarity was present in the middle of a devastating global pandemic and reminded many of the constructive roles that religion can play in supporting human relations, especially when the focus can be shifted onto humanitarian concerns that may point beyond religious divides. As hospital visits were being restricted, the ability to transcend religious differences and collaborate in a time of difficulty inspired powerful and captivating contributions toward interfaith harmony in contemporary South Africa (Chitando 2022).

6.3. Experiential Spirituality and Land Care

The final component of this 'fourth' approach is experiential spirituality, which provides the opportunity to focus on land care. Indigenous deferential esteem of land as being imbued with sanctity can contrast sharply with anthropocentric worldviews linked to conservative evangelicalism, which some of the literature reports as reflecting tendencies of ecological domination, utilitarianism, extractivism, and environmental exploitation (Luetz and Leo 2021; Scoffham 2019; Arbuckle and Konisky 2015; Hoffman and Sandelands 2005). However, there is also research that reflects more nuanced perspectives on the responsible stewardship of the earth, sometimes termed 'creation care' in the literature (Edvardsson Björnberg and Karlsson 2022; Buxton et al. 2021; Griffiths 2021; Luetz et al. 2018).

Indigenous spirituality commonly correlates with environmentally sympathetic "land-care practices of reverential reciprocity" (Nelson 2020, para. 10). This may be underpinned by the affective closeness and connectedness of many traditional societies to their land, which is conducive to fostering environmentally sustainable lifestyles (Hinds and Sparks 2008). Environmental land-care and climate-change adaptation practices are typically informed or even inspired by people's worldviews, so it makes sense to consider scientific knowledge and Indigenous spirituality in tandem (Berto et al. 2018; Fair 2018; Nunn et al. 2016; Luetz and Leo 2021). Holistic strategies that integrate science and faith tend to be more inclusive, practical, and enduring (Luetz and Nunn 2020, 2021; Gupta and Agrawal 2017).

There is a solid evidence base that traditional spirituality and affective connection to nature can sustainably underpin local conservation efforts and can therefore benefit the domains of research, policy, and practice (Yunkaporta 2019; Gupta and Agrawal 2017; Nunn et al. 2016). Hence, this discourse argues in favour of holistic and inclusive interfaith approaches that conjoin and integrate elements of both spirituality and scientific inputs (Makondo and Thomas 2018). Integrated strategies that rest on sound science and are at the same time spiritually and socio-culturally attuned are well-placed to facilitate ecologically sustainable outcomes (Balehegn et al. 2019; Chisadza et al. 2015; Luetz et al. 2020).

Our analysis points to fertile opportunities for more interfaith initiatives, interrogations, and engagements. Contemporary development policy and practice may create consilience by engaging science and spirituality in tandem, thus making environmental protection and biodiversity conservation more effective and sustainable. Inviting African religious cosmology just might be what is now needed to foster global sustainability and invigorate interfaith consciousness for the planetary common good (Leal Filho et al. 2021a, 2022b; Luetz et al. 2019).

In synthesis, the concepts and approaches discussed in Section 6 are useful for advancing the field of interfaith dialogue. Theorizing a 'fourth' intercultural theological approach builds the field of interfaith engagement while at the same time pointing to practice-oriented perspectives. As such, there are clear conceptual and practical benefits for both academics focusing on conceptual field-building and practitioners working at the grassroots of interfaith engagements.

7. Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

This research is subject to some limitations. Given that this paper was methodologically focused on literary analysis implies a range of opportunities for further in-depth empirical inquiry. More specifically, and as noted elsewhere in the literature, "it would be interesting to examine areas of syncretism between Indigenous spirituality and major world religions" (Adeleke and Luetz 2023, p. 24). For instance, future research could investigate how African religion may be nurtured, preserved, and/or esteemed, even when beliefs have acquiesced to introduced religious traditions, as exemplified in the Pacific (Hausia Havea et al. 2018). Further work also needs to be done regarding interfaith dialogue between African religion and other Christian groups beyond Pentecostalism. Relevant knowledge generation in this area could strengthen strategies that target leveraging African religion in South Africa for effective and sustainable local land-care and climate-change adaptation practices.

8. Conclusions

The interrelationships between African religion and Pentecostalism are sensitive and must be handled with care. Presently, there are no good reasons to avoid or sidestep this important interfaith topic of abiding significance. On the contrary, interfaith engagement remains an area of promising theory and practice that may be better explored and more carefully mapped out if various misconceptions that create a divide between African religion and Pentecostalism are to be effectively dispelled and possible conflict minimized. This aspiration includes the nurturing of a pertinent Pentecostal intercultural theology that is suited to African religious orientations.

This article aims to invigorate scholarly discourse and debate through more thematization of pertinent issues. It advocates for renewed conversation and interfaith dialogue among the various religious groups in South Africa. Moreover, it proposes that religious groups should not only come together when there is a challenge, as was exemplified by interreligious initiatives and collaborations during the COVID-19 pandemic, but that interfaith dialogue should be normalized and mainstreamed across South Africa's religious landscape. Relevant interfaith programs may educate South African citizens to better understand the diverse belief systems of various religions. When people understand why followers of other religions believe and practice their rituals and sacraments, this knowledge may help dispel mis- and disinformation and thereby construct inter-religious common ground. As such, the mutual exchange of religious ideas and information can enhance mutual respect and become the bedrock for peaceful interracial and interreligious coexistence.

Pentecostal theologians and laypeople, who are members of the majority religion in South Africa, may take the initiative and engage in genuine interfaith conversations with followers of African religion. A promising avenue may be for Pentecostals to interrogate and learn from the worldviews of African religious societies about environmentally sympathetic land care, development, and sustainability practices. The emphasis should be, among other things, on fostering genuine interreligious tolerance and respect while at the same time upholding the principles of religious plurality in South Africa. This is fitting because every human being has the inalienable right—and duty—to express, respect, recognize, and esteem in all other humans "the irreducible, glorious dignity of difference" (Sacks 2009, p. 42).

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Article

The Human Being in Eastern Church Father's and Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology

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Abstract: The authors analyze two historical types of philosophical culture—the classical Eastern Patristics and Arab–Muslim medieval thought. They are united by the religious doctrine of man, which allows considering the intercultural and inter-theological nature of these traditions. In more particular terms, the article examines the understanding of the human being of the thinkers of Nicaea and post-Nicaea periods of Eastern patristics—Athanasius of Alexandria and Maximus the Confessor—and Abu Hamid al-Ghazali as the most profound representative of the Sufi philosophical–theological system of the Middle Ages. The authors highlight the philosophical, intercultural, and interreligious significance of the mentioned anthropological concepts. The article focuses on the comparability and consistency of the ideas of the Church Fathers and al-Ghazali. Particular attention is paid to Islam's theoretical image of man as a caliph—a successor—of the Creator on the Earth. Comparative studies reveal the patristic vision of man, containing in himself the fullness of Divinity and humanity. The main points of the dyophysite Christian understanding of the God Incarnate in contrast to the monophysite currents of Apollinarianism are revealed. The depth of the Christological views of Athanasius of Alexandria and Maximus the Confessor is presented. Al-Ghazali's doctrine of man is substantiated as a conceptual understanding of man's place in the system of the world created by God, which is seen as a holistic and systematized doctrine of humanity in Muslim philosophy. Conclusions are made about the comparability and the presence of intersections between Eastern Christian, Byzantine, and Muslim types of thought.

Keywords: Christianity; Islam; Eastern and Byzantine patristics; Sufism; Incarnation of God; Eastern Church Fathers; al-Ghazali; fanā'; similarity law; mulk; jabarut; malakut; mirror and reflectiveness

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1. Introduction

Comparative philosophy makes it possible to put more objectively the question of dialogue of theological teachings and intercultural communication, as well as of religious–cultural identity, by analyzing different ways of perceiving other cultures and faiths. It is the philosophical understanding of man as a religious problem, in our opinion, that can unite different religious positions and theological views, revealing their genuinely humane and general cultural meanings. For instance, the Abrahamic religions are permeated by the intersection of cultures and various religious traditions. Thus, in its history, Muslim civilization reveals and cultivates both its "Western" face, as it contains elements of Judaism, Christianity, and Hellenism, and its "Eastern" face, diverging from the essence of these civilizational systems (Kraemer 1984; Rosenthal 1992). Examining this fact allows us to grasp the nature of religious humanism and the ideals of Muslim culture, which are linked to the attempt to humanize humanity and promote the discovery of human greatness. Likewise, early Christianity in Byzantium, drawing on the various theoretical and cultural sources of the ancient world, mythology, Platonism, and Neoplatonism, demonstrates the creative intersection of Western and Eastern cultural elements and religious ideas and elaborates a unique syncretic religious system. Considering the content of medieval

Christian and Arab–Muslim philosophy, we can say that both of them represent a certain synthesis with the values of ancient philosophy, although, in each of them, the ratio and the proportion of these elements are different. The importance of ancient culture for the Muslim East is evidenced by the famous Greek–Arabic translation movement in the 8th–10th century (Gutas 1998). This is not about the practical utilitarianism of the era of the translation movement, which stimulated interest in medicine and natural sciences, and not about theoretical utilitarianism, which stimulated philosophical and religious research. We are meeting the fact that the translation movement was in the nature of the creative development of the Arab–Muslim culture itself. It is no coincidence that F. Rosenthal noted that this "translation activity was in the nature of a conscious creative act" (Rosenthal 1975, p. 12).

In this article, we seek to show how philosophical and religious understandings of the human being condition this gracious interplay of cultures and theologies. The works of the early Eastern (later–Byzantine) Church Fathers and al-Ghazali are combined by their profound knowledge of ancient philosophy. The Greek Fathers, during the periods of the triadic and Christological theological disputes, both criticized and appealed to Platonic and Neo-Platonic ideas (Ramelli 2009). It is worth mentioning that Plotinus' doctrine of the triad correlates quite harmoniously with the Christian triadology. A direction of *Christian Neoplatonism* even emerges in the early Byzantine period, evidencing the continuity of antiquity and Byzantism. In turn, al-Ghazali repeatedly adverted to Greek philosophy in his works. For instance, in his work *Maqāsid al Falāsifa* (*The Aims of the Philosophers*), he revealed the peculiarities of the philosophy of Eastern Peripatetics al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, and in the book *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa (The Incoherence of the Philosophers*), al-Ghazali conducted a critical analysis, showing that the Peripatetic philosophers were unable to reconcile the truths of theoretical and practical reasons. However, it is clear that al-Ghazali recognized antiquity as a part of Arab–Muslim culture. He was one of the most influential theologians and philosophers of Islam and has been considered an authority in both Western and Islamic philosophical traditions (Griffel 2015; Montgomery 1963).

«Al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) is one of the most influential thinkers of Islam. There is hardly a genre of Islamic literature where he is not regarded as a major authority. Islamic Law, Sufism, ethics, philosophy, and theology are all deeply shaped by him. Yet in the past thirty years, the field of Ghazālī-studies has been shaken by the realization that Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, d. 428/1037) and other philosophers had a strong influence on him. Now, after the 900th anniversary of his death, the field emerges stronger than ever» (Islam and Rationality: The Impact of al-Ghazālī 2015, pp. i–xx). Therefore, in our opinion, ancient Greek philosophy contributed to the establishment of the intercultural connection between the ancient and medieval worlds, even if medieval authors rejected or criticized ancient thought at different periods.

The philosophical comprehension of man as a religious problem is based on answering the question of man's place in the world and history as part of the appeal to God. The human in the religious picture of the world is seen as a creature of God. This does not mean, however, that he is merely a creature of God. The teachings of Christianity and Islam argue it is God who makes a man *a person*, revealing Himself in Holy history and elevating man above other created things (Kraemer 1984). Such a vision of the human being is inherent in Abrahamic religions, including the major Arab–Muslim philosophical trends: kalam, falsafa, Sufism, Ishraqi, and Isma'ilism (Arkoun 1982; Kirabaev 2011). The elevated understanding of man as a crown of God's creation, responsible for himself and the human world before the Creator (John Climacus 1908), outlined in early Christianity, is further transmitted from generation to generation by theological doctrines and religious–anthropological concepts, determining the historical forms of culture and types of philosophizing (Stead 1994).

This article highlights some significant philosophical and theoretical constructions regarding a human as a spiritual and religious being. The mentioned constructs emerged during the classical formation of the Christian doctrine (4th–7th centuries) and in Islam within the framework of Sufism. The considered ideas of Athanasius of Alexandria,

Maximus the Confessor, and al-Ghazali, in our opinion, have spiritual and semantic continuity and are actual enough in the ethical plan of our time. One of the most important examples of Muslim spiritual history is al-Ghazali, a Sunni Sufi Muslim. And whatever way the development of Arab–Muslim philosophy took since the mid-11th century, at all turning points in the history of Islam, it has always returned to the personality of al-Ghazali as the founder of the Sufi philosophical and theological system. No wonder he was awarded the honorific titles *The Proof of Islam* and *The Revivalist of Faith*.

The comparative analysis of the philosophical and anthropological concepts of Christian and Muslim thinkers discloses the religious and secular understanding of man concerning justifications for monotheism in Christianity and Islam. The Holy Trinity doctrine, elaborated by the Church Fathers, existing both in unity and in hypostatic manifestations of the three Persons, shaped the corresponding conceptual image of man, absorbing and reflecting the three-dimensionality of Christian monotheism. In Islam, with many ideological overlaps with the Christian vision of man, an anthropological doctrine was formed that correlates with the one-dimensionality of Muslim monotheism. The article traces common and specific descriptive characteristics in the theorizing of man, considered in terms of the noted differences between the monotheism of the two world religions.

One of the fundamental concepts of both Byzantine Church Fathers and Muslim thinkers (in particular, Al-Ghazali) is the philosophical idea of the *perfect man*, which found its reflection in the religious anthropology of both religions. The Byzantine Fathers proceeded from the perfection of the two natures of God–man Jesus Christ, which helped them elaborate on the doctrine of a man striving for perfection in the process of deification, following the example of Jesus. In Islam, the idea of human perfection is expressed more epistemologically as a means of cognizing the Creator and simultaneously grasping spiritual and moral values (in Sufism, for example, in its movement toward the One). For both Christianity and Islam, this idea of human perfection lies in epistemology. The way of God-cognition relates to the perfection of personality and the acquisition of spiritual and moral knowledge. In both cases, cognition of God is identical to self-knowledge and elevates man. In Christianity, this path is defined by *theosis* (deification, θέωσις) and the attempt to restore the lost Godlikeness, and in Islam, it is based on a common understanding of the hidden knowledge and the desire of every Muslim to comprehend it. The article shows how the idea of human perfection was realized in the ratio of God–man–world in ontological and epistemological terms from the perspectives of Eastern Patristics and Sufism. The comparative analysis thus allows us to deduce the peculiarities of the two understandings of God and man—early Christian and medieval Muslim.

We consider the understanding of man in the two world religions in philosophical and ethical terms. We focus on the fundamental ideas of a person striving for self-improvement, cognizing their own inner essence and knowledge of the Creator, an individual responsible for the existing world, and aiming to realize spiritual values in society. This view of man was characteristic of both Christian patristics and the Arab–Muslim philosophy of the Middle Ages. The vision of the human being in Christianity was directly linked to the dogma of the Incarnation, which was formed over three centuries, while in Arab–Muslim philosophy, the teachings of al-Ghazali became fundamental. It is on the basis of these theoretical premises that the article reveals the anthropological views of Athanasius of Alexandria, Maximus the Confessor, and Al-Ghazali. In a more specific consideration of man as an integral being uniting the corporeal and the mental, the spiritual, the natural, and the sacred,[1] overcoming certain stages in the process of deification in Christianity and movement to the state of *fanā'* in Islam[2] we provide references to relevant published works of the authors of this article.

At the same time, the understanding of man in the teachings of the considered thinkers of Christianity and Islam is shown in the article as two methodological approaches to solving the most important philosophical problem of the God–world–man relation in both world religions. What Islam and Christianity have in common is that both religions focus on universal values directly related to the philosophical and anthropological vision of man's

position in the Universe with his existential gravitation toward God. The representatives of Eastern Patristics and the Arab–Muslim world revealed these universal values through the deep spirituality and religiosity of the man of the medieval age, preserving, however, the specificity and uniqueness of their worldview and their culture.

2. Human Being as *Caliph* in the Discourse of Islam and *Partaker* of the Divine World in the Context of the Formation of the Christian Doctrine of the Incarnation

Sacred history, as described in the Qur'an (*The Holy Qur-an (Qur'an)* (1990)), is a series of covenants (عهد) between God and man, imposing certain obligations on people but suggesting that the Almighty regards man as a kind of comrade, a companion, a partner. Of course, man is not an equal companion or partner. It is a religious obligation for a Muslim to uphold his contract, which is a valid agreement. "O ye who believe! Fulfill [all] contracts . . . " (The Qur'an, 5:1). The covenant to God is seen as both a blessing and a responsibility in the Qur'an. In addition to this notion of 'knowing' and 'remembering' our oath to Allah, we are called to understand the responsibility of that oath to Allah, His prophets, and the Holders of Authority. At the same time, man's position in Islam in relation to God differs significantly from that in Judaism and Christianity. The Bible says: "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (NKJV, Gen 1:27). It is from the interpretation and argumentation of this provision that follows the Christian Christological teaching about the God–man (Incarnation of God), based on the understanding of the inseparable unity of the divine and human natures in Jesus Christ.

For Islam, such an understanding is simply impossible (e.g., Treiger 2011). The Qur'an notes: "(Remember) when your Lord said to the angels: 'Truly I am going to create man from clay'. So when I have fashioned him and breathed into him (his) soul created by Me, then you fall down prostrate to him" (Qur'an, 38:71–72). The Sunnah about the creation of Adam "in the image of God" says: "Allah created Adam in his image . . . " This is part of an authentic hadith narrated by Bukhari (No. 6227) and Muslim (No. 2841) from Abu Hurairah (Al-Bukhari 2002). This hadith implies that the phrase «Allah created Adam in His image» (إن الله خلق آدم على صورته) actually means "Allah created Adam in his own image", in his form (على صورته). It does not mean that Allah and Adam share the same image, but rather that Allah created Adam according to his appearance. This indicates that the appearance of Allah and the appearance of Adam are one and the same. Thus, it is signified that God chose for man one of the many available formulas, "خليفة رسول الله", (successor to the Messenger of God) or the title "خليف الله" (deputy of God), as God cannot have a "successor" in the literal sense of the word. The latter seems important enough since Islam lacks a mediator between God and man both as an idea and as an institution. Therefore, we are talking about the head of the Ummah (الأمة), the Muslim community. The Qur'an nowhere explains clearly whose "خليفة" a person should be. The Qur'an says: «And (remember) when your Lord said to the angels: "Verify, I am going to place (mankind) generations after generations on earth". They said: Allah, "Will You place therein those who will make mischief therein and shed blood while we glorify You're with praises and thanks and sanctify Your". He (Allah) said: "I know that which you do not know" (Qur'an, 2:30). This verse of the Qur'an "خليفة" refers to a person who replaces God acting as a judge in disputes between his creations (خليفة مني ياهل وفيني في الحكمي بينا اهليه الحكميحكمي).

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111), the preeminent thinker and the most influential authority of the Muslim Middle Ages, outlined the way for further interpretation of the word "الخليفة" by suggesting the concept of an "inner interrelationship" (المناصب الباطنة) between man and God. This conception not only made man love the Almighty but also made plausible the version about the appointment of Adam as a deputy of God on earth, not as a prophet, but as a simple man. In the "inner interrelationship", al-Ghazali also

found an explanation of the statement about the creation of Adam by God in his image, understanding by the latter the *inner* image as opposed to the *external* image.

In Christianity, the most important issue for the Abrahamic religious systems—man in his connection with God—received its orthodoxy in the dogma of the Incarnation of Christ, which was developed in Byzantium over the 5th to the 7th centuries in the theological polemic of Eastern and Western Patristics, and in the struggle of some Eastern Church Fathers against trends opposed to the Christian dyophysite doctrine.[3] This was the formation of Christology, the creed of how to understand the God–manhood of Jesus Christ, and, in fact, the systematic formation of Christian theology as the church dogma of the Son of God who *became*, i.e., the *incarnate* man. "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, . . . full of grace and truth" (John 1:14)—stemming from this evangelical thesis, the Eastern Fathers began to create Christology, which completed and then continued the truths of triadology (the dogma of the Holy Trinity) developed and fixed at the Council of Nicaea. Since the trinitarian dogma had already been perfected by the Church Fathers (e.g., Athanasius of Alexandria 2007b), patristics raised the question of justifying the fullness and absolute perfection of the two natures of Jesus Christ, divine and human (Gregory of Nyssa 2016).

We deem that without discussing the dogma regarding the God–manhood of Christ, the Homoousion (ὁμοούσιον) triadology (the unity of the three hypostases of the Trinity), so difficult to develop in the 4th century, could remain a scholastic doctrine with an understanding of God far from the mortal human world. Therefore, the argumentation of Eastern Church Fathers was directed not only at making *dyophysitism* as an affirmation of the two perfect natures in the unity of Jesus Christ but also at justifying the purposes of Christ's appearance in the earthly world. Athanasius of Alexandria, who did outstanding work in formulating triadological and Christological dogmas, commented on the Incarnation of God: "The Son of God became a man to enable men, the sons of Adam, to become sons of God . . . Therefore, He called Himself the son of man, so men might call God their Father in heaven" (Athanasius of Alexandria 1994a, § 8, p. 257).

The Christological dogma determined the original setting of the question, first, about Jesus Christ Incarnate (which would not be recognized in Islam) and, second, about man as the *mediator* between the Divine and the created worlds, including in his inner world a part of the Divine nature, His image, and absoluteness. We may argue that it was with the polemic and discussion of the ideas of the Incarnation of God that the era of the construction of Christian culture as part of Byzantine civilization and religious anthropology as a special theoretical direction within Eastern Christianity began. The formation of the understanding of man in his relationship with God in Greek–Byzantine Patristics was directly linked to the development of Christological dogmatics.

The dogma of the God–man Jesus Christ (or of the Incarnation of the Son of God) was elaborated in the clash between some Eastern and, further, Byzantine Church Fathers and the religious–philosophical teachings of Apollinaris of Laodicea and his followers, but also those of Arianism, Sabellius, Nestorius, emerging monophysitism, and monothelitism. The power of ideas and doctrines, which did not recognize the equal, indivisible, and inseparable unity of Christ's two natures, divine and human, came down from various positions and parts of the east of the former Roman Empire on the *dyophysitism* (the teaching of the two natures of Christ), which was breaking through.

Apollinaris of Laodicea (310–390) sowed a storm in the Christological debate and laid the foundation for Monophysitism as an affirmation of the existence of only one—divine—nature and one person in Jesus Christ. Apollinaris taught that in Christ, there was only the incarnate divine mind (Logos) present, and He lacked a human mind. The thinker held that the existence of two minds in Christ, with each mind's distinctive action and will, would destroy the unity of the person and nature of the Son of God (Sidorov 1993, p. 13). Such Apollinaris' views gave rise to a new trend in Christianity—monophysitism—the doctrine of only one nature and one person of Jesus Christ.

The monophysitism claimed to be an independent doctrine, forming within Christianity a separate Monophysite church. The theological and philosophical struggle of the Greek–Byzantine Fathers and some Eastern Fathers for a dyophysite understanding of the Incarnation of Christ kept them from fully accepting the monophysite doctrine (Florovskij 1992b, pp. 23–24). At the First Council of Constantinople in 381, the doctrines of Apollinaris and Arius were recognized as heretical. Prior, the First Council of Nicaea (325) rejected the Arius' doctrine on the Son of God as the creation of the Father and, therefore, having the beginning. Athanasius argued with this affirmation. He wrote in his treatise *On Luke 10:22 and Matthew 11:27*: "As then the Father is not a creature, so neither is the Son; and as it is not possible to say of Him 'there was a time when He was not,' nor 'made of nothing,' so it is not proper to say the like of the Son either. But rather, as the Father's attributes are Everlastingness, Immortality, Eternity, and the being no creature, it follows that thus also we must think of the Son" (Athanasius of Alexandria 2007a, § 4). It should be noted, however, that Apollinaris' and Arius' thought in the spirit of ancient Hellenism, trying to make Christology and Trinitarian dogmas logically consistent, which gave philosophical depth to the theological debates.

The struggle against Apollinarism caused the creation of a holistic Christological doctrine based not only on the Sacred sources of the Church but also on ancient philosophy and logic. The Church Fathers who upheld dyophysitism—Athanasius of Alexandria, the Cappadocian Fathers, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Maximus the Confessor, and the Antiochians Diodorus of Tarsus and John Chrysostom—contrasted Apollinarism with the doctrine of the *two natures* of Christ, and then of the *two natures* and *volitions* (divine and human), inherent in Christ as one in God the Father and one in mother. Theoretically creating the Christological system, the aforementioned Church Fathers defended the simultaneous real coexistence of both the common, i.e., the *Ousia (*οσία), nature of Christ, which unites him with God the Father, and its concrete manifestation in the individuality, i.e., in the *hypostasis* of Christ as the Savior. That presupposed the elaboration of an argument for the perfect fullness of both the Deity and the humanity of Christ. From the dogmatic explanation of the human nature of Christ, the most important anthropological statements about the salvation and deification of every mortal man, the meaning and purpose of man in this world, the possibilities of his knowledge, including cognition of God, the relationship between the human and the divine worlds also emerged. Jesus Christ, in the context of dyophysitism, was grounded in the Patristics as a model of absolute moral life, to some extent inherent in every person on earth.

After the Council of Constantinople of 381, the Eastern Church Fathers theorized the basic direction of the development of sacred theological thought at the following stage. They address questions about the specific relationship between the divine and human natures in the one hypostasis of Christ and about *how* the God–man Jesus Christ *acts* and *wills*. The Council of Chalcedon of 451 opened a new period of Christological disputes in the history of the Church, during which not only the inner but also the moral, anthropological, and logical interconnection between the two natures and the two actions and volitions in the one Person of the Son of God were discussed (Florovskij 1992a, pp. 24–28). In the process of theological debates, the crucial religious–philosophical theme matured considering the correspondence between the real and the divine world, achievable for righteous people in their earthly life course. Furthermore, the discussion of Christology touched upon such questions about the relationship between God and man as would later be raised in Islam, in *kalam* as speculative theology, in the teaching of Sufism about the three worlds and the possibilities of knowing the One, etc. (Kirabaev and Chistyakova 2020). The last part of our article is devoted to these questions.

The next section examines the particular ideas regarding the God–man and man coined by the Church Fathers Athanasius of Alexandria and Maximus the Confessor, who fought for dyophysitism and conditioned the very specificity of the formation of Christian anthropology. These Church Fathers proceeded from the preceding Nicene tradition and determined its development in the following centuries of Christianity.

3. The Doctrine of Man as *Mediator* between the Divine and the Earthly Worlds by Athanasius of Alexandria and Maximus the Confessor

Although Athanasius of Alexandria and Maximus the Confessor defended dyophysitism and the profession of two actions and two wills in the single of Christ several centuries before al-Ghazali—one of the most significant representatives of medieval Muslim philosophy—some ideas of the Christian Fathers and the great Sufi intersect in some categories of culture and determine their philosophizing and the philosophical thinking of corresponding historical periods. We may compare the anthropological reasoning of the mentioned Church Fathers and al-Ghazali, the questions of cognition of God, the idea of man's inner illumination with Divine light, and the presence of the Divine in the inner world of the individual.

Athanasius of Alexandria fought for the idea not merely of the Incarnation of God[4] (Greek Manuscripts 1606) but precisely of the "*incarnation*" of Logos, i.e., the full perception by the Son of God of the psychophysical nature of man (e.g., Athanasius of Alexandria 2007c), was one of the first brightest representatives of Eastern Patristics who defined the main theme of the Christian anthropology. Through the grounding of the divine and human in Christ, he conveyed a new type of relationship between man and the Absolute, man and the other, and attention to one's inner self and individual salvation (Athanasius of Alexandria 2007c, § 4). St. Athanasius outlined the theological tenets of the dogma of the God–man, which became decisive for Eastern Christianity and shaped an understanding of the relationship between "perfect man" and "perfect God" in one hypostasis of Jesus Christ. He develops the main theses of the Incarnation of God: the Son of God took all human nature except sin, and He *became* man (Athanasius of Alexandria 2007c, § 8). However, the human body was incarnated into the body of God with the assimilation of all carnal humanity to show the possession of a truly human nature (not just an anthropomorphic appearance). For Athanasius (as for the Byzantine Church Fathers), it was crucial to demonstrate *God's communion with humanity*. Struggling with the Arians, he stresses this context: "Not the Word of God by grace took that to be called God; but His flesh together with Him is named God. It is not said, The Word became God, but: *the Word was God* (John 1:1), i.e., always was God the Word, and this same God became flesh so that His flesh might become God the Word" (Athanasius of Alexandria 1994a, § 3, p. 253).

At the same time, Christ is God, *coessential* with the Father, and this coessentiality is impossible for man. By his actions and his life on earth, the God–man manifests and extends (pours out) his unity with the Father to men. In *the Word about the Incarnation of God-the Word and about His Epiphany*, St. Athanasius writes: "The Word was pleased to make Himself visible, through the body, so that, becoming man, He might draw the attention of men to Himself, to divert their feelings to Himself, and when they see Him as man, by those works which He does, He will finally convince them He is not only man but also God, the Word, and Wisdom of the true God" (Athanasius of Alexandria 1994c, § 16, p. 211). Athanasius highlights the integrity of human nature, which can be as sinless as the nature of God Himself. The essential nature of the person of Christ is a unity of body and soul, of absoluteness and frailty, of higher meanings and their human realization, of transcendence and phenomenality. All this (apart from the unity with the Creator) is also possible in everyone since the Word of God has not just kenotically descended into man but has become him. St. Athanasius defines the basic purpose of Patristics as showing *the enhypostasia of all humanity to God* and the immanent belonging of each person to the divine world. By this, he conditioned the saintly tradition of considering the phenomenon of the God–man as the cherished ideal for every Christian in reaching the heights of spiritual unity with God on the path of deification.

In the context of Athanasius of Alexandria's works on the Incarnation of God, one finds an important theme of the universal spiritual essence of all humanity, which would then become the subject of theorizing by the other Byzantine Fathers, in particular Gregory of Nyssa (ref. Gregory of Nyssa 2016). The divinity of Christ conditions the universality of human nature because absoluteness, spirituality, morality, and perfection bind all men to-

gether. God–manhood enables such unity based on high morality and pursuing deification and salvation through the inherent image of God in man. Through the perception of God's flesh by the Word, human nature becomes "spirit-receiving", accepting the Holy Spirit. Let us recall that Athanasius of Alexandria is considered the first theologian in the history of patristics to have developed a systematic doctrine of the Holy Spirit (e.g., Athanasius of Alexandria 1951). For this reason, his discussion of God–man includes statements about the power of the Spirit, which makes every person who perceives it a partaker of divinity, a glimpse of the "temple of God". He writes: " . . . when we enlightened by the Spirit, it is Christ who in him enlightens us . . . Again, as Christ is true Son, so we, when we receive the Spirit, are made sons, it is clear that it is in Christ we are called children of God" (Athanasius of Alexandria 1951, pp. 111–12). St. Athanasius defends the position that while Christ reveals and sanctifies the way of theosis (deification) as the foundation of the universal essence of humanity, the significance of the Holy Spirit lies in the individual descent of each person as the gift of life. The universality of Christ and the individuality of the Spirit are inseparable, and thus the inner image of God, His wisdom, and the Divine light are inherent in every person. "But as the Son is Wisdom, so we, receiving the Spirit of Wisdom, have the Son and are made wise in him . . . But when God is in us, the Son also is in us . . . Furthermore, as the Son is life . . . we are said to be quickened by the Spirit . . . But when we are quickened by the Spirit, Christ himself is said to live in us" (Athanasius of Alexandria 1951, pp. 112–13). Therefore, the one hypostasis of Christ, who has received the Holy Spirit, is the absolute model, the supreme truth for the rational and religious man, ensuring the development of his wholeness. "For as the rational soul and flesh is one man, so God and man are one Christ" (Athanasius of Alexandria 1994b, p. 479).

At the Council of Chalcedon of 451, the Chalcedonian definition was elaborated. It expressed the creed of the God–man in the categories of apophatic thinking—two natures of Christ coexist in Him *unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly,* and *inseparably* (Lossky 1991, pp. 108–9). After the Council, a new wave of Christological debates arose. The Egyptian theologians rejected the accepted formula of God–manhood. Monophysitism, which united numerous churches and their hierarchs, became the faith for many Syrians, Copts, Ethiopians, and Armenians who had not accepted the Hellenic tradition (Florovskij 1992a, p. 30). Monothelitism gradually emerged out of Monophysitism. These ideas would further become the linchpin of the theological debates among the representatives of the aforementioned churches and post-Nicene Fathers who upheld the dyophysite tradition.

In Chalcedonian Greek–Byzantine Patristics, Maximus the Confessor (580–662) became the center of the theological and theoretical discussions with Monophysitism and Monothelitism' followers, as well as the creator of the original Byzantine Christological doctrine[5] (Greek Manuscripts 1837). Continuing to discuss the coexistence of the two natures–actions and volitions in the one person of Christ, he worked to argue the problem that St. Athanasius of Alexandria had posed but failed to solve. Maximus the Confessor tried to justify *how* two opposite natures could belong to God the Word without violating the unity and indivisibility of the Son of God. St. Maximus writes: " . . . the most important: how does God become man? And most mysterious [of all]: how did the Word essentially remain in the flesh by hypostasis, being all entirely in essence and in the hypostatic image in the Father? . . . These sacraments are contained in faith alone, being the *substance of things* (Hebrews 11:1) beyond the mind and reason" (Maximus the Confessor 1993b, para. 13, p. 260). St. Maximus stresses the inclusion of human nature in the hypostasis of God the Word, justifying, in the spirit of the Eastern patristic tradition, the enhypostasia of all humanity to the Son of God (Maximus the Confessor 1993a, para. 66, p. 226, paras. 21, 25, p. 238). For the theologian, these ideas are the basis of the Incarnation of God with emphasis on the essential preservation of the fullness of the divine nature.

Maximus the Confessor speaks of the philosophical significance of human nature, both in the God–man and in each individual. This nature is bound up in the *transfiguration*, the illumination of humanity by divinity. As Christ's humanity was transfigured, the essence of each individual is illuminated and transformed by the absoluteness and perfection of

God's nature. "The solid and sure foundation of the hope of deification for the nature of man is the Incarnation of God, which makes man a god in the measure in which God Himself became man" (Maximus the Confessor 1993d, para. 113, p. 276). In our opinion, St. Maximus theoretically creates a special image of human existence that correlates with the moral norms and spiritual values of society. According to St. Maximus, a special spiritual light as a reflection of the Divine, uncreated light is immanent in every person. Mystical uncreated light unites man and God and gives hope of comprehending the Creator in terms of religious gnosis (Kirabaev and Chistyakova 2020). The sublime idea of the God-given *luminosity* of man links the subtle anthropological mysticism of Maximus the Confessor with the sophisticated Sufism of Al-Ghazali.

Defending dyophysitism through logic, Maximus the Confessor insisted that the perfect Divine nature and perfect human nature of the incarnate Son of God inevitably follows the duality of His actions and wills, although the one exercising His will is the "One and Only". This phenomenon is also descriptive of man—the same two wills are united in everyone (e.g., Maximus the Confessor 1993c, VI, p. 166, VII, pp. 167–69). Man's free will, unlike God's, is limited by choice. Choice is an attribute of human freedom, not inherent in Divine freedom. The Divine will—from creation inherent in man—always precedes the will of the individual. This is the guarantee that man acts according to the pattern of Christ's life. St. Maximus shows that the equality, inseparability, and indivisibility of the two acts and wills of Christ predestine the realization of the will of man. This is the manifestation of the absolute freedom of God the Word. Christ's perception of the grace of God the Father and the deification of the human will in Christ also "ensured" the deification of humanity. He writes: "For, not as God in essence and as the only begotten Son, coessential with God the Father, was graced, but as He who became man coessential with us by the Divine economy [of God] He was graced with it for us who need to grace. And we, in our [spiritual] prosperity, continually receive the corresponding grace from His fullness" (Maximus the Confessor 1993a, para. 76, p. 250).

For Maximus the Confessor, as for the Byzantine Patristics, the emphasis on the activity of man, on the manifestation of his will in salvation, and his spiritual ascent to the Creator in the process of deification, is descriptive (Chistyakova 2021). The absence of passivity, the focus on the spiritual activity component, and the departure from the idea of absolute Divine predestination (in contrast to the Western Patristics, where Augustine of Hippo's views dominated in this context) is a peculiarity of the Greek–Byzantine Fathers' way of contemplation. Georges Florovsky, who studied St. Maximus' corpus, emphasized the context: "St. Maximus always makes a clear distinction between these two factors: nature and volition or will. Christ heals nature once and for all, without the actual participation of individual persons, and even independently of their possible participation—even sinners will be resurrected. But everyone must be liberated in a personal 'ordeal'. Everyone is called to this liberation—with Christ and in Christ" (Florovskij 1992a, p. 220).

Thus, St. Maximus deduced the necessity of changing the nature and the will of man. The will was the source of Adam's sin, and it is the will that must be transformed, made luminous, and directed to the path of man's elevation to God. That is why recognizing the perfection of Christ's two natures, actions and wills, not only solved the problem of the specifics of combining the seemingly incompatible but also marked the way of life of man himself, revealing the essence of his nature (Maximus the Confessor 1993d, para. 59, p. 261), and gave hope for human's deification. As Maximus contends: "For it is clear that He who is made man without sin can also deify nature without putting it into Divinity, insofar as He elevated it to Himself, insofar as He humbled Himself for man's sake" (Maximus the Confessor 1993d, para. 113, p. 276). Divinity and humanity are equally present in man—this is both the philosophical and theological interpretation of the Greek Father's essence of man, signifying the wholeness and uniqueness of human nature.

This kind of elevated and philosophically argued comprehension of man in the Eastern Patristics of the Triadological and Christological debates was ideologically reflected in the

medieval conceptualization of al-Ghazali. Let us scrutinize his philosophical and religious views on man.

4. Al-Ghazali's Doctrine of the Human Being

The doctrine of the human being is an important part of the religious and philosophical teachings of al-Ghazali. His concept is distinguished by focusing on the issues of human existence in its various aspects: in relation to man to himself, to the world, and to God. In the conditions of domination of traditionalism and conservatism, with their requirement to consider only the letter of the sacred text as truth and answering all questions with traditional "do not ask how" (بلا كايف), al-Ghazali's anthropology was an attempt to comprehend the place of man in the system of the world created by God and to give a comprehensive and systematized view of human being based on Sufi traditions.

At the heart of al-Ghazali's doctrine is the doctrine of man's communion with the divine. The latter is seen as the basis of the natural possibility to cognize the truth of things, the world, and God. A distinctive feature of the anthropology of the Muslim thinker is that epistemology is a defining part of his general doctrine of man. For instance, for al-Ghazali, the true existence of man is determined through cognition. It should be noted that inquiries on the possibility of divine cognition and human knowledge about God, the world, and man often turn into a meditation on the nature of different types of truth (الحقيق), in particular, the question about the true nature of man and his purpose in this world. Here, cognition occurs on two levels: cognition of the external world and self-cognition—cognition of the "original nature of man," his *self*. The process of cognition, grasping knowledge (ادراك) in al-Ghazali means consideration of the God–world ratio, which is connected with his concept of the origin of the world, the God–man ratio, which makes up the doctrine of the soul, and the man–God ratio or the concept of *fanā'* (فناء). The main doctrine defining the Muslim thinker's view of the world and man is the doctrine of the three worlds. In the process of knowing the truth, man passes through three worlds. The first world is the "external", transient, the world of sensuality ('*Alam al-Mulk wa-al-Shahada*' ("عالم الملك والشهداء") the created world. This is the material world, the world of objects. It is opposed to the "inner" world, the world of the "hidden and otherworldly," the higher world of ideas, the spiritual world of eternity, objectively displayed in the lower world of *mulk* ('*Alam al-Malakut*— (عالم الملكوت). It is inaccessible to the senses and can only be comprehended through intuition, "inner vision". Between these worlds is the intermediate world, the one of the "mediator" ('*Alam al-Jabarut*, (عالم الجبروت)—the world of spiritual substances such as "will", "power", "knowledge" and divine forces, connecting the outer and inner worlds. All three worlds are in unity. The main feature of these worlds is their mirroring (Ignatenko 2004).[6]

That which, as a prototype, exists in '*Alam al-Malakut*, then resides in '*Alam al-Mulk wa-al-Shahada*' in a multitude of imperfect specimens. "The world of *mulk* (الملك) is that which appears to the senses and is created by the power of the Almighty one from the other in the literal sense. The world of *malakut* (ملكوت) is that which the Almighty created by an eternal command, not gradually, it remains in the same state . . . " (Al-Ghazālī n.d.b, p. 27). "*Jabarut* (جباروت) is that between the two worlds: it is like the manifest that is in the *mulk* and is close to the eternal power from the world of *malakut*" (Al-Ghazālī n.d.b, p. 39). The world is not God, but neither is it something different from God.

According to al-Ghazali, pantheistic ideas are not applicable to Islam and Sufism. For this reason, he was critical of the Sufism followers who shared them, and in particular criticized Mansour al-Hallaj (858—executed 922), who in one of his contemplations exclaimed: "انا الحق" ("I am the Truth"). Al-Hallaj publicly proclaimed the path of ecstatic union with God as the only true one, requiring no external ceremonial actions. Al-Ghazali, in a polemic with al-Hallaj, denied the possibility of the ontological unity of God and man. Applying the symbol of the mirror, he interpreted the world only as a copy of the true transcendent

world, in which divinity is not its essence but only leaves some trace. The cosmos is a strict hierarchy of worlds arranged and passing from one to another. And the highest world passes into the divine one, i.e., the structure is descending: *Allah–malakut–jabarut–mulk*. This is reflected in the doctrine of the origin of all that exists. The relationship between the lower and higher worlds is considered by al-Ghazali in terms of similarity as a mirror reflection of the existing higher, true world (تمزيل) in the lower, transient world. Many people live in this world without realizing that it is a world of shadows. And only those, al-Ghazali believes, who embark on the path of knowledge of truth and self-improvement can grasp it (Al-Ghazālī n.d.c, pp. 31–32).

In considering the terms "heart", "spirit", "soul", and "mind", al-Ghazali argues that they have two meanings simultaneously: one in the material world and the other in the divine. On the one hand, they coincide, and on the other, they are infinitely divergent when applied to God and to the created world (Tamer 2015). While different in meaning in the material world, these terms coincide in their second meaning, denoting the "divine light" in man, which awakens in him the longing to know the truth. This is a unique trait of human nature. The knowledge of truth is man's mission and the basis of his perfection, without which eternal enjoyment is impossible. If man does not try to comprehend the truth, then he degrades to the level of animals, while the cultivation of knowledge allows him to rise to the level of angels. Al-Ghazali believes that, for various reasons, not all people can fulfill this ability. But he always emphasizes that the way to knowledge is open to everyone, for everyone possesses "divine light". Al-Ghazali accented that in the process of cognition, an important role is played by human self-improvement, which does not mean forgetting the human beginning and assertion of the divine (Treiger 2012).

Al-Ghazali regards *the heart* as a "polished mirror" reflecting divine intimate knowledge. The purified and polished heart of a Sufi shows that he is on the highest spiritual stage of enlightenment and is, therefore, open to the perception of divine inspiration. Such "inspiration" affords the unique capacity for direct and instantaneous knowledge of the truth. Importantly, the mirror is always shining, radiating light, illuminating. Al-Ghazali views the mirror as a light source in *The Niche of Light*. The heart is a mirror in which the images of the two worlds are reflected. Indeed, within an allegorical interpretation, the mirror is a metaphor for understanding the process and the result of this process. The reflection of a person in a mirror is the *likeness* or *image-form* of that person. "The believer is the mirror of the believer; in the shortcomings of the other he sees his own shortcomings" (Al-Ghazālī n.d.d, p. 22). Moreover, al-Ghazali views the "perfect man" as the mirror of God and the matrix of the world because God is both immanent and transcendent to the carnal world.

In his account of the history of the contest between the Byzantine and Chinese artists, who argued before some king over who of them was better at drawing or "making images", al-Ghazali shows the different ways of reaching the truth by the philosophical (rationalist) scholars and the Sufi saints. We are talking here about the truths of reason and the truths of faith as two sides of the One Truth. To uncover who the best artists were, a certain king gave them a portico, one side of which was to be painted by the Chinese and the other by the Byzantines. Between them was a curtain that prevented each side from peeking at the other. The Byzantines collected countless outlandish paintings. But the Chinese came with no paints at all. They began to grind and polish their side. The Byzantine and Chinese artists simultaneously announced the completion of their work. However, the king was astonished by this announcement on the part of the Chinese artists, expressing bewilderment at how it was that they painted with no paints at all. They were asked, "How is it that you have finished but have not used a single color?" They replied, "Don't worry about it. Raise the curtain". It was lifted, and the wonders of Byzantine art shone with even greater brightness and radiance, for the Chinese artists turned their side into a polished mirror. The beauty of their side surpassed that of the Byzantines because the mirror shone (Al-Ghazālī n.d.d, pp. 22–24). According to al-Ghazali, the works of the Byzantine artists represent discursive and sensual knowledge. The Chinese artists symbolize those who

purify their hearts so that inspiration may enter (Al-Ghazālī n.d.d, p. 63). Al-Ghazali's knowledge of God is not theoretical but intimate, knowledge of being and presence, of intuitive insight. Through their hearts, Sufis feel God, both immanent and transcendent to the world.

The assertion that "Allah created Adam in his image" is interpreted by al-Ghazali: "By His image is meant the big world as a whole. Man was created in the likeness of the big world, but he is a smaller version of it. If by means of knowledge we divide the big world into parts and divide Adam into his parts in the same way, it will appear that the constituent parts of Adam . . . will be like the constituent parts of the big world, and if the parts of one set are like the parts of another, then these two sets undoubtedly resemble each other. Thus, the big world is divided into two parts. One of which is the manifest, perceived by the senses, namely, the world of *mulk.* The other is the inward, perceived by the mind, namely, the world of *malakut*. Man is also divided into the manifest, perceived by the senses, as flesh, bones, blood, and all kinds of sensually comprehended entities, and the internal, as spirit, mind, knowledge, will, power, and the like" (Al-Ghazālī n.d.b, p. 15).

The *God–man–world* relation is developed by al-Ghazali in the idea of a close relationship between cosmology, anthropology, and psychology. "Know that you are in three worlds and of each a part is in you" (Al-Ghazālī n.d.a, p. 49). An important place in Sufi's anthropology is taken by the idea of the correspondence between the world and man. Like the world, man is divided into inner and outer, inferior, and superior. The body is compared to the world of the sensual, manifested, and tangible, the transient. The soul is compared to the world of the eternal, the immutable, the higher, and the intuitively comprehensible. Al-Ghazali compares the emotions in the human chest to the intermediate world of *jabarut*, the mediating world. The soul connects with the body through emotion, but, in fact, it is a "stranger in this world" (Al-Ghazālī n.d.a, p. 49). The divine nature of the individual—his spirit—constitutes the higher world. The mentality belongs to the spiritual and the body—to the material worlds.

However, according to al-Ghazali, *the similarity* is not only external, attributive, explicitly manifested. In the process of cognition, it is necessary to focus on a deeper–inner–similarity, "meaning not similarity in image or form, but the similarity in relation to the soul" (Al-Ghazālī n.d.d, p. 298). Believing that the soul is the essence of man, al-Ghazali views it from two perspectives: the soul as "self", "higher self", the quintessence of man, and the soul as something spiritual, the opposite of the body as a material element.

Considering the relationship between soul and body, al-Ghazali notes that the existence of the soul is self-sufficient, while the body depends on the soul for its existence. The soul is united with the body so that man may become aware of his divine essence and take responsibility for it. The soul, united with the body, must always strive to preserve its purity, dominate the struggle against the animal side of man, suppress the basest passions, and control desires. Evil arises not because it is inherent in human nature but because of a violation of the correspondence between the "human" and the "divine". The soul is originally deprived of all knowledge but can master it. Without knowledge of the truth of things, of the world, and of God, man is incapable of confronting evil. Although the human body is connected to the lower world, because of its inseparable connection with the soul, it is related to the higher world, and therefore the body cannot be considered absolute evil. Al-Ghazali's doctrine of the soul highlights how in the process of knowledge of truth, there is a "purification of the soul" which leads to the comprehension of the higher truth. The process of cognition of truth is also seen as the process of man's union with God in the state of *fanā*'.

It is not the only thing to note that al-Ghazali's "unity" cannot be understood literally. He regards it as an intentional, spiritual, rather than a spatial or temporal state. Here "we are talking about the self-improvement of personality. It means man's movement in the process of cognition according to his state and the stage of being. Speaking of the highest stage on the path of self-perfection, al-Ghazali believed that man contemplates only the other . . . Thus, man contemplates the One and cannot contemplate himself as a person, for

from the moment he plunges into his own consciousness, he disappears for himself. Yet again, immersion cannot be understood literally but must be seen as immersion in knowing God, i.e., epistemological, intentional immersion" (Chistyakova et al. 2019, pp. 166–67) since the One is incomprehensible in principle. For al-Ghazali, the purposeful intention is important since *fanā'* is perceived as the orientation of human consciousness toward God. Reaching the state of *fanā'*, a man becomes transfigured, highly moral, possessing true knowledge of morality and religious truth. One may say that it is in this state that the idea of *the perfect man*, formulated by al-Ghazali, is realized. *Fanā'* thus gains a moral character in Sufi's works and is in direct connection with Muslim ethics.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of some philosophical–anthropological and theological teachings of the representatives of Greek–Byzantine Patristics and Sufism makes it possible to assert that, despite the centuries-long gap, the ideas of these thinkers concerning the *God–man–world* relation are comparable in content and axiological terms. The Greek–Byzantine Patristics, within the framework of theological disputes of the 4th–7th centuries, created a theological and a philosophical discourse, which allowed subsequent generations of Christian theologians and medieval Muslim theorists to adopt the most important provisions of their doctrines (Treiger 2011) and create original teachings on man in a personal relationship with the Creator. One of the most important sources both for the Christian theologians and Muslim thinkers, was the Ancient Greek philosophy which had presented them a rich categorical apparatus and philosophical ideas for reflexive and creative usage. Particularly, Platonism and Neoplatonism played a significant part in shaping the Byzantine theology (Lilla 1997; Karamanolis 2021; Chistyakova and Chistyakov 2023). Aristotle's philosophical legacy also influenced the elaboration of Trinity and Christology doctrines in the Early Christian period. At the same time, the philosophy of Aristotle and Peripatetics was increasingly valuable for the medieval Arab–Muslim tradition.

We have traced sufficient intersections in the concepts of man in Eastern Christianity and Islam, particularly in Sufism, which allows us to speak of points of contact between these cultures on a fundamental issue—namely, in the vision of man as being in spiritual unity with God. The common trait in the understanding of the religious man, who strives to acquire sacred knowledge about the Almighty, was also realized in the theoretical differences between Holy Fathers' doctrines and medieval Muslim philosophy. In Christianity, human ideals were formulated in connection with the orthodox vision of Christ's Incarnation and the perfect features of Jesus as the God–man, who showed humankind a model of absolute morality. In Islam, the focus of humanity's conceptual conditioning was on the epistemological plane—the perfect man had to comprehend the unity of the Creator and, as Allah's deputy on earth, follow rigorously the rules and moral norms that had been developed. Ethics and spiritual values are historically embedded in both religions, but the philosophical grounding of man in Eastern Patristics and Sufism contributed to the development of original types of monotheistic knowledge of God.

These conceptual crossroads of cultures and religions are not archaic and have not remained somewhere in late antiquity or the Middle Ages. Thus, a reflexive analysis of al-Ghazali's anthropological teachings contributes to a deeper understanding of the traditional Islamic worldview and discloses the social nature of contemporary Muslim humanistic doctrines. Reflection of the philosophical and anthropological ideas of Eastern Patristics thought reveals the undiscovered theoretical sources of Byzantine culture and unveils the continuity of the views of Byzantine and Old Russian thinkers. In both cases, the ideas of Christian and Muslim authors contribute significantly to the treasury of modern philosophy and the spiritual cultures of the two world religions.

That suggests the promise of a comparative study of the theological and philosophical ideas of the Greek–Byzantine Church Fathers and thinkers of the Arab–Muslim East (al-Ghazali in the presented paper) from the perspective of further establishing a dialogue between the two religions and the two philosophical cultures. The common features and pe-

culiarities of these traditions are a unique source for an in-depth theological–philosophical analysis of the patristic texts and works of al-Ghazali both from the synchronic point of view, "as it were frozen in time", and diachronic "in terms of its evolution over time" (Chandler 2002, p. 12) study.

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Notes

1 For more details on the notions of deification (theosis) in Byzantine patristics and fanā' in Al-Ghazali's teaching, please, refer to some previous works of the authors: Kirabaev and Chistyakova (2020); Chistyakova et al. (2019).

2 Concerning the topic of the relationship between the body and soil, nature and spirit in the human being, please, see the previous article by one of the authors in *Religions* Journal: Chistyakova (2021). Also, the following book can be important in this sense: Cartwright (2018).

3 Regarding the elaboration of the Christology doctrine in the Early Christian period and a particular contribution to the Christological theological discussions of some Church Fathers, please refer to: (Chadwick 1967; Karamanolis 2021; Edwards 2000; Evans 2007; Lyman 1993; Ramelli 2011; Osborn 1993; Treiger 2011).

4 For learning more about Athanasius of Alexandria's contribution to the formation of the Triadic and Christological topics, please refer to "Greek Manuscripts (1606). Life of Athanasios of Alexandria" written in Ancient Greek, which is a collection of ancient manuscripts on this Byzantine Church Father. The original manuscripts are being kept at St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai.

5 Maximus, the Confessor's works in the Ancient Greek language, are presented in the manuscript: Greek Manuscripts (1837). Maximus the Confessor. Language: Greek, Ancient to 1453, [Online]. The manuscript is a collection of ancient works by the Byzantine Church Fathers.

6 The mirror is one of the most important categories that determines both the understanding and the solution of particular philosophical and religious problems and the general directions of Muslim culture's development. For more details please ref. to: Ignatenko (2004).

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Article

Pope Francis' Culture of Dialogue as Pathway to Interfaith Encounter: A Special Focus on Islam

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Abstract: Pope Francis' leadership has stimulated several debates within the Catholic Church and even in larger segments of the public. One of the most prominently debated issues is the one concerning the relationship with people of different religions and, more specifically, with the world of Islam. Since 2013, the Argentinean pontiff appeared to be unambiguously committed to finding an alternative pathway to the much-publicized category of 'clash of civilisations', which, in the last few decades, has been the reference paradigm in Christian–Muslim relationships. Papal initiatives, gestures and journeys have consistently aimed at a 'culture of dialogue and encounter'. Nevertheless, the present pope's open attitude has encountered severe criticism even inside certain circles of the Catholic world, which have accused him of compromising on theological issues. However, Pope Francis is highly appreciated by leaders of other traditions, including Muslims. In the face of such debate, Bergoglio has often recalled that all his statements and actions are deeply rooted in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. The present article wishes to show how Bergoglio's engagement to establish constructive dialogical rapports with Muslims is an effective way towards the real implementation of the Council while opening avenues for what could be defined as 'interreligious synodality'.

Keywords: dialogue; fraternity; identity; synodality; Pope Francis; Islam

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1. Introduction: A Road Map for Dialogue

"Interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities" (Pope Francis 2013a). This sentence, one of the strongest statements we can find in *Evangelii Gaudium* (Pope Francis 2013e), suggests the bearing interfaith dialogue has in Pope Francis' thinking and in his vision of humanity today. Moreover, it reveals a decisive clue for those who wish to grasp the real perspective of the Argentinean pope. Interreligious commitment, in fact, is not only a Christian venture; rather, it crosses the boundaries of the Catholic Church as well as those of any other Church or Christian community. In Pope Francis' perspective, it is a 'duty' for all people who believe, and even for those who claim to have no religious affiliation. *Evangelii Gaudium*, being the first official document of the new papacy, reveals the road map the present pope intended to follow in the years ahead. Yet, already a few days after his election, while addressing a variegated group of representatives of various Christian Churches, of Jewish communities and of different religions, Pope Francis had made clear his vision. On that occasion, he straightforwardly assured the Church's commitment in "promoting friendship and respect between men and women of different religious traditions" (Pope Francis 2013b). It was not just a diplomatic and cordial way of addressing other religious leaders to ensure a good and warm spirit of collaboration. It revealed a very pragmatic and programmatic approach as he clearly listed the main goals for a constructive dialogue among people of communities following different religions.

> The responsibility which all of us have for our world, for the whole of creation, which we must love and protect [. . .] to benefit the poor, the needy and those who suffer, and to favour justice, promote reconciliation and build peace". (ibid.)

Furthermore, the newly elected pontiff engaged people of different faiths to focus jointly on the commitment to "keep alive in our world the thirst for the absolute". At the same time, he encouraged countering "the dominance of a one-dimensional vision of the human person, a vision which reduces human beings to what they produce and to what they consume: this is one of the most insidious temptations of our time" (ibid.).

A further element in the crucial topic of dialogue—this time considered in a general perspective but nevertheless very much connected with the one among people of different religions—was added only two days later when Pope Francis, following the Vatican protocol for newly elected pontiffs, met all the Ambassadors accredited to the Holy See. On that occasion, after stressing the role of religion as a fundamental element in the present world scene, he clarified that "it is not possible to build bridges between people while forgetting God. But the converse is also true: it is not possible to establish true links with God, while ignoring other people" (Pope Francis 2013b). Consequently, to intensify dialogue among the faithful of different religious traditions is of vital importance. In the broader context of interfaith dialogue, Pope Francis singled out the followers of Islam and those who claim to have no faith. Within a year from his election, in the already mentioned *Evangelii Gaudium*, he devoted two paragraphs to underline the importance of intensifying dialogue among the faithful of different traditions, repeating the same general concern and drawing attention to building positive relations with the followers of Islam. In short, we can argue that, on his occupying St. Peter's Chair, the present pope clearly framed an invitation to dialogue in light of the crucial challenges of the present time (Lefebure 2018, p. 306). Moreover, interfaith dialogue, with special attention to Islam, was not something that he developed during the years of his papacy. The former cardinal of Buenos Aires had interreligious dialogue as a top priority in his agenda already at the beginning of his papal mandate and in the unfolding of the last eight years; he has been timely in grasping signs that suggested how to implement this priority.

The present paper will attempt to examine some aspects of this dimension, giving special attention to dialogue with Islam, which, in all probability, produced the least expected and yet most innovative expression in Pope Francis' pontificate: *The Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* (Pope Francis and al-Tayyeb 2019), often simply referred to as *The Abu Dhabi Declaration*. This charter was co-signed with a very high and internationally acknowledged Muslim authority, Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Ahmed Mohamed Ahmed al-Tayyeb.[1]

2. Dialogue as a Style

Since the time of John XXIII, Bergoglio is the first cardinal to become pope without having been present at the Vatican Council II (1962–1965). At that time, when bishops of the Catholic Church gathered in Rome around John XXIII, first, and Paul VI, later, Jorge Maria was already a Jesuit but not a priest yet. He was a young teacher in Jesuit institutions in Buenos Aires and other cities of Argentina. Most likely, he had never imagined that his life would have been strongly inspired by the first encyclical letter written and signed by Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* (Paul VI 1964), the text that truly marked the contents of some of the most decisive documents of the Council: *Unitatis Redintegratio* (Vatican Council II 1964), *Nostra Aetate* (Vatican Council II 1965d), *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican Council II 1965c), *Dignitatis Humanae* (Vatican Council II 1965b) and *Ad Gentes* (Vatican Council II 1965a). It was in *Ecclesiam Suam* that Paul VI, for the first time in the Catholic world, spoke of what he defined as the "new mental attitude which the Catholic Church must adopt regarding the contemporary world" (Paul VI 1964, n. 58). This new attitude was 'dialogue', which he defined more precisely as an "internal drive of charity which seeks expression in the external gift of charity" (ibid., n. 64). To this new development is devoted the entire third section of the encyclical, where Paul VI suggests that "the Church must enter into

dialogue with the world in which it lives. It has something to say, a message to give, a communication to make" (ibid., n. 65). The Italian pope also described the dialogical style, and, among the many aspects, he spelled out its typical characteristics: clarity, meekness, confidence and prudence. This link with *Ecclesiam Suam*[2]—and to Pope Paul VI, who is the author of the document, handwritten almost without corrections—is vital if we wish to trace back the reasons why dialogue not only has taken a centre stage in Pope Francis' papacy but also, more specifically, has become a true lifestyle.

In fact, the word 'dialogue' can sum up effectively the eight years of the present papacy. From the moment, on 13 March 2013, when he appeared on the main balcony of St. Peter's Basilica façade, the Argentinian pope has commenced an experience of dialogue with those who were in front of him. That evening, he immediately succeeded in establishing a dialogue with all the people who crowded the square and asked them to bless him. In the following days, he continued his dialogue with diplomats, journalists, members of other Christian churches and ecclesial communities and with Jewish people, along with representatives of the main religious traditions. He showed how to respect their sensitiveness as on the occasion when, at the conclusion of his meeting with the journalists and media men and women, instead of imparting his blessing, out of respect for the feelings of those among them who had no faith, preferred to suggest a moment of silence. Later, he was open to dialogue with students, intellectuals, men who had left the priesthood, along with their families, and with women and men who had accused Church personnel of having sexually abused them. Dialogue has become Jorge Maria Bergoglio's style of guiding the Church for which he appointed a group of cardinals from different corners of the globe to discuss how to reform the Roman Curia. He entered into dialogue also with those who live in the peripheries of the world and with outcast or downtrodden communities. Migrants have become some of his favourite partners in dialogue to the point that, before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, he washed the feet of some of them—and one was a Muslim woman—during the Holy Thursday service. He never shied away from establishing a dialogue even with people who have written to him of their sorrows and personal tragedies.[3] Two essential elements of Pope Francis' dialogical approach are silence and listening, which he himself practiced when meeting groups or individuals. He also explained what dialogue is supposed to be, trying to correct wrong ideas and images about them and pleading with people, especially world leaders, to avail themselves of the possibility of dialoguing rather than using violence. In his tireless search for dialogue, he has looked for words, images and gestures that could help people's understanding. He even found a geometrical image—the prism—which helps to explain the richness and conditions of dialogue. Dialogue, in fact, should never aim at uniformity. When it is true, it leads towards unity in diversity, as the prism suggests with its multiple faces.

> We are in the epoch of globalization, and we think about what globalization is and what unity would be in the Church: perhaps a sphere, where all points are equidistant from the centre, all equal? No! This is uniformity. And the Holy Spirit doesn't create uniformity! What shape can we find? Let us consider a prism: the prism is unity, but all its parts are different; each has its own peculiarity, its charisma. This is unity in diversity. (Pope Francis 2014c)

These years of Pope Francis' presence at the helm of the Catholic Church have shown that, unlike in past centuries, Christian identity cannot be grasped, understood and deepened by negating 'otherness' of any type. It rather emerges from establishing and keeping a constant mutual relationship of friendship with the 'other', accepted in his or her diversity and, therefore, uniqueness (Salvarani 2016, p. 30).

3. Different Levels of Dialogue in Pope Francis

The dialogical approach in and by the present pontiff finds its expression at different levels. It is worth examining them, taking into account two more elements. First, we should never underestimate the fact that the present pope is not a European and, although his culture and faith upbringing have deep roots in the Italian origins of his family,[4] the South American perceptivity has clearly shaped his personality and his theology. His way of speaking, for instance, is full of images that have little to do with the typical western, European imagery.[5] Secondly, in his personality, doing is far more important than speaking. An action or a gesture is able to convey contents and meanings much more effectively than a sentence that expresses a way of thinking or an intellectual perspective, which could be understood only by a few people. This does not imply that Pope Francis runs short of deep theological thinking as some seem to argue when they state that his theology is weak. On the contrary, he masters an articulated theological and philosophical thought that is strongly rooted in his own pastoral experience and takes into account people's spirit and perception of reality. In fact, the so-called 'theology of people' was a decisive source of inspiration and an important factor in his formation.[6] In other words, for Bergoglio, action and thought are always deeply interconnected, but the second has to be rooted in the first and generally never precedes it. His vision in this regard can be better grasped and appreciated at three levels: actions, words and thought.

3.1. Interreligious Dialogue in Pope Francis' Gestures

As already briefly mentioned, events, actions and gestures are basic factors for extra-European cultures, which have the tendency to place action before reasoning and narratives based on facts—often-personal life-experiences—before concepts. In this perspective, reflection does happen but because of a certain action or a series of actions, which offer the matter on which to reflect. Accordingly, more often than not, Pope Francis clearly shows his thinking through actions and events. A significant example may be offered by his concepts of the 'peripheries' of the Church and of the Church as a 'field hospital'. At the beginning of his pontificate, for many observers and Churchmen and -women, both expressions sounded new and creative yet intriguing. The new Pope himself never explained them through a reasoning. Rather, he progressively clarified them through his actions. In fact, his first trip outside Rome was to Lampedusa, an almost unknown tiny island in the Mediterranean Sea, which has become famous only in the last decade, being the arrival point of thousands of migrants coming from North Africa and trying to reach Europe. Lampedusa is a true periphery not only of the Catholic Church but also of the society at large. Other such places—such as Lesvos, in Greece, and Ciudad Juarèz at the Mexican–American border—followed as 'peripheries' visited by Pope Francis. The latest confirmation and, probably, the strongest sign of this option for the 'peripheries' and his appreciation and support for the suffering Churches came with his trip to Iraq, where he was not embarrassed to hold events and celebrations against the backdrop of bullet-ridden walls and among debris of destroyed cities. This scenario dramatically and sharply contrasted with the elegant and elaborate stages traditionally built and assembled for hosting papal visits and events in other parts of the world. These gestures helped to make clear for everyone the ecclesiological meaning and dimension that 'peripheries' and the Church as a 'field hospital' have for the present South-American pope.

The same holds true for his attitude toward interreligious or intercultural dialogue. Pope Francis chose to dialogue with people, irrespective of their cultures and religions. Many of the migrants and the people he listened to during his trips were Muslims. In the Republic of Central Africa, he not only paid a visit to a local imam, Kobine Layama, and to the Muslim community but also went on, crossing the borders of Christian and Muslim areas of Bangui, and he entered the local mosque. Later, he invited the imam on board of his car in order to show the crowd and country leaders how Muslims and Christians can be together and friends. In Bangladesh, he spoke to some representatives of the Rohingya people who suffered rejection by Myanmar and Bangladesh and found

themselves at the centre of international contention, which deprived them of a land to reside. Theirs, as many others, is a truly humanitarian crisis. In Sri Lanka, the Pope allowed a local Hindu *swamy* to put a saffron-coloured shawl around his shoulders as a sign of respect and acknowledgement of moral authority. In the heart of Santa Marta, his residence, the author of this article witnessed him doing something similar, when, at the end of a Buddhist–Christian meeting, while greeting all the participants, he accepted garlands from some Buddhist monks. It was not a religious symbol or ritual but a sign of moral and religious esteem. Often, these gestures have encountered bitter criticism in some Catholic and Christian circles, which accuse Pope Francis of allowing 'pagan' symbols and rituals in the Church. In this connection, the most evident and talked-about happenings were the dances performed inside St. Peter's Basilica by some Amazonia indigenous people on the occasion of the Synod, which was focused on the issue of their land being destroyed by international financial and economic interests.

All these events—and many more could be mentioned—are instances of a dialogue of life, characterized by Pope Francis' openness to welcome the religious and cultural 'other', whom he appreciates for his or her religious richness and cultural background. They are all gestures that show his willingness to build bridges and to create an atmosphere of trust that drives away the temptation of both syncretism and proselytism in order to contribute to a culture of genuine friendship and encounter. They are actions that remain as icons speaking to people's mind and heart much more effectively than documents and statements. The event that, in all probability, carried the strongest meaning and seems to be destined to carry long-lasting consequences, is what happened in Abu Dhabi in mid-February 2019. It was the first time that a pope visited the Arabic Peninsula, the heartland of Islam. Pope Francis met a committee of high-ranking dignitaries of the Muslim world—the *Muslim Council for Elders*[7]—and attended an interreligious conference focussing on peace, where he addressed the audience along with Ahmad al-Tayyeb, Grand Imam of al-Azhar in Cairo. At the end, the two religious authorities co-signed the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, something that never happened before. There was a great deal of body language involved in the different moments of this visit: the pope walking hand in hand with the Grand Imam and local Prince and other evident signs of warmth (hugging and hand-shaking).

Finally, among the great signs of his commitment to dialogue, we have the event at the Plain of Ur in 2021. That simple ceremony meant to remind the common origin in Abraham of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The image of the big tent raised for the occasion in the middle of the desert, where Pope Francis prayed along with Muslims in a land devastated by recent destructions inflicted by Daesh, remains as an icon of peace and brotherly understanding among people who claim to have a common origin in father Abraham. Significantly, on the way to Ur, the pope paid a visit to Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Al-Husayni Al-Sistani in Najaf. There was no official news about the discussions that took place during the meeting, but the few photographs that have been published evoke an iconic image: a warm first official meeting of Pope Francis with one of Shia's highest authorities.

The examples mentioned so far—and many more could be mentioned—are precious for two reasons. On the one hand, they were helpful to allow Pope Francis to establish a close relationship with the people he met, and they show to others how relevant for him the engagement to build links among people and communities is. All this helped leaders and the faithful of other traditions to be open to the pope's words, to his invitations, while erasing fear and scepticism, especially about the possibility of a hidden agenda, such as proselytism. On the other hand, through his gestures, Pope Francis has given a meaning and explanation to some of his words addressed within the Catholic Church, inviting the people of God to open up towards those who are different, especially from the cultural and religious viewpoint. In fact, Pope Francis views the grace of God that Christians experience in Jesus Christ nurturing the life of people who follow other religious paths. That is why he believes that Christians can learn from other traditions (Lefebure 2018, p. 307).

> The same Spirit everywhere brings forth various forms of practical wisdom, which help people to bear suffering and to live in greater peace and harmony. As Christians, we can also benefit from these treasures built up over many centuries, which can help us better to live our own beliefs. (Pope Francis 2013a, n. 254)

3.2. Interreligious Dialogue in Pope Francis' Words

Pope Francis spoke and continues to speak extensively about dialogue. Most probably, his gestures, though they have carried great meaning in themselves, would have been less powerful if not substantiated and supported by his words. Moreover, dialogue has not been a rare or occasional topic in his messages, speeches and official documents. On the contrary, we can well define it as a 'constant', as we have already seen, from the very beginning of his mandate. It may be interesting to pay special attention to some of the words or definitions Bergoglio uses in this regard. He himself coined some of them that have entered the dictionary of dialogue. Moreover, his approach and the way of using them enriched and further articulated others.

'*Journey*' is the first word that can be singled out. Pope Bergoglio often uses it, although it is a term that has long been associated with dialogue. He has mentioned it interchangeably with 'pilgrimage', and both—journey and pilgrimage—are key terms in dialogue. Already, at the conclusion of his first encounter with people after his election, in St Peter's square, he said: "And now, we take up this journey: Bishop and people" (Pope Francis 2013f). Since then, Pope Francis has very often described 'dialogue' with these two nouns, practically using them as synonyms. A significant example is found in the words he addressed to the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem.

> In our earthly pilgrimage, we are not alone. We cross paths with other faithful; at times we share with them a stretch of the road and at other times we experience with them a moment of rest which refreshes us. Such is our meeting today, for which I am particularly grateful . . . We are experiencing a fraternal dialogue and exchange which are able to restore us and offer us new strength to confront the common challenges before us. (Pope Francis 2014e)

An important frequent addition to these two terms is the adverb '*together*'. This combination—journey together and pilgrimage together—makes his definition of dialogue as a '*journey together*', where this dimension of *togetherness* assures a communitarian dimension to the dialogical experience, which has to be mutual in order to be true. A significant example is the statement made in Cairo.

> Precisely in the field of dialogue, particularly interreligious dialogue, we are constantly called to walk together, in the conviction that the future also depends on the encounter of religions and cultures. (Pope Francis 2017b)

Another term deeply linked to the first one is the '*way*', a word that is very relevant in the context of religions. It is well known how, initially, Christianity was defined with this term in Antioch for the first time, before Jesus' followers could be called 'Christians'. At the same time, we also have to acknowledge that Oriental religions recognize themselves in this definition: for instance, Taoism ('tao' means 'way') and Hinduism propose different 'marga' (way) as ways to realisation. Bergoglio, while dialoguing with Rabbi Abraham Skorka in Buenos Aires, had commented that each person, in his or her personal experience of God, has to start journeying in search for Him. The then cardinal of Buenos Aires admitted that there might be different paths to reach God, through suffering, joys, light and darkness (Bergoglio and Skorka 2013, p. 13).

'*Culture of encounter*' is another definition—this time a phrase revealing a concept—part of Bergoglio's dictionary in the context of interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Often, it is associated with similar formulas: '*culture of proximity*' or '*culture of closeness*'. All these are Bergoglio's neologisms,[8] which apply, even if not exclusively, to the context of dialogue among people of different faith traditions. For instance, Pope Francis spoke about this 'culture of encounter' when he addressed the academic world.

> The university is a place where the culture of closeness develops, a culture of closeness. This is a proposal: a culture of closeness. Isolation and withdrawing into one's own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about a renewal. Rather, it is closeness; it is the culture of encounter. Isolation, no. Closeness, yes. Culture clash, no; culture of encounter, yes. (Pope Francis 2013a)

A fourth term that often emerges in Pope Francis' vocabulary in dialogical contexts is '*silence*', a word that is often coupled with '*listening*'. In this respect, a text, which is highly significant in the context of dialogue, is the one the pope addressed, years ago, to the participants of an international conference organised by the *Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies*, PISAI.

> In recent years, despite some misunderstandings and difficulties, progress has been made in interreligious dialogue, and with the Islamic faithful. *Listening* is essential for this. It is not only a *necessary condition* in a process of mutual comprehension and peaceful coexistence, but is also a *pedagogical duty* in order to be able to "acknowledge the values of others, appreciate the concerns underlying their demands and shed light on shared beliefs". (Pope Francis 2014a)

A couple of years later, while meeting some imams, leaders of the Muslim community in England, he focussed again his very short address on this theme of 'listening' and 'silence'. These words appeared to be apt in a moment when, because of several terrorist attacks in Western Europe and England, the dispute against Islam was so vociferous, and, at times, violent, that dialogue appeared to be almost impossible.

> I like to think that the most important work that we have to do today, among us, in humanity, is the work "of listening": listening to each other. Listening to each other, without rushing to give a response. Welcoming the words of a brother, of a sister, and then thinking to offer my own . . . When people have this capacity for listening, they speak with a low, calm voice . . . Instead, when they do not have it, they speak loudly; they even shout . . . In addition, when you listen and you speak, you are already on the right path. (Pope Francis 2017a)

We can find a further contribution to the dictionary of dialogue by Pope Francis in his speech at the *Founder Memorial* in Abu Dhabi, minutes before he and the Grand Imam al-Tayyeb signed the *Document on Human Fraternity*: '*know your brother or sister*' (Pope Francis 2019).

> Alongside the famous ancient maxim "*know yourself*", we must uphold "*know your brother or sister*": their history, their culture and their faith, because there is no genuine self-knowledge without the other. As human beings, and even more so as brothers and sisters, let us remind each other that nothing of what is human can remain foreign to us. It is important for the future to form open identities capable of overcoming the temptation to turn in on oneself and become rigid. (ibid.)

Finally, we have to underline how, in the context of dialogue, the present pope has given a new meaning and a very central place to the word '*fraternity*'. Bergoglio is not the first one to use this word. The term has a long history, both in the socio-political field—it is one of the three main goals of the French revolution and, as someone says, the most forgotten of the three[9]—and in the religious, especially in the Christian world. For sure, Pope Francis, by putting forward once again the centrality of the common belonging of all human beings to the same family, has given a great contribution to its rediscovery and appreciation. At the same time, he has made 'fraternity' a central category of his message, as demonstrated by the Encyclical Letter "*Fratelli Tutti*" (Pope Francis 2020), which deepens 'fraternity' from a different perspective and with a keen and innovative reading in today's context. It is surely of great significance that, at the end of the document, among those he mentioned as sources of inspiration for the latest Encyclical Letter, he names also Mahatma

Gandhi, a Hindu and a pioneer in the venture of dialogue among the faithful of different traditions.

3.3. Interreligious Dialogue in Pope Francis' Thoughts

At this point, let us turn to consider the conceptual dimension of intercultural and interreligious dialogue in Bergoglio's approach. The focus will be on proposing some elements that appear to be typical of his perspective: a 'culture of dialogue', dialogue as a 'duty for all' and need for a clear identity, empathy, 'incomplete thinking and fraternity'. In order to explore these concepts, we need to take into account that they have a deep connection with his South-American cultural background and his Jesuit formation.

3.3.1. A Strategic View: Building a Culture of Dialogue

Already, Paul VI had a clear strategic view of dialogue among people of different cultures and religions. In his opinion, dialogue was never an end in itself, nor was it ever just an aimless exercise. For Montini, who deserves the priceless merit of having understood ahead of time the centrality that dialogue among people of different traditions was destined to have, it was clear that the goal of dialogue is one of contributing to build and to preserve peace.

> We feel impelled to mention our cherished hope that this intention of Ours of holding a dialogue and of developing it under all the various and changing aspects which it presents, may assist the cause of peace among men . . . The mere fact that we are embarking upon a disinterested, objective and sincere dialogue is a circumstance in favour of a free and honorable peace. It positively excludes all pretence, rivalry, deceit and betrayal. It brands wars of aggression, imperialism, and domination as criminal and catastrophic. It necessarily brings men together on every level . . . It strives to inspire in every institution and in every soul the understanding and love of peace and the duty to preserve it. (Paul VI 1964, n. 106)

Pope John Paul II maintained and further developed the same perspective. The Polish pope, in the midst of the Cold War, with a serious and concrete danger of a nuclear conflagration, sensed that religious leaders could have a key role as promotors of peace and dialogue. This prophetic view constituted the background of the Day of Prayer for Peace he convened in Assisi on 27 October 1986, as Wojtyla himself explained on that day.

> For the first time in history, we have come together from everywhere, Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities, and World Religions, in this sacred place dedicated to Saint Francis, to witness before the world, each according to his own conviction, about the transcendent quality of peace . . . Either we learn to walk together in peace and harmony, or we drift apart and ruin others and ourselves. (John Paul II 1986b)

He repeated similar moments in the 1990s, during the Balkans war, which carried strong ethnic and religious components, and again in the months following the attack and destruction of the Twin Towers that represented the climax of the terroristic strategy masterminded and implemented by several groups in the name of Islam. Bergoglio's election came in the midst of a chaotic world scenario made up of political tensions at the national and international level, with terrorist attacks repeatedly claiming innocent lives in the name of an apparent religious motivation. The new pope defined the overall world precarious unbalance as a "piecemeal third world war" (Pope Francis 2015a), a very effective formula coined by him. This was, according to Pope Francis' reading, the unavoidable result of a much sought-after and pursued culture of hatred, discrimination and violence. That is why, from the very beginning of his pontificate, the Argentinean pope tried to counteract all this through what, in turn, he called 'culture of encounter', 'culture of friendship', 'culture of dialogue', 'culture of proximity/closeness'. In Pope Francis' perception, a sharp paradigmatic shift is required. This new culture, in fact, must replace all those that dominate the present world-scene without keeping the 'person'—man and

woman—and creation at the centre of their interests. His idea of a 'culture of peace'—or of 'dialogue' or of 'encounter' or of 'friendship'—is fundamental for a sustainable economy, for a new geopolitical order and for an eco-friendly future. It is, therefore, an all-compassing category that involves humanity at different levels.

> This is a proposal: a culture of closeness. Isolation and withdrawing into one's own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about a renewal. Rather, it is closeness, it is the culture of encounter. Isolation, no. Closeness, yes. Culture clash, no; culture of encounter, yes . . . this culture which does not indiscriminately level out differences and plurality—this is one of the risks of globalization—nor does it take them to the extreme, causing them to become causes of conflict. Rather, it opens to constructive dialogue. (Pope Francis 2013a)

In order to achieve this new type of culture, certain elements are required, and they represent the pillars of Bergoglio's thinking regarding dialogue.

3.3.2. Dialogue, a Duty for All

As mentioned at the opening of this article, the fourth section of *Evangelii Gaudium* opens with a strong statement voicing Pope Francis' firm conviction that "interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities" (ibid.).[10] On the one hand, as a general consideration, we can acknowledge that such a statement shows to what extent the magisterium has evolved even from the time of the publication of *Nostra Aetate*. On the other, we need to put this statement in context as the world situation has changed sharply since the mid-1960s.

In fact, among the many developments after the end of the 'Cold War', at the closing of the second-last decade of the past century, the world has witnessed a progressive return of religions—not only of religion as a category—into the public sphere. This return has represented an absolute surprise to many who were strongly convinced that religion was on the way out of the public scene of life, especially in Europe and in some other parts of the Western world. The well-known political scientist Peter Berger (2014), for instance, after having argued for decades that modernity implies an unavoidable decline of religion, had to admit his mistake and started speaking of a process of de-secularization of the world.[11] At the same time, Samuel Huntington's successful idea of 'clash of civilisations' made its appearance (Huntington 1996). The American historian's perspective expected religion to play a decisive role in the new panorama, more as a problem than as a solution. The events of 9/11, the climax and the most tragic of a series of terrorist attacks with a religious connotation, seemed to have dramatically confirmed Huntington's theory, which was further proved right by a constant growth of politicisation of religions and new acts of violence, apparently perpetrated in the name of religious traditions. In the context where religions seemed to be part of—or, even worse, the cause of—the problem, dialogue emerged more and more as a key word. Nevertheless, the approach towards it has seen contrasting positions: some were, in fact, in favour of the dialogical attitude while, for many, it appeared to be a naïve approach or an inflated concept. For sure, no one had ever had the courage to define it as a 'duty' for believers as well as people who have no faith.

However, in Pope Francis' perspective, the statement of *Evangelii Gaudim* n. 250 in no way was an isolated episode. In the months following its first publication, the Pope showed that he possesses a clear vision of dialogue as a pivotal element towards creating the right conditions for peace by softening tensions and facilitating conciliatory processes in what he called, as we have already mentioned, "a true world war fought piecemeal" (Pope Francis 2015a).

3.3.3. Dialogue, a Way to Discover and Strengthen One's Own Identity

Since the time of the publication of *Nostra Aetate*, the Catholic Church has always strongly recommended the need for clear identities in order to ensure a fruitful dialogue. Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI have often underlined this aspect, which represents an unavoidable condition for dialogue among people of different cultures and religions. Pope Francis too has repeatedly come back to this point, underlining how identity is a foundational condition without which it may be even dangerous to venture into dialogue. "It is always worth remembering, however, that for dialogue to be authentic and effective, it presupposes a solid identity: without an established identity, dialogue is of no use or even harmful" (Pope Francis 2015d). Bergoglio has been always convinced that both partners need to be well grounded in a full and forthright presentation of their respective convictions. As dialogue progresses, certainly, this process will accentuate how varied the different beliefs, traditions and practices are. Still, the more the dialoguing protagonists are honest in presenting their convictions, the more they will be able to see what their cultures and religions hold in common. This will open wide new avenues for mutual esteem, cooperation and friendship (Pope Francis 2015b).

> We cannot engage in real dialogue unless we are conscious of our own identity. We can't dialogue, we can't start dialoguing from nothing, from zero, from a foggy sense of who we are. Nor can there be authentic dialogue unless we are capable of opening our minds and hearts, in empathy and sincere receptivity, to those with whom we speak . . . A clear sense of one's own identity and a capacity for empathy are thus the point of departure for all dialogue. (Pope Francis 2015c)

Today, we live in a world where globalisation tends to homogenise differences. In this context, religions and cultures tend to succumb to the temptation of selling goods in order to answer only the market appeal. That is why it becomes crucial—as individuals and communities—to be aware of and to maintain one's own identity. The protagonists of dialogue require what Pope Francis defines as the "the duty of identity", which needs to converge constantly towards "the courage of the otherness" (Pope Francis 2017b). Only in doing this will everyone and every community succeed in not renouncing their richness and uniqueness, which can be offered to the 'other'. In fact, in order to meet positively those who are different from us and from our own people and groups, differences cannot be ignored or, even worse, flattened. As in the prism, every face has a contribution to make to the overall shape of the object.

3.3.4. 'Incomplete Thinking', a Key Dialogical Awareness

The concept of 'incomplete thinking' is, most probably, the main original novelty of Bergoglio's perspective. We can trace the roots of it in his Jesuit formation. The confirmation comes from the fact that he speaks about this category almost exclusively while conversing with groups of Jesuits (Spadaro 2013). 'Incomplete thinking' calls for a way of looking at and reflecting on reality that has to be open, flexible, creative, generous and never tired of searching (Accattoli 2017). It is an attitude that calls for a horizon, which cannot be reached, making the genuine searcher ceaselessly surprised by new discoveries and, at the same time, restless in front of an inner abyss (Pope Francis 2014d). All this calls for 'creativity', another category that is close to Pope Francis and explains much of what we have seen as far as his gestures and terms are concerned. The field of dialogue needs creativity as it is hard to foresee how things and processes may progress and develop. The dialogical process involves at all times a mysterious dimension and, therefore, only at the end of the dialogical experience can the partners achieve understanding and discovery. Moreover, 'incomplete thinking' is a category that is crucial in the search for Truth, which is very much part of interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Already, Pope Benedict XVI had advised 'how not to possess the Truth', with great courage and clarity, a few days before leaving the Vatican: "We do not possess the truth, the truth possesses us" (Benedict XVI 2012). Pope Francis fully inherits this approach when, soon after his election, in a written

dialogue with an Italian journalist, he argues that "rather than ourselves possessing truth, it is truth which embraces and possesses us" (Pope Francis 2013c). This implies that we all need humility of heart, which makes us capable of recognizing that no one can be the master or the owner of the Truth (Pope Francis 2013a). Moreover, the search for Truth can never be a lonely search as "Truth, according to the Christian faith, is the love of God for us in Jesus Christ. Therefore, truth is a relationship . . . truth, being completely one with love, demands humility and an openness to be sought, received and expressed" (Pope Francis 2013c).

3.3.5. Empathy as a Basic Dialogical Attitude

To the centrality of identity and the necessity of the awareness of possessing an 'incomplete thinking', Pope Francis adds 'empathy' as a basic attitude for making the process of dialogue effective. The identity the present pope mentions has nothing of the rigidity that this term often carries, almost implying that to be aware and preserve one's own roots means to opt for a defensive attitude against the 'otherness'. The preservation of one's identity is, in pope Francis' understanding, the condition for offering the 'other' the uniqueness that one has and, at the same time, for accepting the other's as a gift. This process requires an attitude of openness facilitated by the effort of fully understanding the other side of the process. Here lies the value of empathy that, as the Greek root suggests, allows each partner involved in dialogue to open up to the other while fully welcoming his or her way of thinking, of believing and of living. As suggested already in 1986 by Frederick Whaling, it is necessary to try to know the other's religion or culture by penetrating the sense of what it means for that other to *be* a Hindu, or a Muslim or a Buddhist. It is a matter of looking at the world from the other's viewpoint (Whaling 1986, pp. 130–31).

Pope Francis explained this process in a most effective form in the course of a speech addressed to the Asian bishops in Seoul.

> Finally, together with a clear sense of our own Christian identity, authentic dialogue also demands a capacity for empathy. For dialogue to take place there has to be this empathy. We are challenged to listen not only to the words, which others speak, but to the unspoken communication of their experiences, their hopes and aspirations, their struggles and their deepest concerns. Such empathy must . . . lead us to see others as brothers and sisters, and to "hear", in and beyond their words and actions, what their hearts wish to communicate. In this sense, dialogue demands of us a truly contemplative spirit of openness and receptivity to the other. I cannot engage in dialogue if I am closed to others. Openness? Even more: acceptance! Come to my house, enter my heart. My heart welcomes you. It wants to hear you. (Pope Francis 2014b)

In synthesis, the capacity for an empathic approach enables a truly human dialogue in which words, ideas and questions arise from an experience of fraternity and shared humanity. In fact, the climax of a true empathy is to reach the point of fully understanding as my own the suffering and the pain of the other. "May we learn to understand the sufferings of others?" said Pope Francis, on the occasion of his visit to the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem in 2014. This is not only a catch phrase. It carries—along with the whole concept of 'empathy'—a theological and anthropological dimension and approach that has its roots in the common Father who has created all men and women as his children (ibid.).

3.3.6. Fraternity and 'Mercy'—Central Categories for Dialogue

Finally, we cannot fully understand and appreciate Pope Francis' commitment to interreligious dialogue without the categories of 'mercy' and 'fraternity', to which he has devoted his last Encyclical Letter.

As the purpose of this paper is also that of underlining dialogue between Christians and Muslims, it may be significant to mention the value of mercy, which is very central in Bergoglio's teaching, even before he became Pope Francis. In fact, he started speaking of 'mercy' and 'compassion' soon after his election, inviting the whole Church to rediscover this dimension. Mercy is so central in his approach to God and to men and women that, in 2015, he called the whole Church to celebrate a Jubilee Year of Mercy. In his papal bull proclaiming the yearlong event, he underlined the need for constantly contemplating the mystery of mercy that, apart from being the wellspring of joy, serenity and peace, is a "supreme act by which God comes to meet us". That is why, in his understanding, mercy is "the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life" (Pope Francis 2015d, n. 2).

Moreover, mercy and compassion are the foundation for fraternity, which is the central category of Pope Francis' thinking, not only in interfaith dialogue but also his priority issues: the care of creation and the urgent and impelling necessity for economic and financial justice in the world. This strong link emerges with clear evidence from the centrality the parable of the Good Samaritan has in *Fratelli tutti.* The episode is a significant image of the exercise of mercy and of the idea that we are all children of the same Father, God.

> There is an aspect of mercy that goes beyond the confines of the Church. It relates us to Judaism and Islam, both of which consider mercy to be one of God's most important attributes. Israel was the first to receive this revelation, which continues in history as the source of an inexhaustible richness meant to be shared with all mankind . . . The pages of the Old Testament are steeped in mercy . . . Among the privileged names that Islam attributes to the Creator are "Merciful and Kind". This invocation is often on the lips of faithful Muslims who feel themselves accompanied and sustained by mercy in their daily weakness. (ibid., n. 23)

The centrality of mercy in Bergoglio's perspective represents an important point of contact with the Islamic tradition (Lefebure 2018, p. 314). The confirmation comes from the appreciation by a number of Muslim leaders and intellectuals. Significantly, the Pakistani British scholar, Amineh A. Hoti, speaking about Pope Francis, dwells on the attention he pays to the value and practice of mercy. In fact, acts of compassion and mercy have characterized the Prophet's life, and Pope Francis, by performing some of them, helps Muslims to connect to their own faith (Hoti 2018, p. 165). Hoti significantly affirms: "my faith, Islam in line with the Abrahamic faiths, taught me compassion, mercy and an emphasis on humanity . . . It is this focus on humanity that makes Pope Francis special" (ibid., p. 147). Moreover, the Indian British scholar Ataullah Siddiqui seems to be on the same line of understanding when, without mentioning the words 'mercy' and 'fraternity', he writes in the same spirit.

> Our relationship is an interconnected relationship to our fellow human beings and to our environment . . . to reach the Most High, one must go through the empathies, the pain and the suffering of the people, as well as the joy and happiness of his creation around us. In doing so we recognize the other and our unique ability to relate to the others and so find meaning, security, and mutual assistance. (Siddiqui 2018, pp. 169–70)

It is in this perspective that we come to the concluding section of this study, in which we will examine the relationship between Pope Francis and Islam.

4. Pope Francis and Islam

Jorge Maria Bergoglio comes from the continent where Islam has the lowest number of followers. Argentina counts around half a million Muslims, and their presence is traditionally less felt than that of the Jewish community. However, the former cardinal of Buenos Aires established a friendly relationship with Omar Abboud, former General Secretary of the Argentinean Islam Centre and, in general, he was perceived as a 'pro-

dialogue' cardinal by the Muslim leaders, who confirm that "he always showed himself as a friend of the Islamic community" (Lefebure 2018, p. 306).

4.1. Christian–Muslim Dialogue Not a Smooth Path

Before going further in exploring Pope Francis' attitude and experiences of dialogue with the Muslim world, it may be significant to examine the background against which Bergoglio's contribution made its appearance in 2013. In fact, in the previous years, the journey in this specific context of dialogue had been far from simple and smooth. The Regensburg incident, which had made Benedict XVI an unintentional protagonist, was still rather fresh. Moreover, the unfortunate quotation by the German Pope was accompanied by statements regarding religious freedom for Christians in Muslim nations, which were taken as interference in the internal national matters of some countries, such as Egypt. As a result, the relationship between the al-Azhar of Cairo and the Holy See was almost frozen. In addition, other Muslim institutions and leaders slowed down in their commitment of dialogue with the Catholic Church. Since his election, Pope Francis has promoted a discrete but progressive diplomacy on several fronts. First of all, he visited countries with a majority Muslim population—Jordan (2014), Turkey (2014), Albania (2014), Bosnia Herzegovina (2015), Azerbaijan (2016), Egypt (2017), Morocco (2019) and Iraq (2021)—and among them, for the first time, he touched the ground of the Arabian peninsula in Abu Dhabi (2019). During these visits, he met with local imams and sheikhs, entire groups of religious leaders or students on the way to qualify as future imams (for Europe), such as in Morocco. He entered mosques for moments of great spiritual intensity. As already mentioned, he chose to wash the feet of a Muslim woman during the Holy Week celebrations, and he welcomed to the Vatican several Muslim groups and authorities. We cannot forget four imams from England, who travelled to Rome a few weeks after a bloody terrorist attack had targeted London. More recently, during his trip to Iraq, on the way to the plain of Ur, he paid a visit to Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Husayni al-Sistani, one of the leading spiritual leaders of Iraqi Shia Muslims and one of the most senior scholars in Shia Islam. With this gesture, he sent a clear message to this minority portion of Muslims that he is not interested in building a relationship and understanding only with Sunnis. To these gestures, we have to add many phrases, which Pope Francis addressed to 'Muslim sisters and brothers' over the years. Probably, the most surprising were the ones he spoke at the end of the *Angelus* on Sunday 11 August 2013, when he invited all people present in St. Peter's Square to remember the end of the period of fasting of Ramadan, which Muslims were concluding on that day.

> I would like to greet the Muslims of the whole world, our brothers and sisters, who recently celebrated the end of the month of Ramadan, dedicated in a special way to fasting, prayer and almsgiving. As I wrote in my message for this occasion, I hope that all Christians and Muslims will work to promote mutual respect especially through the education of the new generations. (Pope Francis 2013d)

At the same time, he carefully and tactfully committed to rethread the relationship with al-Azhar Mosque and University, which, among the internal problems Islam is experiencing, remains somehow a reference point for a good segment of Sunni Muslims. Several Vatican offices, such as the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, discretely accompanied and supported his personal courageous initiatives.

An encouraging sign from the Muslim side came when, in May 2016, at the pope's invitation, the Grand Imam al-Tayyeb travelled to the Vatican. After meeting Pope Francis, the Sheik's comment was prudent but significant: "Let us resume the path of dialogue and hope that it will be better than it was before" (al-Tayyeb 2016). His response to Francis' welcoming gesture was not long in coming. In 2017, the Grand Imam welcomed Pope Francis in Cairo, inviting him to an International Peace Conference. The result of this process was evident, two years later, when, at Abu Dhabi, the Pope and the Grand Imam made history by co-signing a common statement: *The Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together.*[12] It was the first time that a Pope signed a document along

with another religious leader and authority. In brief, gestures, words and documents accompanied the dialogue the Argentinean pope proposed and pursued with Islam and its followers. At the same time, a deep theology has constantly represented the solid platform on which to build from this mutual encounter.

4.2. Christian Theological Foundation for Dialogue with Islam

The ground of this theological approach is the one that *Nostra Aetate* indicated at the end of the Vatican Council.

> The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honour Mary, His virgin Mother; at times, they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the Day of Judgment . . . Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting. (Vatican Council II 1965d, n. 3)

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis dedicates two fundamental paragraphs—nn. 252–53—to this aspect. On the one hand, Francis shows himself to be well aware of the complex historical phase that Islam is going through at the internal level, with growing tensions between Sunnis and Shias, and on the international level where Islam is widely considered as a source of violence and political imbalance. Moreover, many—though not all—of the migrants who reach the shores of Europe or of other countries are Muslims. This has provoked a sharp—and, for some Church leaders, worrisome—rise of Muslims' presence in many traditionally Christian countries. Many in the Western Christian world, even in Catholic circles, fear an Islamic strategic invasion for the replacement of Christianity. Against this complex and volatile situation, the pope underlines that "we must never forget that they [Muslims] profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, who will judge humanity on the last day" (Pope Francis 2013a, n. 251). In tune with *Nostra Aetate*, he proposes an appreciation of some of the theological tenets of Islam to the point of inviting Christians to look at Muslims not simply from a stereotyped perspective.

> The sacred writings of Islam have retained some Christian teachings; Jesus and Mary receive profound veneration and it is admirable to see how Muslims both young and old, men and women, make time for daily prayer and faithfully take part in religious services. Many of them also have a deep conviction that their life, in its entirety, is from God and for God. They also acknowledge the need to respond to God with an ethical commitment and with mercy towards those most in need. (ibid., n. 252)

At the same time, Pope Francis does not leave any room for dangerous compromise or absurd naïveté. He rather calls for a sense of identity on both sides and, from a more social and political angle, asks for mutual respect and freedom of worship for Muslims moving to traditional Christian countries and for Christians living in the midst of a Muslim majority.

> We Christians should embrace with affection and respect Muslim immigrants to our countries in the same way that we hope and ask to be received and respected in countries of Islamic tradition. I ask and I humbly entreat those countries to grant Christians freedom to worship and to practice their faith, in light of the freedom, which followers of Islam enjoy in Western countries! (ibid., n. 253)

In the end comes the invitation for everyone to avoid dangerous generalisations. The papal document reminds everyone to acknowledge that "authentic Islam and the proper reading of the Koran are opposed to every form of violence" (ibid.). In summary, we can argue that these parts of *Evangelii Gaudium* present a road map of the pope's perspective regarding relationships between Christians and Muslims.

More recently, special significance has to be given to the trip to Iraq, which offered Pope Francis the possibility of celebrating a meeting in the Plain of Ur, "where faith was born" (Pope Francis 2021). His intention was evident. From the land of Abraham, he wished to affirm that "God is merciful and that the greatest blasphemy is to profane his name by hating our brothers and sisters" (ibid.). This awareness of enjoying a common ground, once again, did not prevent the Pope from saying clear and strong words against the abuse of religion. He reiterated his adamant conviction that "extremism and violence are not born of a religious heart: they are betrayals of religion" (ibid.). True believers, whatever religion they may follow, cannot be silent when terrorism abuses religion. Commitment to interfaith dialogue, especially between Christians and Muslims, should not leave any window open to the smallest doubt: "peace alone is holy and no act of violence can be perpetrated in the name of God, for it would profane his Name" (Pope Francis 2017b). These past years of Pope Francis' commitment to dialogue with the Muslim world can be summarized in three aspects, the pillars of his dialogical approach: "the duty to respect one's own identity and that of others, ... the courage to accept differences ... [and] sincerity of intentions" (ibid.). These three categories represent the fundamental keys for any dialogue, especially for dialogue among people of different cultures and religions and even more when Christians and Muslims are protagonists of this commitment to build a culture of dialogue and understanding. On the one hand, the three categories facilitate a culture of encounter and, on the other, they prevent falling into the dangerous traps of naïveté, fear, compromise and syncretism. In fact, in the context of what political scientists, referring to the present world situation, call 'chaos-land', people of faith have to be on the forefront in the effort to help the human family to renew the capacity of reconciliation, which requires the shedding of all fears and doubts. Courage and audacity are two virtues that should characterize this commitment. Christians, Muslims and Jews are strongly invited to be aware of the universal dimension of the human family, which can open up to a new capacity for reconciliation, for acquiring a vision of hope and for building concrete paths of peace, as the Document co-signed in Abu Dhabi amply demonstrates.

4.3. Christians and Muslims Called to 'Co-Operation' and 'Co-Witness'

This Charter is an open invitation to Muslims and Christians to work together for educating new generations, promoting human rights and preserving, defending and respecting holy places. Above all, believers of both traditions are called to the commitment of injecting a deep spiritual dimension in today's world. Building bridges and cooperating for a culture of encounter and dialogue does not mean wasting time in empty discussions or in hair splitting hermeneutics. It has to lead to building something concrete and visible together through cooperation and mutual involvement. As underlined also in Muslim sources, over the last few decades, various charities have cooperated in relief work, particularly in times of serious emergency, such as the Ebola virus in Africa, human trafficking in different parts of the world and the COVID-19 pandemic (Siddiqui 2018, p. 176).

Muslims and Christians can really become allies in the common struggle against social injustice and violence in order to build a more balanced society and peace in the world. In this way, they can be witnesses and not only in their respective religious domains but also in an open common venture, which can be very meaningful in the present pluralistic society where we all live and experience plurality of religions and multiple identities. Men and women of faith who follow Christian and Muslim traditions are, in fact, called to a plurality of missions and *dawah* (call) in order to become a 'co-witness'. This process demands a re-examination of the respective theologies (ibid.).

> What is required is [*in Christianity*] to preach the Kingdom of God—a mission toward God—and in Islam a perception of *dawah il-allah* (a call toward God). The sense of injustice also requires a joint crafting in the social and moral framework that anchors us in the Divine and heals the wounded. (ibid.)

Nevertheless, we should never downplay the importance of keeping respective identities and specificities and, at the same time, being honest and open in dialogue without a hidden agenda that may emerge on the way as a hindrance. Pope Francis spelled out these concerns during his speech at al-Azhar. On that occasion, in fact, he pointed out the crucial importance of the "the duty to respect one's own identity and that of others" as, he emphasized, true dialogue cannot be built on ambiguity or on compromising on some truths for the sake of pleasing others. Secondly, he indicated that the 'others' are not a threat or enemies but 'fellow travellers', and that is why we need what he calls "the courage to accept differences". Thirdly, no one engaged in dialogue should ever forget that this is not a 'strategy to achieve one's own goals" but a "path toward the truth", and this calls for "sincerity of intentions" (Pope Francis 2017b).

5. Conclusions: From the 'Argentinian Model' towards an 'Interreligious Synodality'?

Without any doubt, 'dialogue'—along with 'fraternity'—represents one of the main keywords characterizing, at least so far, Pope Francis' papacy. As already mentioned, the Argentinean pope, long before being elected to the See of Peter, had a remarkably long experience of friendship with Jews, Muslims, and also with Anglicans and Pentecostals in Buenos Aires. The network of relationships and their depth was such that Card. Jean-Louis Tauran, then President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in the Vatican, used to refer to it as the 'Argentinian model of dialogue'. Its distinguishing mark was—and still is, as those rapports continue—the fact that the experience of dialogue in Buenos Aires developed out of mutual friendship rather than attempts at theological discussions. Dialogue, in fact, does not happen among institutions but rather among people, and it becomes truly significant when the leaders of the different religious communities succeed in establishing among themselves relationships of friendship. This was Bergoglio's experience with Sheikh Omar Abbud and Rabbi Abraham Skorka.

They were able to understand their respective interests and ideas without ever compromising on their identities and those of their communities. Bergoglio started visiting the Islamic Centre in 2004, being the first bishop to enter it after it was established in 1931. The following year, he joined the Muslim community to mourn the death of the president of the Centre, Adel Made. The relationship grew in such a positive way that even the crises following the Regensburg incident with Pope Benedict XVI had practically no impact in Argentina. At the same time, the cardinal invited Muslim authorities to join in the *Te Deum* service he celebrated with the Catholic community every year. Muslims, until today, give credit to the Cardinal for bringing religious minorities around the same table, creating not only the space for a theological or a spiritual debate but, first of all, a civic forum. In a different way, a deep friendship grew also between Bergoglio and Rabbi Skorka. This time, he inherited the patient and rich experience of his predecessor, Card. Quarracino, who was able to build strong and lasting relationships with the Jewish community of the capital city of Argentina, especially following the bloody attacks on the Association for Israel–Argentina Mutual Assistance (AMIA) in 1992 and 1994. Skorka and Bergoglio grew closer and closer and started collaborating for joint publications and media programs of formation. From this experience, they co-published a very successful book: '*Sobre el cielo y la tierra*'.[13] Yet, these deep relationships of friendship were open to new dimensions. In fact, as time passed, these leaders started questioning themselves about their contribution towards making a space and creating interest for a greater spiritual dimension in the world. As a true Jesuit, Bergoglio remained a frontier man capable of accepting tensions between identity and pluralism and trying to act in creative ways towards new experiences of mutual acceptance and learning from each other. The 'Argentinian way of dialogue', probably, taught the future Pope Francis the great lesson that dialogue cannot be something

rigidly codified. It has to be creative, all the time, and it must grow through its protagonists' engagement to generate processes (see Iverigh 2014).[14]

This, as explained in this study, became evident as soon as Bergoglio became Pope Francis. In these years spent at the helm of the Catholic Church, he has often appealed to people, groups, communities and nations to engage in dialogue before resorting to violence and war. He himself has had no fear in setting foot on unknown paths, as his experience with the Muslim world has shown. Yet, he has never given the impression of proposing dialogue only as a last attempt to solve problematic and chaotic situations that seemed otherwise to have no solution. His proposal of dialogue has always been one of starting new processes towards unexplored horizons rather than a shortcut towards easy compromises. In his perspective, dialogue has never appeared as a ready-made receipt to find remedies or an easy way out when problems seem to block all other possibilities. Neither did Bergoglio propose dialogue with a sense of naiveté in a very problematic world and Church scenario. Finally, considering specifically the theological and pastoral domains within Christianity, Pope Francis carefully kept away from proposing the dialogical option as a new way to announce the Gospel in view of imposing its truth over other traditions and cultures. On the contrary, he did repeatedly and consistently suggest dialogue to the Catholic Church and its ministers, never missing the opportunity to emphasize how crucial is the duty of avoiding syncretism, on the one hand, and proselytism, on the other. In his perception, dialogue appears to be a precious means to facilitate the fermentation of the Good News in different cultural and religious contexts, helping the growth of relationships between men and women of different religions and beliefs, and even with those who claim to have no religious reference. In this context, a study focussing on the relations between dialogue and evangelisation in the present pope's perspective would be of great interest. For the last forty years, this represents, in fact, an ongoing and thought-provoking debate among theologians and Church personnel (bishops, priests and consecrated men and women without excluding lay people). In the course of time, Pope Francis' contribution to this debate will certainly be appreciated. In fact, while he underlines the dialogical dimension, he never refrains from announcing the Good News with clarity and conviction but with a style and modalities that are inclusive and respectful of other cultures and religious traditions without ever forgetting people who claim to have no religious affiliation.

Probably, in order to approach the real and full dimension of dialogue in Pope Francis' perspective, there is no better text than Chapter VIII of *Fratelli Tutti*. Here, the pope invites religions to contribute to the project of building universal fraternity, which implies also a commitment to social justice and to an economic agenda different from the one imposed by the free market and globalisation that dominates the present world scene, ignoring the dignity of the human being. If the conjunction of dialogue and fraternity, on the one hand, remains a dream, on the other, it does open the way to what we could define as an 'interreligious synodality' (Czerny and Barone 2021, p. 197). As the Argentinian pope invites the universal Catholic Church to reflect in these coming two years—2022 and 2023—synodality could represent the true paradigm shift of the Catholic Church in the Third Millennium. However, as we know, synodality remains a challenge, first of all, *ad intra* within the domain of the Catholic Church and in the effort of enhancing ecumenical processes. Nevertheless, it cannot and should not remain a Catholic or Christian category. The interreligious dialogical perspective can widen and deepen the experience of 'synodality', helping to open it up towards other horizons, such as those of different religious traditions. It invites people to a common pilgrimage where people of different faiths and cultural traditions can walk together, never losing sight of their specific identities but rather focussing on shared common goals. Followers of different religions and people of good will, although not claiming any particular faith, can work together so that fraternity may prevail over divisions of any type. In this way, love and fraternity may win over hatred and peace over war, setting a new roadmap for society and for the Church.

> The different religions, based on their respect for each human person as a creature called to be a child of God, contribute significantly to building fraternity and defending justice in society. Dialogue between the followers of different religions does not take place simply for the sake of diplomacy, consideration or tolerance. In the words of the Bishops of India, "the goal of dialogue is to establish friendship, peace and harmony and to share spiritual and moral values and experiences in a spirit of truth and love". (Pope Francis 2021, n. 271)

This was already the great intuition of John Paul II when, in 1986, he bravely challenged all resistances—including those within the Roman Curia—to call for a Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi where he invited leaders and representatives of all religions. He had clearly understood that, already at the time of the Cold War, religions could be part of the solution rather than the problem.

The dimension of 'interreligious synodality' may truly represent an aspect of what Pope Francis defined as "a conversion of the papacy" (Pope Francis 2013a). This represents an absolute novelty, which is truly possible if the Bishop of Rome remains open to suggestions that "can help make the exercise of [his] ministry more faithful to the meaning which Jesus Christ wished to give [. . .] to the present needs of evangelization". Pope Francis never gave up his commitment to finding "a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation" (Pope Francis 2013a). The *Document of Human Fraternity and World Peace*, co-signed with the Grand Sheik of al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, on 4 Febraury 2019 in Abu Dhabi, offers the greatest evidence to this new dimension of 'interreligious synodality', which may truly transform the Church's mission in the present millennium. *Fratelli Tutti*—which was inspired also by people of other Christian Churches and ecclesial communities (Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu) as well as by followers of other religions (Mahatma Gandhi) (see Pope Francis 2020, n. 282)—does not claim for the Catholic Church a role of superiority and of self-assigned leadership over other faiths and traditions. On the contrary, it suggests an attitude of service, as an instrument of the unity that characterizes humanity, as already underlined by *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate*. In this perspective, 'interreligious synodality' requires from the Church and from all Christians the firm commitment to esteem and respect people of different cultures and religions and those who claim to have none. This implies that, on the Christian side, there should be no claim of primacy or superiority. We need to acknowledge that we are all sisters and brothers. If, today, Pope Francis is widely accepted as a leader in this process of inviting others to dialogue, it is because he does play this role as a service rather than with a sense of supremacy, setting processes in motion rather than claiming authority over others. His commitment, his choices, his words and actions reveal a humble, sincere, discrete and, at the same time, strong commitment to avoid considering himself above others. His attitude, somehow, favours feelings of reciprocity without forcing anyone.

From a theological angle, this 'interreligious synodality' may shed new light on one of the most courageous statements of John Paul II. In Chennai (India), in 1986, while addressing representatives of different religious traditions present in the Indian sub-continent, the Polish pope convincingly affirmed: "by dialogue we let God be present in our midst; for as we open ourselves in dialogue to one another, we also open ourselves to God" (John Paul II 1986a). In this vein, Pope Francis, significantly, goes a step further. For him, in fact, openness to the transcendental dimension is the unique contribution that women and men of faith can offer to today's society and culture. This is obviously more powerful and effective if believers of different religions, all together through their witness, remind today's humanity that the human being is constitutionally oriented towards the Absolute. This represents a crucial contribution and service to the world. Peace among nations and an effective equality among all men and women can be tremendously enhanced and fostered by a shared acknowledgement of the fact that we are all creatures in front of God. Being His children, we are called to achieve our own fulfilment through a relationship with the Absolute and with one another (Czerny and Barone 2021, p. 206).

> . . . we, the believers of the different religions, know that our witness to God benefits our societies. The effort to seek God with a sincere heart, provided it is never sullied by ideological or self-serving aims, helps us recognize one another as travelling companions, truly brothers and sisters. We are convinced that "when, in the name of an ideology, there is an attempt to remove God from a society, that society ends up adoring idols, and very soon men and women lose their way, their dignity is trampled and their rights violated. You know well how much suffering is caused by the denial of freedom of conscience and of religious freedom, and how that wound leaves a humanity which is impoverished, because it lacks hope and ideals to guide it". (Pope Francis 2020)

A first powerful example of this common awareness is the shared statement that Francis and Grand Sheikh Ahmad al-Tayyib made in the Abu Dhabi document, where they speak of a "desensitized human conscience, a distancing from religious values and the prevailing individualism accompanied by materialistic philosophies" (Pope Francis and al-Tayyeb 2019). Against such a commonly acknowledged situation, 'interreligious synodality' can work to show, on the one hand, an alternative to anthropological and social theories that, by ignoring God, end up in a dominant individualism and materialist philosophy. On the other, 'interreligious synodality' can be an effective antidote to "hateful attitudes, hostility and extremism [which] . . . are the consequence of a deviation from religious teachings" (Pope Francis and al-Tayyeb 2019). The challenge of this '*ad extra*' dimension of the category of synodality is already expressed concisely in the famous passage of *Ecclesiam Suam*: "To this internal drive of charity which seeks expression in the external gift of charity, we will apply the word 'dialogue'. The Church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives. It has something to say, a message to give, a communication to make" (Paul VI 1964). Pope Francis, after John Paul II and Benedict XVI, has found new and creative ways to implement the great opening of Paul VI.

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Notes

1 For a long time, the Mosque and University of al-Azhar had an important role in the Muslim world, above all, among Sunnis. In recent times, its prestige has been damaged by the political scene in Egypt, which somehow involves also the credibility of the Grand Imam of al-Azhar. More recently, this point of reference for Sunni Muslims has maintained remarkable relevance, although the Imam's words and thoughts are never binding for all Muslims. Shia Islam refers more to other sources of inspiration: Karbala, Najaf and Qum located in Iraq and Iran.

2 Bergoglio often refers also to *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Paul VI 1975) as an inspiring text for his pastoral life (see Pope Paul VI 1975, Evangelii Nuntiandi, Vatican City, December 8).

3 He often directly calls them from his mobile personal number.

4 He often refers to his personal relationship with 'nonna Rosa'—pope's grandmother whose name was Rosa. He quotes her sentences and, at times, has spoken of learning the Catholic faith on her lap.

5 Regarding this aspect, see (Borghesi 2018a, 2018b; Poirier 2011).

6 On this topic, see (Luciani 2018; Scannone 2015).

7 The Muslim Council of Elders is an independent international organisation established in July 2014 to promote peace in Muslim communities. The Council unites Muslim scholars, experts and dignitaries who are known for their wisdom, sense of justice, independence and moderateness. They will work together to promote peace, to discourage infighting and to address the source of conflict, divisiveness and fragmentation in Muslim communities. Based in the United Arab Emirates' capital, Abu Dhabi, the Council is the first institutional body that aims to bring the Islamic nation together by extinguishing the fire that threatens Islam's humanitarian values and principle of tolerance and put an end to the sectarianism and violence that have plagued the Muslim world for decades (https://www.muslim-elders.com/en, accessed on 27 December 2021).

[8] They were, in fact, part of his dictionary much before becoming pope.

[9] With the partial exception of the French scenario, fraternity has lived a very marginal journey similar to that of an underground river. At times, it resurfaced but it was not able to adequately irrigate the political terrain until democratic thought became silent about its existence. See (Baggio 2013).

[10] It may be relevant to note that this sentence is already present in one of Pope Benedict XVI's last speeches pronounced a couple of months before leaving the Vatican (see Benedict XVI 2012).

[11] Regarding this aspect, see also (Berger 1999, 2014).

[12] For the entire official text, see: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html (accessed on 27 December 2021)

[13] See (Skorka and Bergoglio 2010). This book had a remarkable success outside Argentina, immediately after Card. Bergoglio was elected pope.

[14] Austin Iverigh devotes the entire Chapter VIII of his book to these interreligious rapports that Card. Bergoglio entertained in Buenos Aires (see Iverigh 2014).

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Article

Intercultural Lived Ecclesiology: The Asian Synodal Praxis of *Communio, Partecipatio et Missio Inter Gentes*

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Abstract: The current synodal process (2021–2024) engaging the worldwide Catholic Church at the micro, meso and macro levels involves bringing Christians from across cultures, ethnic communities, linguistic groups and nationalities to interact and shape their journey as people of God. Without wanting to reproduce the intense debate that is in progress, we limit ourselves to examining the crucial issue—to a great extent ignored—of the intercultural lived ecclesiology associated with the *inter gentes* synodal praxis of communion, participation and mission. Although the synodal journey appears to be promising, the endogenous and exogenous ecclesial and societal differences implied in the *inter gentes* discernment can render it a complex transformative endeavor, entailing reciprocal enrichment and mutual critique. Taking up ideas that emerged in the various episcopal conferences in Asia in dialogue with some key themes in one of the European, namely, the German Episcopal Conference, we trace the intercultural challenges and prospects of *communio*, *partecipatio et missio inter gentes*, with a view to transforming the Church's way of being and functioning.

Keywords: intercultural theology; lived ecclesiology; synodal process; communion; participation; mission; *inter gentes*; decoloniality; Asian context; empirical research

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1. Introduction

Ecclesiology from a practical theological perspective denotes lived ecclesiology at the micro level of the local church, the meso level of the national and continental ecclesial structures, and the macro level of the worldwide Church governance (van der Ven 1996; Midali 2011). In fact, the synodal process engaging the Catholic Church—to which we refer when using the term 'Church' in this paper—has evolved at these three levels: the diocesan–national phase, from October 2021 to April 2022; the continental phase, from September 2022 to March 2023; and the universal church phase, in October 2023 and in October 2024. This long-drawn process (2021–2024) is considered to foster synodality as a constituent trait of the Church, as envisioned by the Second Vatican Council. Intriguingly, the aim of the ongoing synodal process is to reinforce the synodal transformation of the Church (Pope Francis 2013, n. 32).

The present synod has brought Christians of diverse cultures, ethnic communities, linguistic groups and nationalities to engage in a process that can be termed *inter gentes.* The term *gentes* refers not only to the peoples and nations who form the people of God, but also to those outside of it, the 'gentiles.' This *inter gentes* process—as is known—seeks to address three intersecting features of synodality: communion (*communio*), participation (*partecipatio*) and mission (*missio*). In other words, the synodal process is intended to review the current state of *communio*, *partecipatio et missio inter gentes*, with a view to reinforcing the synodal nature of the worldwide Church. More specifically, the synod aims to transform the largely uniform, centralized, hierarchical, clericalized, and *missio ad gentes* Church into a Church that is polyhedral, communal, egalitarian, participative, and *missio inter gentes*. Viewed from a cultural perspective, this means transforming an essentially monocentric, monocultural, patriarchal, and Westernized Church into a polycentric, intercultural, gender-inclusive, and global Church (Pope Francis 2013, n. 32;

Midali 2008, pp. 75–94; Luciani 2022, p. 37). Without aiming to reproduce the intense debate that is in progress, we limit ourselves to examining the crucial issue—to a great extent ignored—of the intercultural lived ecclesiology associated with the *inter gentes* synodal focus on communion, participation and mission. Although the synodal journey appears to be appealing, the endogenous and exogenous ecclesial and societal differences implied in the *inter gentes* discernment can render it a complex transformative process, entailing reciprocal enrichment and mutual critique at all levels, namely, at the micro, meso and macro levels (Second Vatican Council 1964, n. 12; Luciani 2022, pp. 56–57; Czemy 2022).

Cognizant of these, on the basis of the theological reflections emerging in diverse ecclesial contexts, we first explore synodality as a transformative process arising from intercultural lived ecclesiology that engages the entire people of God (Section 2). We then clarify the criteria underlying the synodal process of the *inter gentes* discernment of the present, the future and the journeying in between (Section 3). Against the backdrop of the theological framework of synodality and the criteria of discernment, we then critically summarize the challenges and prospects of *communio*, *partecipatio et missio inter gentes* emerging among the Asian episcopal conferences, and examine it in an intercultural dialogue with the results of an empirical study of Asians' view on related questions featured in the German Synodal Way. Furthermore, with the view to exploring these issues further, we refer to some contextual empirical studies that focus on the themes of the Asian synodal process (Section 4). We conclude by drawing attention to intercultural synodality as an ongoing, complex and transformative process.

2. Transformative Process of Intercultural Lived Ecclesiology

Rediscovering the synodal nature of the Church implies learning together what it means to be the Church in the third millennium. At the level of the local Church it is necessary for members to be sensitive to their own culture, context, resources and constraints and discern the synodal path of growth (SGSB 2021b). The bottom-up process, starting with the micro level of baptized persons engaged in their synodal praxis with local bishops, is conjoined to the meso level of national and continental collegial praxis and, ultimately, to the macro level of worldwide collegiality in communion with the Pope, the bishop of Rome (ITC 2018, n. 7). Underlying these composite dynamics, extensive in time and space, there is the intercultural lived ecclesiology of the people of God (Pope Francis 2013, n. 115). We therefore consider synodal praxis from the perspective of practical theology, based on lived ecclesiology, in its intercultural and polycentric features.

2.1. Synodal Praxis from a Practical Theological Perspective

In epistemological terms (Midali 2011; van der Ven 1993), the material object of practical theology is the study of current ecclesial praxis. The *ad intra* ecclesial praxis is to be viewed in connection with its *ad extra* ecumenical praxis, i.e., with the praxis of other Christian churches and religious praxis, i.e., with the praxis of other religions' adherents. In other words, the focus of practical theology is the study of ecclesial–Christian–religious praxis as a continuum of intersecting dimensions. Moreover, this praxis needs to be viewed in terms of human praxis, comprising cognitive, affective and operative components. It stands for the subject's agency in their mode of thinking, feeling and behaving. In this vein, human praxis is fundamentally a communicative form of praxis, i.e., intersubjective and relational. As subjective and intersubjective, human praxis entails an inner dynamism of growth, development and transformation; an inner drive to mature, evolve and progress creatively. Studying the current ecclesial–Christian–religious praxis, in its subjective and intersubjective facets, with a view to transforming it and bringing it closer to the ideal envisioned, is the formal object of practical theology. The focus is on *Ecclesia semper reformanda*, a permanent and continuous ecclesial reform (Pope Francis 2013, n. 26; Luciani et al. 2022, p. 25).

Viewed from this perspective, the synodal process is, paradoxically, an exercise in synodality, which involves transforming the current 'not so synodal' or 'not at all synodal'

situation, resulting from a clerical tradition deeply rooted and operational since the early Middle Ages and consolidated with symbols, language, dress codes and styles of life depicting distinction and separation (Noceti 2022b, p. 200). The vertical and monarchical clerical structure of Roman centralism reflects a theocratic conception of power, making the Church a static rather than a journeying entity. The synodal process is therefore an opportunity to rediscover the Church as the people of God (Second Vatican Council 1964, n. 4) and, thus, dissolve the image of *societas perfecta*—put forward by Roberto Bellarmino—that has dominated the ecclesial scene since the sixteenth century Counter Reformation. A pastoral conversion or structural transformation has become urgent in order to contend with the systemic ecclesial crisis: the silent schism in which a substantial number of the faithful are abandoning the Church, particularly in the northern hemisphere (Czemy 2022; Paranhos and Ponte 2022; Eckholt 2022, p. 152). If the first phase of Second Vatican Council's reception was the collegiality of bishops, the current focus is on the ecclesiology of the People of God. In fact, the objective of the synodal process is to lay an emphasis on the ecclesial praxis of all the baptized, giving a greater voice to lay men and women, with their professional competence and experience in the familial, cultural, civil, political and economic spheres of life, by promoting co-responsibility and inclusivity of the societal context (Brighenti 2022; Noceti 2022b, pp. 156–58; Midali 2002), so as to create a discursive space with a communication pattern integrating the vertical and the horizontal (Faggioli 2022).

All of the people of God are to be involved in the ecclesial transformation, denoting the personal and communitarian conversion of the papacy, episcopate, presbyterate and laity (Pope Francis 2013, n. 32). Markedly, the contribution of the laity emerges as indispensable for the Church to be constitutively synodal (ITC 2018, n. 9), since, currently, they have little or no decisive voice. Having remained pyramidal for centuries, the Church requires a structural transformation, namely, decentralization. The enduring affirmation of hierarchy has left the laity rather submissive in ecclesial life. Inured to the comfort of passivity, ironically, the laity are currently not drawn to assuming their responsibilities in the Church (Vélez 2022; Czemy 2022; Corpas de Posada 2022). The synodal process is therefore an attempt to re-establish a proper framework for the transparency and accountability of the hierarchy that ensures the shared participation of all the baptized (Pope Francis 2015; Borras 2022, p. 126; Schickendantz 2022; FABC 2023, n. 89). In other words, all of the people of God are to be responsible for communion and mission, as well as for participation in governance and the magisterium of the Church (Paranhos and Ponte 2022). This ecclesial reform has become an urgent task—albeit a difficult one—for the survival of the Church (Pope Francis 2013, n. 27).

2.2. Synodal Praxis of Lived Ecclesiology

Lived theology may be understood as the reflective horizon emerging from the everyday faith–life of believers: their religious understanding, religious experience and religious practice (Astley 2002; Dillen 2016; Marsh et al. 2017; Francisco and Cornelio 2022). This lived theology is personal and autobiographical in nature and, as such, it is intersubjective, engaging aspects of communities' expressions of faith and institutional or formal theologizing. We may describe it as the theological reflective horizon associated with personal and communal lived experience, an instinctive theological interpretation of individuals' life situations. In this vein, we can speak of lived Christology, lived anthropology, lived ecclesiology, etc. Lived ecclesiology, which is our concern here, is the reflective horizon embedded in the ecclesial praxis of individuals and communities, namely, in their attitudes, behaviors and structures (Luciani 2022, p. 26). This lived ecclesiology cannot but reflect local socio-cultural and linguistic traits. With its risks and prospects, lived ecclesiology is a *locus theologicus* enshrining the *sensus fidei* of the baptized and an incentive for the Church "to become incarnate today in history, in creative fidelity to Tradition" (ITC 2018, n. 9).

The importance of *sensus fidelim* is derived from its role as the living voice of the people of God, grounded in their faith experience. Therefore, it can foster an experience of

discernment, participation and co-responsibility when *inter gentes* diversity is conceded (SGSB 2021b, n. 1.3). In effect, the first phase of the present Synod was intended to draw on the richness of the lived experience of the Church in its local context (SGSB 2021b, n. 1.5), "to foster a broad consultation process in order to gather the wealth of the experience of lived synodality" (SGSB 2021b, n. 1.5), including the experience of those at the margins or periphery of the Church and society.

Synodality "is a sign of something new that has been maturing in the ecclesial consciousness starting with the Magisterium of Vatican II, and from the lived experience of local Churches and the universal Church since the last Council until today" (ITC 2018, n. 5). Since it is Catholic, the Church attains the universal in the local form, and the local in the universal essence; attention to both these poles, local and universal, brings about the richness of this correlation (Galli 2022, p. 73). In this vein, synodality is "the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission" (ITC 2018, n. 6).

As lived ecclesiology, synodality can lead to a mature ecclesial communion of unity in diversity, of interdependency, greater participation in ecclesial praxis and openness to mission. It can lead to a mature quality of ecclesial life and transform the style and structures of ecclesial praxis, giving rise to an original figuration of the Church (SGSB 2021a, n. 1–2; Noceti 2022b, p. 224). Moreover, from an ecumenical perspective, lived synodality "offers a way of understanding and experiencing the Church where legitimate differences find room in the logic of a reciprocal exchange of gifts in the light of truth" (ITC 2018, n. 9). Given the current sociocultural diversity in which the Church is immersed, there is therefore the "necessity of rereading the experience of lived synodality" (SGSB 2021a, n. 3, 30; 2021b, n. 5.3). Evidently, the synodal moment is not purely intended for structural and administrative transformation, ignoring the mission of evangelization (Faggioli 2022).

2.3. Intercultural and Polycentric Synodal Praxis

From the contextual perspective, synodal praxis can be viewed as embedded in religio-cultural, socio-structural and ecological-economical spheres, additionally involving personal agency (Anthony 1997; Gaillardetz 2022). In general terms, the religio-cultural sphere comprises the meaning–value systems (which are cognitive in nature) articulated in the linguistic–expressive systems of scriptures, literature, symbols, art, music, etc. The religio-cultural sphere is closely connected to the socio-structural sphere, comprising political and juridical forms. Besides, the religio-cultural and socio-structural spheres are bound to the ecological-economic sphere of geographical and natural settings and resources. Furthermore, given that personal agency is articulated in cognitive, relational and operative features, the synodal process entails thinking, feeling and acting *inter gentes* (ITC 2018, n. 8; Corpas de Posada 2022). It means that the ecclesial agency or praxis of a local community is embedded in its religio-cultural, socio-political and ecological-economic context. To the extent that local communities are critically embedded in their local contexts, their ecclesial–Christian–religious praxis can be dialogic and humanizing, embedding individuals in their local culture (Anthony 1997).

Embeddedness in local culture, namely, inculturation, presupposes (in the missionary context) and gives rise (among established local churches) to intercultural theological encounters. In effect, intercultural lived theology is the fruit of the dialogue between theological praxes in varied cultural contexts; it is a product of culturally different and interacting faith communities (Ward 2011; Wrogemann 2016, 2018, 2019; Gruber 2018). As the Christian faith spread, after the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15; Galatians 2:1–10), through the Mediterranean basin to the rest of the world, it brought with it the cultural vision and values of the people among whom it took root. Hence, coherence with past traditions serves as a basic criterion for any new development. In other words, compatibility or cohesiveness with the trajectory of meaning that flows from the Scriptures, through the Tradition, into the present magisterium, can be postulated as essential to the authenticity

of the intercultural process. This diachronic centrifugal interculturation must be reciprocated by synchronic centripetal interculturation. If the 'young' churches of the southern hemisphere must be more attuned to diachronic centrifugal interculturation with a view to preserving Christian roots, then the 'old' Churches are challenged to overcome their traditional complacency by opening themselves to synchronic centripetal interculturation in order to nurture ecclesial unity-in-diversity. A solution to the problems of secularization, religious pluralism and relativism that the Church faces in the northern hemisphere may be found in the intercultural resources of the synchronic centripetal process. In the current context of a global and scientific world, Newlands (2016) adds that rethinking intercultural theology would also imply incorporating interdisciplinarity.

As underscored above, interculturation is essential from both a diachronic and a synchronic perspective. As a diachronic centrifugal process, it implies a retrospective dialogue with the cultures that gave rise to the present form and spread of ecclesial faith, while as a synchronic centripetal process, it implies interactions not only among the various local churches that represent different cultures, but also among the various cultural groups within each local church and among the various denominations of Christian churches. We cannot ignore the fact that schisms resulting in denominations in history attest to the underlying role played by contrasting sociocultural identities. Taking stock of this, promoting and coordinating the process of diachronic and synchronic interculturation, so that a variety of cultural expressions can converge in the unity of faith, is the task of those responsible for the universal Church. In this sense, the synodal process entails a communion of lived faith among local churches along with that of Rome, "both in a diachronic sense—*antiquitas*—and in a synchronic sense—*universitas*" (ITC 2018, n. 52; Corpas de Posada 2022). The local churches are Catholic to the extent that they are inculturated (Luciani 2022, pp. 105–8); however, without intercultural integration and interaction, local churches risk becoming increasingly isolated and outdated ghettos, estranged from the Catholic communion and the modern world (Clark 1987). Hence, the micro level of the synodal process requires not only cultural awareness to celebrate and embrace diversity within local churches, but also interculturality at the regional/continental level and the universal level (SGSB 2021b). "The diversity of the local Churches and their context and culture bring different gifts to the whole, enriching the entire Body of Christ" (SGSB 2021b, n. 4.2).

To the extent that synodal praxis is contextually embedded, it necessitates—as succinctly elaborated by Midali (2008, pp. 75–94)—the decentralization of ecclesial agency, namely, a move away from a monocentric Catholic Church, particularly since the Great Schism in the 11th century and the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, by transplanting European Christianity in other continents through centuries of *missio ad gentes*. It is therefore time to move towards a more egalitarian, polycentric Church, inspired by the initial phase of Church's history (Routhier 2022, pp. 382–86). This also implies decolonizing and de-Europeanizing current ecclesial life (Hong 2021) and underscoring the significance of the synodal continental phase for a polycentric Church, without in any way undermining the role of the Roman Church as the 'center of unity' and role of the Pope—as *primus inter pares*—in presiding over the universal communion in charity, to watch over legitimate variance, so that the particular does not disrupt unity and, instead, serves it (Second Vatican Council 1964, n. 13).

3. Discerning through *Inter Gentes* Synodal Process

The core dynamics of the synodal process involves discernment grounded on the intercultural lived ecclesiology of the entire people of God in order to review the current state of the monocultural, clerical (male-domineering), centralized Church (Pope Francis 2013, n. 32) and move towards an intercultural, egalitarian, polycentric Church in terms of *communio*, *partecipatio et missio inter gentes* at the micro, meso and macro levels. As mentioned above, the starting point is the acknowledgement that we have not lived the synodal process, and that we do not know how to live it; that we stand in need of *inter*

gentes encounters, of listening, discerning and creating a culture of ecclesial consensus (Vélez 2022). Furthermore, in the contemporary context, we cannot ignore the modern sensibility of *homo democraticus*, the appeal to human rights, communicative dissent and egalitarianism (Faggioli 2022; Anthony 2020a). With these observations in mind, we outline the dynamics of intercultural discernment entailing intercultural hermeneutics, critique and participation and, more specifically, diverse types of thinking.

3.1. Intercultural Approach to Discernment Dynamics

"Exercising discernment is at the heart of synodal processes and events" (ITC 2018, n. 113). The term "discernment," derived from the Latin *discretio* and the Greek *phrónesis*, is close to the meaning of the Indian term *viveka*. These terms suggest the need to distinguish or discriminate in making proper judgments and prudent decisions, in accordance with conscience, rationality and wisdom. In the Indian tradition, Swami Vivekananda (1987, p. 232) and Swami Chinmayananda (1989, p. 22f) refer to *viveka* as the faculty used in day-to-day decisions, brought to the level of the inner constitution of the subject; as the capacity to discriminate between what is real and unreal, true and false, permanent and impermanent. There is, in Hinduism, a fine tradition of critical inquiry, a constant injunction to conduct *viveka* (discrimination), which implies both analysis and evaluation (Antoine 1968, p. 30).

In the biblical tradition, discernment was considered as the faculty with which to distinguish between God's revelation and other sources of knowledge. It was considered a form of grace, a gift given by God to individuals for the purpose of enlightening their community regarding what was good for their common life. In the reflection that ensued among early-century Church Fathers, namely, Evagrius Ponticus (c. 345–399) and John Cassian (c. 360–435), as well as the later writings of Bernard of Clairvaux (c. 1090–1153) and, in particular, Ignatius of Loyola (c. 1491–1556), the meaning of discernment shifted to the personal level of making life choices. However, in recent times, a renewed interest has arisen in viewing discernment as a communal process in the search for the common good (Waaijman 2013; ITC 2018, n. 113).

In the Cassian tradition, discernment implies exploring different perspectives on a given matter with a view to decision-making. Insofar as exploring multiple perspectives necessitates the views of others, discernment has a communitarian or social dimension. In the Cassian tradition, discernment matures through the following four stages (Waaijman 2013):

- Circumspection: The existence of multiple perspectives on a question requires space for ideas from different sources and persons. It also implies a distinction between the viable and the non-viable.
- Introspection: This covers reflection and self-inquiry, at both the individual and the community level. The focus here is on evaluating alternative perspectives and their possible outcomes, going beyond (the ideological aspect of) what is known and opening up to (the utopian aspect of) how things could be. Becoming attuned to ultimate purpose and being open to new possibilities necessitate both peace of mind and the ability to change perspectives.
- Intervision: This stage is marked by an exchange of arguments in the process of deliberation, which requires participants to be wise and willing to share learning experiences.
- Decision: This final stage of discernment entails the judgement of which of the alternatives can be viewed as wise, sound and adequately representative of the ultimate purpose.

The link between decision-making and radical attunement to the ultimate purpose and, thus, the creation of new possibilities is crucial to the Cassian tradition of discernment. It is characterized by a process of deliberation, which encourages the participation of all members in decision-making. It follows that in the case of the synodal process, a climate of listening and dialogue permits the faithful to express their common perception (*consensus*

fidelium), leading to (collegial and/or papal) decision-taking, without disregarding the voices of the minority. A dissonant minority with intuition and an innovative outlook is required for ecclesial transformation. This can be held as a necessary condition for the exercise of *sensus fidei*, which translates into a living sense of the Church (*sensus ecclesiae*), which the people of God perceive as authentic witness of Tradition. The primacy of *sensus fidei* permits the discernment of *sensus fidelium*, in view of *consensus fidelium.* To the extent that these engage sociocultural and linguistic resources, they can be termed as *sensus populi* or *sensus inter gentes* (Czemy 2022; Luciani 2022, pp. 46–50, 69, 87–99; Noceti 2022b, pp. 164–74, 249–65; 2022a, p. 273; Wijlens 2022, p. 50).

Consensus fidelium is not a question of reaching an accord among different positions, but rather of valuing and reconciling differences at a higher level, where the best of each can be conserved (Pope Francis 2020b, p. 93). Furthermore, the process may not be unilinear; instead, incomprehension and conflict may form part of the learning process, depending on the sincerity of the moral agent (Eckholt 2022, p. 160). It is conscience as the ethical center of the subject that warranties the dignity of the person. It represents the heart of personal identity and the temple of dialogue with the divine, the condition for knowing the moral truth and attaining the good (Del Missier and Massaro 2022).

As examples of culturally marked discernment praxis, we may cite the Melanesian method of consensus and the African *Indaba* method of dialogue—also used in the Anglican synodal praxis since 2008—which aim to gradually resolve the conflicting positions in decision-making processes by coming to know the experience of the other and strengthening relationships in a climate of prayer and listening (Zaccaria 2022, pp. 107–12). Likewise, we may refer to the unique and inclusive qualities of the Malaysian *longhouse* culture, the spirit of *goton-royong* (voluntary mutual assistance), and the culture of dialogue and cooperation in decision-making (CBCMSB 2022, pp. 8–10, 17).

In this vein, the synodal dynamics of discernment can be understood as evolving through three phases of practical theological methodology: the prophetic discernment of the challenges posed and faced by the current lived synodal praxis (kairological phase); the prophetic discernment of a more consonant and desirable synodal praxis (projective phase); and the prophetic discernment of the progressive steps or itinerary necessary for moving from the current state to the desired configuration of the synodal Church (strategic phase) (Midali 2011; ITC 2018, n. 113). Given the challenge of balancing between the prophetic and the institutional, between the personal and the communitarian, the role of practical theologians and experts in accompanying and refining the synodal process cannot be overlooked (ITC 2018, n. 75; Brighenti 2022; de Roest 2020).

3.2. Intercultural Hermeneutics, Critique and Participation

The dynamics of discernment described above entail concrete modes of hermeneutics, critique and participation. Hermeneutics is a process of interpretation comprising multiple perspectives, arising from the cultural assumptions or the worldview of persons (Scheuerer 2001). As these assumptions shape cultural meaning systems, the latter become resources for the inculturation of faith in the hermeneutic mode. Meaning systems, in turn, find expression in words, concepts and categories in one or more languages. When believers from different cultures interact and interpret, intercultural tension arises, which can purify or enrich the understanding of lived ecclesiology. The ensuing discussion and debate can reveal the limits of the concepts or categories used in interpretation. Through this intercultural engagement, a more refined and deeper understanding of ecclesial life can emerge. In this regard, languages—as the most abstract forms of culture, with their nuances and subtleties—can play a crucial role. Therefore, instead of limiting ourselves to translating the theological understanding emerging from Western linguistic contexts, we need to use local linguistic resources as tools for exploring the profundity of our lived ecclesial experience.

When Gospel values interact with cultural values and purify the latter, we can speak of inculturation in the critical mode. If the fruits of this inculturation in one local church

are shared by other local churches, interculturation occurs. Cultures differ in their scales of values. When these scales of values are confronted with others and with the Gospel, they become resources for intercultural exchange. In this sense, the ethical and moral aspects of life are fundamental areas of intercultural dialogue. If the multicultural and globalizing context is not dealt with appropriately, the danger of ethical or religious relativism arises. Intercultural critique can be a permanent way of refining what it means to be authentically human and truly Christian (Anthony 2016a).

Observable behavior, signs, symbols, gestures, rituals, and artistic artefacts are concrete means through which the meanings and values of a culture are expressed, shared and celebrated. When these are critically and creatively integrated into the life of a local church, inculturation occurs. When these inculturated elements of a local church are shared by other churches, there is the possibility of aesthetic and expressive interculturation. Exchanges in the expressive system, such as symbols, gestures and rituals, can become—beyond their mere utilization—occasions for participation in another culture. This participation can stimulate creativity in representing and expressing Christian meanings and values in an original and apt manner.

The modes of interculturality described above can be understood as evolving in terms of participation (i.e., identification or ratification) and critique (i.e., distinction or refutation), both of which entail hermeneutics, giving rise to creative advancement (i.e., symbiosis, convergence, integration or transformation) with new possibilities for the ecclesial faith and local cultures. In this sense, interculturality is a complex process of discernment, through which cultural heritages are reciprocally ratified, challenged and transformed, just as ecclesial heritages are confirmed, tested and enriched. In this manner, intercultural transformation enters the structural realm of social and ecclesial life, reaching up to the material level of ecological and economic reality. This innovative and transformative discernment is the distinct hallmark of interculturality (Anthony 1997; Corpas de Posada 2022).

3.3. Types of Inter Gentes Thinking Underlying the Discernment Process

A worldwide *inter gentes* discernment process requires that we become aware of the three types of thinking implicated in it: the *postulational* (conceptual), which aims at defining; the *psychical*, which lays an emphasis on intuition; and the *relational*, which deciphers mutual presence. The first is said to be the characteristic of the Western mind, the second of the Eastern mind, and the third of the African and Chinese mind (Hesselgrave 1978, pp. 204–9; Hesselgrave and Rommen 1989, p. 205f). Although thinking postulationally, psychically and relationally are basic to all epistemological processes, it might be stated that in the postulational type, the focus is on the object known, while in the psychical type, it is on the knowing subject and, in the relational type, it is on the rapport between the knowing subject and the known object. If we were to place these three ways of knowing in concentric circles from the inner to the outer levels, in an Asian mind, the order would be as follows: psychic experience, concrete relationships and abstract concepts. In a Western mind, they would be in the reverse order: abstract concepts, concrete relationships and psychic experience. In an African or Chinese mind, the order would be as follows: concrete relationships, abstract concepts and psychic experience (Hesselgrave 1978, p. 208f).

The Western extrospective mind generally tends to occupy itself with exteriorization, objectification, research and scientific progress; its thinking tends to be positive, historical and social. The dynamics of this thinking process, grounded in the principle of non-contradiction, tend to be disjunctive, i.e., characterized by an *either–or* logic. In this sense, the Western mind is essentially involved in exclusive or analytic thinking. The Eastern introspective mind, by contrast, tends to occupy itself with interiorization and interior search; consequently, it tends to be metaphysical, psychological and spiritual. Founded on the principle of identity, it is characterized by a conjunctive logic, i.e., a *both–and* logic. In this sense, the Eastern mind is essentially involved in what may be called inclusive or synthetic thinking (Irudayaraj 1992, p. 117; Wilfred 1991, pp. 156–60; 1995, pp. 186–87). The

third type, i.e., the relational type, in a way captures the relationship between the subject and the object in symbolic or narrative forms: myths, stories, parables, etc. This thinking tends to be what might be called pluralistic or analogical, based on a *like–unlike* logic. With regards to the latter, the consistent use of the metaphors of Church-as-tent, bridge-building and taking off the shoes in the Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality is a case in point (FABC 2023, n. 36–38, 110, 152, 154, 173, 180–85).

In a worldwide synodal discernment process, it is indispensable that we become attuned to the intersection of postulational, psychic and relational thinking. Fostering participation means enabling those who hold different views based on different modes of thinking to express themselves. Dialogue involves the coming together of diverse views, without excluding anyone, even if those who force us to consider new perspectives seem to run counter to current thinking. Allowing persons to speak out with authentic courage and honesty (*parrhesia*) is indispensable for the discernment process. Humility in listening, openness to newness and conversion (*metanoia*) or to paradigm shifts are vital to rise above prejudices, stereotypes, self-sufficiency and hidden ideologies and contribute to the unceasing process of *ecclesiogenesi*, of constantly building up the Church (SGSB 2021b, n. 2.2.; CBCK 2022, p. 34; SMC 2022, p. 76; PCBC 2022, p. 44; ITC 2018, n. 105, 120; Luciani 2022, pp. 34, 39, 98, 108–12).

Insofar as the cognitive dynamics of interpretation and evaluation are closely bound to local languages, their specific nuances should not be watered down or lost in translation, mostly into European languages (limited to Latin alphabets, with the exception of Greek). In this regard, the great sophistication, wealth and merit of Asian languages—comprising over 2300 spoken languages (FABC 2023, n. 1) and over 280 writing systems—in nurturing religious acumen cannot be ignored. It cannot be denied that the origin and development of Asian religions are intrinsically associated with the flourishing of multiple linguistic traditions. The languages—or codes—we use play a significant role in the way we perceive the world, the insights we have and the decisions we make; they serve as tools for organizing, processing and structuring our thinking (Marian 2023). For these reasons, we need to take stock of local languages along with types of thinking in the intercultural discernment of synodal values and visions present in local cultures (CBCP 2022, pp. 71–73).

4. Intercultural Synodality with Reference to the Asian Context

The previous sections offered some insights into the complexity of the synodal process encompassing the successive stages of discernment (circumspection, introspection, intervision and decision), distinct modes of intercultural dynamics (hermeneutics, critique, and participation) and characteristic ways of thinking (analytic, synthetic, and analogical). We can assume that these intersecting facets of lived synodality, *sentire cum Ecclesia*, are operative in the synodal features of communion, participation and mission (Figure 1), embedded in the diverse religio-cultural, socio-political and ecological-economic spheres of local contexts (ITC 2018, n. 108). In our case, the reference is to the Asian context, with its religious, cultural and socio-economic pluralism. To the extent that the Asian church seeks to be embedded in this pluralistic context, it needs to engage in inculturizing, dialogic and humanizing synodal praxis (Anthony 1997, 2014; Midali 2008).

Although all contemporary world religions, including Christianity, are of Asian origin, Christianity, which has 298 million followers in Asia (6.53%; Catholics comprise 3.31%) is a minority religion in most Asian countries (FABC 2023, n. 1), such as Myanmar (6.2%), India (2.3%), Mongolia (2.1%), Pakistan (1.5%), Thailand (1.17%) and Bangladesh (0.3%), with the exception of Singapore (18.9%), South Korea (29.2%), the Philippines (88.7%), and East Timor (98%). Christianity's minority status in most Asian countries, despite the missionary efforts at its origin, raises the question of its survival or its reduction to a ghetto. Religious diversity in Asia is closely linked to cultural diversity, as religion and culture are bound to each other in an *advaitic* (non-dual) bond, as the soul is to the body (Panikkar 1991). Instead, a range of socio-political and ecological–economic systems have resulted in rapidly developing societies with widespread poverty and ecological threats:

currently, about one billion people are beneath the poverty line of USD 2.15 per day, with 320 million living in extreme poverty (FABC 2023, n. 3–8). This explains why, in the synodal process of the Asian national and regional bishops' conferences, three transversal perspectives ran across the discussion, namely, dialogue with cultures, religions and the poor, which were previously identified by the first assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC I), in 1974. In other words, inculturizing, interreligious and humanizing perspectives—as discussed below—emerge in varying degrees in the three intersecting features of *Communio*, *Partecipatio et Missio inter gentes*. These perspectives suggest an Asian approach to nourishing deeper communion, fuller participation and fruitful mission (SGSB 2021b).

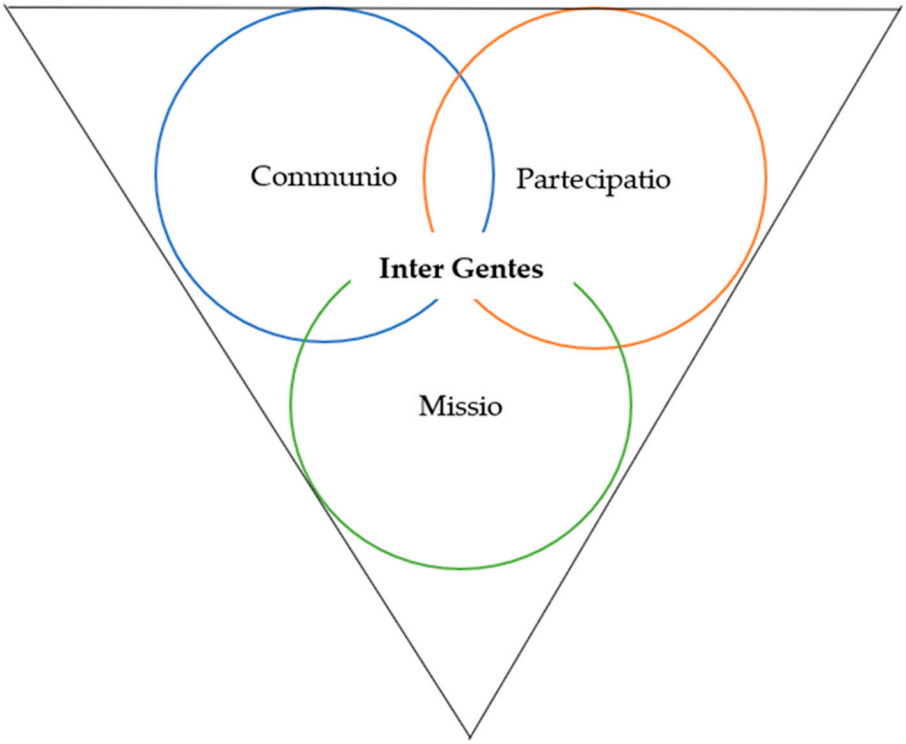

Figure 1. Synodal process of *Communio*, *Partecipatio et Missio inter gentes*. The inverted pyramid stands for the bottom-up synodal process, and the circles stand for the intersecting features of *inter gentes* communion, participation and mission.

To analyze the intercultural synodality emerging through the Asian church, we refer to the sixteen Synthesis Reports of the Synod of Bishops (2021–2023) and the Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (FABC 2023). It is remarkable that in countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia–Singapore–Brunei, Philippines and Thailand, empirical methods were employed in the synodal process, including survey questionnaires (printed or online), tiered consultations, focus-group discussions, in-depth interviews and drawings for children. Among the participants in the survey in Central Asia, foreign parishioners were also included (CECAC 2022, p. 26). Separate online surveys were undertaken among members of other Christian denominations and people of other faiths in Brunei (CBCMSB 2022, p. 14). In the Syro-Malabar Church, the Pastoral Animation Research and Outreach Centre (PAROC) supported the synodal structure through interdisciplinary research in general and psycho-social and pastoral–theological research in particular (SMC 2022, pp. 68–69). An enormous effort was made to translate materials for the synodal process into local languages, given the importance of linguistic nuances and cultural sensitivity (CECAC 2022, pp. 25–26). The diversity of opinions emerging in the Asian synodal process can be attributed to the diversity of ethnicities, cultures, languages and faith stages.

In order to place the themes that emerged in the Asian synodal process—already intercultural in many ways—in a wider intercultural engagement, we refer to the results of an empirical–theological study, "Synodal Way—Global Church Perspectives," undertaken by Catholic Academic Exchange Service (Katholischer Akademischer Ausländer-Dienst—KAAD) and the Institute for the Global Church and Mission (Institut für Weltkirche und Mission—IWM), to solicit the views of Asians (in addition to respondents from other continents) on the basic themes of the German Synodal Assemblies held between 2021 and 2023. The quantitative online research undertaken from 1–17 April 2022 involved 599 respondents from 67 countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. The sample was equally divided between men (56.6%) and women (43.4%). Almost nine-tenths of the respondents were lay people (88.3%) and Roman Catholics (89.2%). In the Asian context, seventy respondents participated in the quantitative research and eight of them participated in the qualitative-research focus group (for further details, see Cerda-Planas 2023). Given that creative and scientific pathways involving theological faculties and research centers were also solicited, with a view to widening the discussion, we also refer to the findings of some of our empirical–theological research, associated with the synodal focus on communion, participation and mission. The significance of empirical–theological research in the synodal process is derived from the fact that these are based on the lived experiences of Christians and followers of other religious traditions, as *locus theologicus* (Wijlens 2022, p. 41; Eckholt 2022, p. 155).

4.1. Communio Inter Gentes ad Intra et ad Extra

Above all, the synodal process is an exercise in *inter gentes* synodality (Paranhos and Ponte 2022), aiming at three objectives: fostering communion, increasing participation and relaunching the mission (SGSB 2021a, n. 1; Czemy 2022). The fostering of communion is not only *ad intra* ecclesial, but also *ad extra*, embracing other Christian denominations, other religions and the global world, viewing synodality as an interface between the Church and the world (Martins Filho 2022). The new and eternal covenant, the God–human–cosmos covenant in Christ's eternal embrace of the wood of the Cross and the outpouring of the Spirit, is the core of trinitarian communion (ITC 2018, n. 116; CET 2022, pp. 42, 43, 45) and the ecclesial communion of communities (FABC 2023, n. 171). As *modus vivendi et operandi*, namely, as a specific form of living and acting, communion is the fount of synodality and the underlying rationale of mission. Lived ecclesial communion results from sincere self-giving, union with God and union with brothers and sisters in Christ (ITC 2018, n. 43). The mystery of married couples' experiences of communion in the domestic church has its specific significance here, as well as parish communities composed of the former (Noceti 2022b, pp. 174–78, 235–42). The reflection of the Asian synodal process—as discussed below—is particularly focused on the problems in and prospects of communion in Catholic families and parishes.

4.1.1. Communion in the Family

The first *locus* of communion is the family, the domestic church, comprising the spouses, children and elderly relatives of the household (KWI 2022, pp. 6, 9–10; FABC 2023, n. 142). However, the growing reality in Central Asia, India, Malaysia, Myanmar, Laos, etc., is that of wounded and broken families, with separated, divorced and remarried couples; of single parents and live-in and polygamous partners; of the orphans and homeless children of dysfunctional families and anti-social personalities; and of victims of domestic violence, incest, honor killings, etc. (CBCMSB 2022, p. 7; CBCB 2022, pp. 12–13; CCBI 2022, p. 38; CELAC 2022, p. 60; CBCM 2022, p. 22; FABC 2023, n. 141, 155–56, 169). Furthermore, in the Indian context, young men and women show reluctant attitudes to married life, viewing it as obsolete and leading to bondage, overly conditioned by internet addiction, pornography, mental stress, etc. (SMCMAC 2022, pp. 73, 76; FABC 2023, n. 139–40). This state of affairs suggests the fear of the erosion of the basic Christian doctrines of family and morality (CECAC 2022, pp. 31–32).

In the Indonesian and Indian contexts, there are mixed or interfaith marriages, in which one of the first difficulties experienced is the need to overcome differences in the ratification of these marriage ties. On the positive side, interfaith marriage ties create opportunities to exercise interfaith dialogue and collaboration (KWI 2022, pp. 9–10; CCBI 2022, p. 38; FABC 2023, n. 123–26, 143). In Laos, mixed couples tend to practice two religions at the same time and bring up the question of double belonging: Is it necessary for individuals to give up their religion in such situations (CELAC 2022, pp. 48, 50, 60)? Evidently, in contexts such as that of Thailand, Catholics married to persons of other faiths require proper formation—seminars and conferences—to instill faith, devotion, and unity in the family, and to grow in mutual understanding and respect for differences, since the family is a place of lived witness (CBCT 2022, p. 31). In this vein, new lay movements, such as the Home Mission, the Judith Forum Movement (for widows), and the Missionary Couples of Christ, could be valued as contributing to the empowerment of family and social relationships (SMC 2022, p. 69).

Interestingly, when the Asian respondents in the empirical study "Synodal Way—Global Church Perspectives" (Cerda-Planas 2023) were asked if "it is right and important that the church's teachings—generally and in the local context—deals so intensively with the topic of sexuality," they demonstrated strong approval (mean 4.13, on a five-point scale, also used in other cases referred to below). In this respect, the Asian responses were similar to those of the Latin American (mean 4.16) and African (mean 4.20) respondents. In response to another statement, "It is correct and should remain so that, according to church teaching, sexuality may have its place only in a Catholic marriage blessed by the Church," the Asian respondents manifested a lesser degree of approval (mean 3.43), probably due to the multireligious situations of some of their families. When asked "if in future diocesan priests should be able to choose whether they want to be celibate or whether they want to marry," the Asian respondents manifested the lowest agreement tendency with regard to the possibility of married priests (mean 2.81) when compared to the respondents from the other continents. This was in contrast to the fact that one of the Asian synodal suggestions was that married priests might better understand the situations of families (CECAC 2022, p. 30). On the other hand, when compared to the other respondents, Asia had the highest levels of agreement with regard to "the actuality and adequacy of priestly celibacy" (mean 3.40). The impact of the Asian religious heritage may be perceived here: although married priests are common among other religions, Asians have a deep respect for celibate monks and ascetics. Catholic secular and religious priests enjoy the esteem of the local people, even of non-Christians, for their total dedication to the divine manifested in their choice of celibacy.

The conversations with the Asian respondents during the qualitative phase of the research confirmed the findings of the assessment: celibacy is viewed as a key aspect and valued as a particular gift that is given for priests' Christian witness and, as such, it should be safeguarded. Instead, giving priests the opportunity to marry would result in their becoming unable to adequately focus on their work in the Christian community. Married priests would be busy looking after their families and their communities, without being able to commit themselves completely to either. In the opinion of the Asian focus group, the commitment and absolute dedication of priests to their ecclesial service have an elevated value and need to be protected. Furthermore, the respondents also drew attention to the value of the Christian family as a witness to faith, unlike that of priests, but equally valuable, especially in the present times. In addition, the Asian participants also mentioned that sexuality was an issue that belonged exclusively to people's private lives; since Asia is a region characterized by traditional cultures, there would not be high expectations regarding reforms of the current doctrine in this sector. Thus, the areas of family life, celibacy and the moral dimension of sexuality emerged as topics of synodal intercultural debate.

4.1.2. Communion in the Parish

The second basic *locus* of communion, namely, the parish as a communion of communities, is challenged by diversity and differences based on ethnicity, culture and religion. Living in a multicultural society necessitates intercultural engagement, which entails the sharing of ideas and the acknowledgement of differences, with the aim of developing a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and practices. This inclusive outlook needs to be fostered to overcome disbelief or mistrust among ethnic tribes that have suffered trauma or wounds in the past. In this regard, the Myanmar church augurs bridge-building amidst a plurality of cultural, ethnic and religious traditions. This entails capacity building among lay people for the specific tasks of dialoguing with people of other faiths, mediating in conflict situations and pro-actively contributing to organizations in civil society (CBCM 2022, pp. 20–21, 31). As a consequence, parish boundaries are to be redefined—according to the Syro-Malankara Church—to include non-Catholics and non-Christians in their area (SMCMAC 2022, p. 74). In the context of the Philippines, it is felt that the Church and *barangay* (villages) should denounce the conflicts arising among tribes, between military and armed groups, etc. (CBCP 2022, p. 63).

Discrimination based on caste, language, ethnicity and economic, academic and social status is not uncommon within Christian communities. Indian communities are of the view that diversity within the Church and society must become a source for celebration, eradicating various forms of discrimination and poverty (CCBI 2022, p. 38; SMCMAC 2022, p. 79; FABC 2023, n. 128–29, 144–45). This would imply the proper representation of *Dalit* faithful and of other marginalized groups in ecclesial and civil structures (CCBI 2022, p. 42; SMC 2022, p. 54).

Among some local communities, there is a lack of interaction, due to language barriers, with foreign believers. Since the Japanese and Korean Societies are increasingly multinational, there is a need to advocate praying together across nationalities and cultures (e.g., Philippines and Vietnam). In fact, migrants and their families desire to attend eucharistic celebrations—the locus of communion—without experiencing language or political barriers. The acceptance of North Korean defectors as companions in the synodal process was a positive response in this regard (CBCJ 2022, pp. 19–22, 29; CBCK 2022, pp. 33, 36). The presence of foreign Christians, namely, migrant workers and tourists, from different parts of Asia and the rest of the world, requires that local community be open to dialogue with other cultures on the basis of love, justice and peace-making (CBCT 2022, p. 38).

In the context, for example, of Indian and Thai parish communities, Basic Christian/Ecclesial Communities emerge as a new way of being Church. In this vein, the Asian phenomenon of Basic Human Communities includes members of other religious traditions living in the same neighborhood to promote justice and the common good (Quevedo 2022; CCBI 2022, pp. 47, 49; CBCT 2022, p. 31; KWI 2022, p. 14; FABC 2023, n. 136, 150). Furthermore, *Khrista-Bhaktas* (Devotees of Christ) exemplify new communities emerging in some Indian dioceses, constituted by people who love and worship Christ, without wishing to receive baptisms for social and political purposes. With their deep faith in and personal relationship with Christ, they offer a convincing form of witness to other Christian communities (CCBI 2022, p. 38; SMC 2022, p. 58). The emergence of *Khrista-Bhaktas*, mixed marriages, etc., raises the question of whether different phases or levels of ecclesial belonging can be envisaged (van Leeuwen 1984).

While the shaping of linguistic, ethnic, social, religious and national identities by diversity can contribute positively to Asian societies and churches, it can also give rise to discrimination and violence (FABC 2023, n. 51). In the context of the International Research Project "Values, Religion and Human Rights" (Anthony 2022), 942 senior-school students differing in their religious identities from Tamil Nadu responded to a specific section meant only for the Indian students on diversity and discrimination. The findings showed that the students clearly agreed that religious, caste, gender and racial discrimination are opposed to both their understanding of human rights and their religious beliefs. However, they seemed to view the culture of discrimination as slightly more opposed to human rights than to their

religious beliefs. We also found that Christians are significantly more sensitive than Hindus to gender discrimination, in relation to both their understanding of human-rights values and their religious beliefs. Similarly, they are more sensitive to religious discrimination than Hindus on the basis of their religious beliefs. On these questions, the Muslim respondents were between the other two religious groups. Overall, Christians seem to be particularly sensitive to gender discrimination. This may derive from the Christian vision of the human person closely bound to the incarnation of the divine. It could also depend on their greater association with the Western feminist culture. Furthermore, their greater opposition to religious discrimination may depend on their own experience of belonging to a minority religion and feeling degraded as foreign, despite the religion's probable presence in South India since the first century and its flourishing communities in the region from the fourth century.

Curiously, this challenging area of religio-cultural diversity and discrimination was not discussed in the questions posed to the respondents in the empirical study "Synodal Way—Global Church Perspectives." Perhaps the German synodal process does not consider this as a crucial challenge in its local context. However, given the massive rate of migration of people to Western countries, particularly of the young (Anthony 2015), intercultural–theological discernment on this issue would be relevant in the macro phase of the synodal process, involving continental representatives of the global Church.

4.2. Partecipatio Inter Gentes ad Intra et ad Extra

The second objective—promoting greater participation—is founded on the priestly, prophetic and governing/diaconal functions not only of ordained members, but of all the baptized. Synodality, as an exercise in participation, is intended to breathe life into church structures (ITC 2018, n. 46–48), encouraging co-creativity, co-participation and co-responsibility, by sharing power in terms of service (Brighenti 2022) and harmonizing the roles of the people of God, priests, bishops and the successor to Peter. Viewing synodality from the perspective of the laity, Pope Francis (2015) describes an inverted pyramid in his discussion of altering the dominant role of the hierarchy. This also implies the conversion of the papacy, in recognition of the centrality of the laity (Pope Francis 2013, n. 32). The key questions are: What should the laity be? And what are they, in fact? (Vélez 2022). It is not sufficient to recognize that all the faithful are anointed by the Spirit; it is indispensable to listen to their voices. In other words, the laity must participate in the processes of discernment, decision-making, planning and implementation (John Paul II 1988, n. 51). Obviously, religious women and men, with their respective charisms, also have special contributions to make in this regard. This implies a recognition of the primacy of *sensus fidei*, exercised as the *sensus fidelium* of the totality of the baptized, including of the poor and the marginalized (Pope Francis 2013, n. 119, 198; Vélez 2022, p. 52). The Asian synodal process—as summarized below—brought into focus the identities and roles of priests, religious, the laity and, specifically, women, with a view to supporting participation and transformational leadership (Noceti 2022b, pp. 186, 190–93, 205–7).

4.2.1. Participation of Priests and Religious

Ministerial priests are expected to inspire baptismal priests, namely, the laity, to become full, active and conscious participants in the Church's governance and liturgical celebrations (PCBC 2022, p. 50). Instead, priests and religious tend to be preoccupied with the administration of institutions and fail to engage in meaningful encounters and dialogues. There have been cases of priests becoming overly secular, dependent on vices, engaged in business, owning vast properties, and misusing parish funds. In other words, some priests have been involved in monetary, verbal and sexual abuses (CCBI 2022, p. 42; CBCP 2022, pp. 59, 62; CBCK 2022, p. 34; FABC 2023, n. 63, 93–94). Unhealthy relationships between the clergy and the faithful, discriminatory approaches and poor leadership have had a negative impact on Christian communities. The authoritarian leadership and patriarchal attitudes of the clergy and the blind obedience and naive reliance on their opinions on the

part of the laity have led to the problem of clericalism (CBCM 2022, p. 28; CBCK 2022, p. 34; FABC 2023, n. 90–92, 112–15).

On the one hand, there is a sharp decline in the vocation of the priesthood and religious life, and on the other, there is a lack of adequate formation courses and programs for the clergy, religious, the laity and Basic Christian/Ecclesial Communities to deepen their specific identities, synodal leadership and synodal spirituality (CCBI 2022, p. 43; CBCJ 2022, p. 23; CBCMSB 2022, p. 14; CBCK 2022, p. 43; CBCM 2022, p. 28; CRBC 2022, p. 16; FABC 2023, n. 166–68, 190). In the Indian context, it was suggested that religious women and the lay faithful could be appointed in major and minor seminaries as formators, members, spiritual guides, counsellors and professors (CCBI 2022, p. 48). In the Myanmar Church, it was felt that the situations of those who have distanced themselves from the Church, like ex-seminarians and former priests and religious, could be reconsidered in the current ecclesial context (CBCM 2022, p. 22).

4.2.2. Participation of Laity and Youth

The history of the Church in Korea and Japan illustrates the crucial role played by the laity in introducing, preserving and sharing the Christian faith for hundreds of years (Quevedo 2022). As in other communities, the laity participates in ministries of lectorship and acolyteship in a spontaneous manner in Bangladesh, without being officially instituted (CBCB 2022, p. 11). Nonetheless, currently, greater attention—according to the Church in Laos—needs to be paid to the formation of ordinary Christians and community leaders for the transmission of faith in the family (CELAC 2022, p. 58). In the Indian context, it was suggested that parish communities should make space for the expertise of the faithful, including men, women and, in particular, youths, by creating inventories of the human resources available in these communities (CCBI 2022, p. 48). Although youths form a significant part of the Asian population (about 65%), they are largely absent from the life of the Church. Instead, youths who frequent the Church stand in need of adequate faith formation and must be included in leadership positions and decision-making processes (FABC 2023, n. 98, 137–38). Given that contemporary youths are technologically literate, there is a need for greater investment in media and communication, to involve them in the ecclesial sphere and to educate them in the critical use of social media (FABC 2023, n. 102, 139).

Christians taking up responsibilities for the society and the nation, namely, involving themselves in social, political and community services as administrators, create awareness—as in Indonesia—that these are integral parts of the mission of the Church (KWI 2022, p. 8). This means that the professionals among the faithful are to be engaged when the Church seeks to address social issues (CBCK 2022, p. 40). Unfortunately, it was noted that there is little dialogue about social and political issues between priests and the laity, as in the context of the Philippines (CBCP 2022, p. 65).

4.2.3. Participation of Women

In both the social and the ecclesial spheres, women are often marginalized as home-makers, domestic workers and working women (PCBC 2022, p. 40). It is felt that greater space needs to be made for women in ministries (CBCMSB 2022, pp. 7, 17; FABC 2023, n. 95–97). Religious women, in particular, feel left out of the decision-making process within the Church (CCBI 2022, p. 41; FABC 2023, n. 65–66).

The empirical study "Synodal Way—Global Church Perspectives" (Cerda-Planas 2023) suggested that Asians manifested strong agreement (mean 4.46)—second only to African respondents—with the important roles women play in their communities. However, they manifested only positive ambivalence (mean 3.16) regarding women's influence on communities and parishes. They manifested some agreement with the possibility of admitting women to the ministries in the Church (mean 3.51).

In relation to this issue, diverse opinions were expressed during the focus-group conversation. On the one hand, the Asian participants recognized that women's work is

mainly related to the domestic sphere of ecclesiastical life and that they are not involved in decision-making processes. For some of them, however, this was not a major setback. Nonetheless, they were of the view that women should be empowered to play a more appropriate role in the community. In this vein, other participants held that it is possible for women to become leaders within the Church and that this should be an area for improvement. Since women have been recognized and integrated into leadership positions in different societal spheres, it should not be a problem for this to take place within the Church. However, there are transversal reservations regarding the ordination of women.

4.2.4. Transformational and Servant Leadership

Underlying the participation of priests, the laity, youths, and women in ecclesial life, there is the question of leadership, implying a certain degree of power. Both within the Church and in society, power needs to be decentralized and made collaborative, encouraging communal discernment and decision-making, with a transformational and empowering model of "servant" leadership (CBCMSB 2022, pp. 16–17; CBCP 2022, p. 73; FABC 2023, n. 86–87, 164). In the resolution of conflicts, there is a need for greater involvement from traditional leaders, religious leaders and government officials. While the lay leadership is particularly evident in small communities, building cooperation and dialogue with religious leaders is indispensable for overcoming the politicization of religious issues and promoting religious moderation in society. The presence of traditional cultural values like respect for and obedience to elders/leaders can help lay people to play leadership roles (Quevedo 2022; CCBI 2022, pp. 47, 49; CBCT 2022, pp. 31, 33; KWI 2022, pp. 10, 15).

The empirical study "Synodal Way—Global Church Perspectives" (Cerda-Planas 2023) found that compared to those from other regions, the Asian (and Latin American) respondents manifested weak ambivalent agreement (mean 3.17) regarding the notion that power and influence are exclusively in the hands of priests and bishops, but their highest level of agreement (mean 4.36)—as in the case of the Middle Eastern respondents—was over the importance of laypeople's influence in the Church and of improvements in the distribution of power in the Church. Comparatively, in the multireligious context, Christianity seems to be undermined by hierarchies (priests and bishops), depending excessively on foreign or Western ecclesial power centers.

In this vein, the Asian participants in the focus group suggested that power within the Church should be the subject of further discussion, although they considered that it is better to conceptualize it as responsibility, since this is a more appropriate term in the ecclesial context. In effect, while power and rights are discussed in the political and civil sectors, Asian religions generally focus more on responsibility. The focus-group participants tended to agree that, generally, priests and bishops assume exclusive decision-making and power positions and that this could eventually be modified in the future. However, in order for this to occur, it is necessary that the laity are prepared to assume tasks for which they are not currently qualified. Furthermore, the participants emphasized that there are no better or worse ecclesial roles; the dignity of all ecclesial roles is the same. In their view, currently, hierarchies are present in different areas of life—such as education or social life—and it is therefore not odd that they also exist in the Church.

Our empirical–theological research project "Spirituality, Education and Leadership" (Anthony and Hermans 2020; Hermans and Anthony 2020) focused on the transformational leadership qualities of the leaders of Higher Secondary Catholic schools run by Salesians in India. The findings—based on 198 respondents (from principals/headmasters, vice principals/assistant headmasters, and key coordinating teachers) to an online questionnaire—revealed that the heads of Salesian schools are characterized by a fairly strong involvement in transformational leadership, comprising idealized attributes and behaviors, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration, in addition to associated rewards. The emerging factor with all hypothesized dimensions reveals an integral understanding of transformational leadership among the heads of schools. The strong impact of discernment on transformational leadership was expected. However,

it is significant that, among the spiritual determinants, discernment emerged as one of the two strongest predictors. In effect, discernment is the compass for navigating good life with and for others over the high sea of spirituality. In other words, discernment is the core of lived spirituality, with which human beings learn to sense the emergence of the good life with and for others and to act and speak accordingly. They report higher levels of discernment if they report a stronger spiritual character trait of self-directed-cooperativeness, more spiritual capital (both in claiming the absolute truth of their own religion and/or in claiming that truth emerges from religious pluralism) and a higher level of mystical experiences.

The above views on the role and formation of priests and the laity could easily reflect the proposals emerging from other local churches with regard to the promotion of ecclesial participation. Although the Asian churches favor the empowerment of women in their ecclesial roles, with the possibility of admitting women to some ministries in the Church, they have reservations regarding the ordination of women. This could be an important theme for intercultural theological discernment at the macro phase of the synodal process. It is noteworthy that, as announced in *L'Osservatore Romano* (26 April 2023), the 70 participants (men and women, including youths), comprising priests, deacons, religious and the laity from local churches participating in the General Assembly of the synodal event in Rome, will have the right to vote on the proposals discussed.

4.3. Missio Inter Gentes ad Intra et ad Extra

If communion is the basis of synodal process, the goal of lived synodality is to discern and promote the mission of evangelization (ITC 2018, n. 53). Historically the Church has been used to *missio ad gentes*, with Western missionaries leaving for other parts of the non-Christian world. Given the uniqueness of the culture and identity of indigenous people, their symbols and images, *missio ad gentes*, i.e., the proclamation of good news to the non-Christian population, called for adaptation, accommodation and, finally, inculturation. With the emergence of Christianity in the southern hemisphere since the Second Vatican Council, missionaries from these churches leave for other parts of the world, including the increasingly secularized European continent. Along with the more theologically positive comprehension of various cultures and religions, this situation emphasizes the urgency of *missio inter gentes,* particularly in the Asian continent (Tan 2004; Anthony 2012a, 2012b, 2013), as well as the necessity of a decolonized planetary theology, working towards a new world order (Balasuriya 1984). In effect, the synodal process entails the exploration of diverse religio-cultural visions and values, along with their integration in the ecclesial praxis of *communio*, *partecipatio et missio inter gentes*. We summarize the synodal debate on the mission of evangelization in the multicultural, multireligious and poverty-stricken Asian context in terms of intercultural, ecumenical, interreligious and humanizing dialogue. The synodal process, recognizing the working of the Spirit in ways known only to God among the peoples of Asia, their history and their socio-cultural realities (John Paul II 1999, n. 15), should lead to *ad intra* ecclesial transformation, i.e., a legitimate plurality of forms of expression of Christian identity, as well as to *ad extra* societal transformation, i.e., to a public theology addressing the common good and a common home (ITC 2018, n. 117–19).

4.3.1. Mission of Evangelization and Witness

Christianity's image as a foreign import results from the fact that Asian churches are the outcomes of *ad gentes* missionary activities originating in Europe. The missionary enterprise was at its height during the colonial and imperialistic expansion of Western powers in several Asian countries, including Myanmar (CBCM 2022, p. 37). Ecclesial power is in fact viewed as based on the imperial colonial past, with its hidden superiority complex. Evangelization in the Asian context therefore requires a decolonized perspective, a decolonial theologization. Since Christians are, at times, ashamed or afraid to declare themselves as members of the Church on account of frequent abusive comments and discrimination in education, employment, etc., as well as their treatment as second-class

citizens, they tend to hide their identity and pretend to be Buddhists or followers of other religious traditions, such as in Laos (CELAC 2022, pp. 52–53).

The credible proclamation of the Gospel springs from the real-life experiences of individual Catholics and communities (CBCT 2022, p. 35). In effect, the lived faith of believers in their respective contexts is already a proclamation of good news. This requires the adequate formation of lay people as evangelizers (CCBI 2022, pp. 42, 48). Families, which are domestic churches, as well as parish communities and Catholic educational institutions can serve as *loci* of evangelization among people of different faiths, cultures and economic statuses (CBCT 2022, p. 29). As the education, healthcare and social development offered by Catholic institutions are appreciated by members of other faiths, these qualified services can serve as witnesses to our faith (CCBI 2022, p. 44).

In the empirical study "Synodal Way—Global Church Perspectives" (Cerda-Planas 2023), we found that compared to those from other regions, the Asian (and African) respondents' strongest point of agreement was the view that "shared participation by lay and clergy in the mission of Church helps in proclaiming the message" (mean 4.59). This tendency probably results from the lived experience of Christians amidst other religious traditions, which are essentially popular religions, i.e., people consider them as their own, with priests called into temple service. There are no territorial divisions headed by priests. It is left to individuals or families to choose to attend one or another temple or sect.

Comparatively, the Asian participants agreed more strongly than the others with the notion that "mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests helps the Church in its credibility and in spreading its message" (mean 3.73). As mentioned above, in the Asian context, the celibacy of monks and priests is viewed as a witness to their total dedication to the divine and to the experience of liberation/salvation. This explains the value of celibacy for spreading good news, which is also a call to follow the master closely as his disciples, chaste, obedient and poor. In the final stage of the synodal process at the macro level, the Asian respondents' view in favor of celibacy in association with its witness value, could be taken up in an intercultural discussion and discernment.

With a view to deepening the discussion, it is opportune to refer to an empirical-theological research project, "Believing and Communicating" (Anthony 2016b), on the urgency of evangelization, undertaken among international students frequenting Pontifical universities in Rome. A total of 567 students responded to the online questionnaire. It is interesting that the urgency of evangelization manifested itself as a continuum starting from broader missionary–ecumenical–pastoral concentric circles. However, the students who responded to the questionnaire tended to feel a greater urgency to evangelize the non-practicing Christians, those who did not belong to any religious tradition, and practicing members of the Church. They manifested a moderate sense of urgency regarding the evangelization of those who belong to other religious traditions (which implies interreligious dialogue) and those who belong to other Christian churches (which requires ecumenical dialogue). This means the demonstration of greater respect in evangelizing those who already have a defined religious identity; however, the relative lack of urgency in these cases can also be explained by a certain lack of interest in or inability to propose the Gospel message in a dialogical way. In the current multidenominational and multireligious context, greater clarity regarding evangelization from the ecumenical and interreligious perspectives could contribute to an increase in zeal among evangelizers, with evangelization understood as a process in which the missionary–ecumenical–pastoral dimensions are intertwined in a continuum, reinforcing the dialogical perspective.

The results of the research also revealed some useful clues concerning theological paradigms. First, in the constants of lived theology, we can distinguish the conservative–static paradigm from the progressive–dynamic alternative. The conservative–static paradigm is characterized by a perennial theology, focused on the ontological dimension and displaying little sensitivity to the value of modern sciences and cultural and religious pluralism. Instead, the progressive–dynamic paradigm represents a theology that develops over time towards the full understanding of truth, embracing the value of modern sciences,

cultures and other religions. The correlational analysis, in turn, showed that the missionary–ecumenical–pastoral urgency felt by those who responded was strongly associated, on the one hand, with the conservative–static paradigm, that is, ecclesiocentrism, individual eschatology and religious monism and, on the other, with the progressive–dynamic paradigm, that is, integral Christology (the integration of Christology from above and below), optimistic anthropology, cultural pluralism and extroverted mysticism. This means that the urgency to evangelize can be sustained by both the conservative–static and the progressive–dynamic paradigms. The regression analysis, however, revealed that the predictability of the feeling of the urgency of evangelization is linked to the affirmation of cultural pluralism and integral Christology, as well as to the attenuation of anthropological pessimism. Therefore, in order to strengthen evangelical zeal, greater clarity in terms of the figure of Christ, the value of culture and the dignity of the human person is indispensable. Furthermore, in the post-conciliar context, the link between missionary–ecumenical–pastoral urgency and the conservative–static paradigm, comprising ecclesiocentrism, individual eschatology and religious monism, becomes ambiguous and problematic if it is not critically reviewed from the dialogic–communion perspective.

4.3.2. Mission of Inculturation and Interculturation

Various languages and cultural groups in Asia represent different ways of perceiving the world, the Church and human reality (CBCMSB 2022, p. 3). Overcoming the dichotomy between cultural identities and Christian life poses the challenge of inculturation. The latter also involves challenging the cultural elements that dehumanize people (CBCM 2022, p. 30). A lack of proper inculturation can lead to unacceptable levels of religious syncretism (CET 2022, p. 41).

Although they are already lived out to some extent, more space must be made for vernacular languages, cultural musical instruments, regional music, local styles of liturgical vestments, etc. The challenge in the Asian context is that of the integration and inclusion of many cultures in the liturgy in an intercultural perspective (CBCM 2022, p. 27; CCBI 2022, p. 43; FABC 2023, n. 117–18). In other words, inculturation in the local cultural context is a necessary condition to initiate mutual enrichment or interculturation between churches. Such cultural differences can be lived as opportunities for unity in diversity. In effect, ethnic Christian communities have their own diverse lifestyles, customs, cultures and languages, and they can coexist peacefully and work for the common good (CBCT 2022, p. 39; FABC 2023, n. 120–21).

Furthermore, a dialogue with God's creation—according to the Thai and Laos churches—can be ensured by incorporating valuable local cultural elements into local liturgies to make the celebration meaningful: forest rituals, the blessing of rice fields, watersheds, fish, the custom of *basi*—the watering of the statues of saints during the New Year—and offering food during liturgies, etc. (CBCT 2022, p. 30; CELAC 2022, pp. 52–53, 59). However, the practice of faith in connection with local cultural traditions is not always feasible, as in the case of customary weddings, the celebration of the Lao New Year, which often falls during Holy Week, etc. Evangelization can be undertaken—as in the Cambodian context—through Khmer Art (Yeeke, Ba-Sak, Lakhon Khol and other performances) in local languages (CELAC 2022, pp. 60, 66).

By contrast, foreign priests, who pose linguistic and cultural barriers, become, to some extent, obstacles to building up local communities. This means that parish priests who are foreign nationals need proficiency in the local language and familiarity with the local culture. Without these factors, the local people become indifferent to faith, turn to other religions, or practice two religions, indulging in superstitious beliefs or divination (CELAC 2022, pp. 48–50; CRBC 2022, p. 17). Moreover, insufficient pastoral care paves the way for other religious fundamentalists to proselytize the Catholic faithful easily, on account of their poverty and ignorance (CBCM 2022, p. 34). For these reasons, addressing the ethnic cultures of Christians through trained catechists is a growing need (CBCT 2022, p. 30).

To delve deeper into this topic, we refer to our empirical–theological research on "Ecclesial praxis of inculturation" (Anthony 1997, 1999b), undertaken among 990 Catholic higher-secondary students and 390 Catholic teachers in Tamil Nadu, India. Firstly, the findings clarified that in a holistic approach, culture must be viewed in connection with its religious and/or ideological core and, consequently, that inculturation is inseparably bound to the processes of interreligious dialogue and liberation. Secondly, inculturation is a question of the relation between ecclesial faith and societal culture, specifically the forging of a dialogical, diacritical and dialectical relationship between the two poles. Thirdly, the dynamic process of inculturation is guided and oriented by the internal regulative mechanism generated by the corrective and complementary roles of the two points of convergence: salvation/liberation and *anubhava* (God–experience). Finally, on the subjective plane, these relationships are to be realized in the cognitive, affective and operative components of attitude/praxis, since inculturation is essentially a question of subjects' agency and lifestyle. In and through the subjective components of praxis, native Christians become the agent-subjects of inculturation. The inculturizing praxis of agent-subjects, in turn, depends on their predisposition towards this praxis, i.e., on their inculturizing attitude, as well as on the external contextual factors that determine both attitude and praxis.

Because the Christian faith has, through the centuries, saturated the Western cultural context, it may appear that inculturation is a necessity only for the churches of the southern hemisphere. Instead, as was made clear by the Asian synodal discussion and related empirical research, the churches in the Western world need to take up the challenge of inculturation in the context of secular culture and enrich themselves interculturally with the developments in the younger churches in the synodal process.

4.3.3. Mission of Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue

As small minorities, living and operating within multicultural and multireligious societies, Christians in Myanmar, China and the rest of Asia face the challenge of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Christians have a special responsibility to develop new forms of living together with their brothers and sisters from other religious traditions. In this endeavor, divisions within Christianity are obstacles to giving a credible witness to the Gospel. In fact, denominationally divided missionary enterprise cause further divisions (CBCM 2022, pp. 33, 37; CECAC 2022, p. 29; CRBC 2022, pp. 18–19; FABC 2023, n. 75–77). However, local churches do not seem prepared for dialogue with other Christian denominations and religions, such as Islam, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism (KWI 2022, p. 11; CBCK 2022, pp. 38–39; CET 2022, p. 48). Living in villages with different religious denominations—as in the context of Laos—can be both a challenge and an opportunity for Catholics to bear witness to their faith. As the faith of many Christians is still impregnated with Buddhist or superstitious practices, this can help or hinder the evangelization of local traditions and cultural practices, such as participating in Buddhist feast days, offering food to monks for transmitting merits to the dead, and seeking auspicious days for weddings or building houses (CELAC 2022, pp. 54, 57).

The push for Islamization and policies restricting religious freedom in some parts of Asia, like Malaysia, can make the young vulnerable to the temptations of interfaith conversion (CBCMSB 2022, pp. 7, 8). As a minority community in an Islamic country, Christians face the challenge of forced conversion, the misuse of blasphemy laws, forced and underage marriages, discrimination in workplaces and in education, inaccurate census data, attacks on Churches and Christian colonies, mob/suicide attacks, bomb blasts, etc. Faced with these situations, Christian communities live under a state of fear and face new forms of "martyrdom" (FABC 2023, n. 61–62, 109–11, 130). These threats and the lack of adequate pastoral care force the faithful either to join other denominations or to convert to other religions (PCBC 2022, pp. 44, 48). Religious fundamentalism, fanaticism and anti-conversion laws seriously sully the attempts to develop dialogue in countries like India and Japan. Moreover, the allegedly foreign character of Christianity hinders its dialogue with civil society (CCBI 2022, p. 45; CBCJ 2022, p. 22; FABC 2023, n. 146).

Although intra/interfaith harmony is promoted in terms of participation in festivals, devotions, praying with non-believers, civic movements and ecological initiatives (PCBC 2022, p. 42; CCBI 2022, p, 44; CBCJ 2022, p. 23), it is feared that such interactions with other religions can easily swallow up Christians if they are not formed well (CBCT 2022, p. 38). For this reason, the formation of the young needs to be based on church teachings on interfaith relationships and to advocate community development for the underprivileged (CBCMSB 2022, p. 8). In this vein, a need is felt for the ongoing exposure of non-Christian faculty and staff members, as well as the students and patrons of Christian institutions, to the Gospel message and its values (CBCJ 2022, p. 25). An example of a positive experience in this regard is the encounter between Catholic and Buddhist monks and lay Cambodian Buddhists to "create a new culture." Although these groups differ in terms of religious affiliations, there is a conviction that all can contribute to the common good (CELAC 2022, p. 64). Similarly, as a dialogue on life, there are also positive experiences of joining other denominations to celebrate some feasts like Christmas Day, Elder's day, International Human Rights Day and the network for environmental conservation (CBCT 2022, p. 32; CCBI 2022, pp. 44–45; SMC 2022, pp. 59, 67)

Our cross-religious comparative research project, "Religion and Conflict Attribution" (Anthony et al. 2014), focusing on the interpretation of religious plurality, religiosity, mystical experience, religiocentrism and religious conflict, was undertaken among Christian, Muslim and Hindu college students in Tamil Nadu, India, with 1920 respondents. Instead of presenting specific details of this complex research, we focus on the key aspect of interpreting religious plurality, on which the research produced three reliable cross-religious comparative models: monism (combining replacement monism and fulfilment monism), commonality pluralism (acknowledging the underlying common ground) and differential pluralism (acknowledging the value and richness of differences). The model that proved to be most acceptable to the three religious groups was commonality pluralism, with Hindus differing significantly from the other two. The Hindus seemed to be the most open to the underlying commonality of religions. Differential pluralism received ambivalent responses from the three groups, with no significant differences between them. The model that was contested by the three religious groups was monism. The Christians ambivalently tended towards agreement with this point of view, whereas the Muslims agreed with monism. The Hindus, by contrast, disagreed with the monistic interpretation and differed significantly from the other two groups. The Hindu students were found to be the least exclusive and the most open to the commonality underlying the other religions. Since the Second Vatican Council, the Christian community seems to have been in the process of overcoming the traditional monistic–exclusive approach to other religions.

Insofar as the traditionally Christian Western world is becoming multireligious through the migration of people from other continents and through Western Christians adopting other religious traditions, the experiences of the churches in the Asian continent can be helpful in synodal discernment.

4.3.4. Mission of Liberation and Humanization

Evangelization requires that the Church engage in dialogue with the poor and their unjust and oppressive situation, promote justice, protect human rights, prevent human trafficking and care for creation. In other words, we need to humanize society at large by addressing human-rights issues associated with freedom of religion, socioeconomic rights, civil rights, the right to life, environmental rights, etc. (CBCK 2022, pp. 32, 37; CBCT 2022, pp. 26, 29–31; CECAC 2022, p. 30; CRBC 2022, p. 18; FABC 2023, n. 70, 151). This means that the Church should be willing to work with civil society, the political establishment, the cultural realm and the business world (CET 2022, p. 47; CECAC 2022, p. 29). More concretely, the Church should facilitate dialogue on political issues such as election fraud, vote buying, cultural bias and stereotyping (CBCP 2022, p. 66). The ecological crisis, in turn, also invites dialogues over nature and culture for the protection of ecosystems; it calls

for creative conversations about our common home, i.e., how we live, learn and work in dialogue with nature (CBCM 2022, p. 33; CBCK 2022, p. 45; FABC 2023, n. 133–34, 178–79).

There is a growing conviction that the lay faithful require adequate formation to be able to participate in public life, engage in dialogue with civil authorities and collaborate with the state on matters of common concern: catering to the marginalized, immigrants, unemployed, street children, refugees, displaced people, etc. (CCBI 2022, pp. 45–46; CBCJ 2022, p. 18; CRBC 2022, pp. 13–14; FABC 2023, n. 103–7, 151). In other words, the laity should be empowered and encouraged to involve themselves in the existential conditions of the stigmatized and marginalized in society: *Orang Asal* and *Asli* (indigenous populations), *Dalits*, LGBTQIA+ people, drug addicts, gangsters, etc. (CBCMSB 2022, p. 3; CBCP 2022, pp. 61, 66; PCBC 2022, p. 50; CBCT 2022, p. 31; CET 2022, p. 42; CCBI 2022, p. 43; FABC 2023, n. 67–69, 108, 148, 169).

In the empirical study, "Synodal Way—Global Church Perspectives" (Cerda-Planas 2023), we found that, unlike the respondents from the African region, who manifest clear disagreement, the Asian respondents showed a rather high level of acceptance concerning the new assessment of homosexuality (mean 3.80). In the Asian context, this may depend on the general pragmatic socio-religious approach to the phenomenon. The references to homosexuality in religious mythology might also make it more tolerable. However, in the focus group, the participants mentioned that homosexuality is culturally rejected in several Asian countries, and therefore, they did not see the need for any modifications to Church's stand in this matter.

An International Empirical Research Project, "Religion and Human Rights," was undertaken in over 20 countries in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America. In the context of Tamil Nadu, India, 1215 Christian, Muslim and Hindu college students participated as respondents. With a view to examining the human-rights attitudes of the young, the questionnaire included scales on the right to life (Anthony and Sterkens 2019a), civil rights (Anthony and Sterkens 2016), judicial rights (Anthony and Sterkens 2019b), political rights (Anthony and Sterkens 2018), socioeconomic rights (Anthony and Sterkens 2020) and the separation of religion from the state (Anthony 2023). The findings revealed that among all the categories of human rights, socioeconomic rights and the right-to-life issue of abortion, for psycho-economic reasons emerged, as distinct categories in the perception of the young (Anthony and Sterkens 2021). The young respondents manifested a clear tendency towards agreement on socioeconomic rights, with the Christians expressing significantly stronger agreement than the Muslims and Hindus. The three religious groups affirmed that they might engage in human-rights activism if necessary. The findings emerging in the overall project in the Indian context suggest that the Christian, Muslim and Hindu religious traditions can offer a meta-ethical basis for critically upholding socioeconomic and other rights. This is in line with the fact that religions, with their beliefs, experiences and practices, aspire to contribute to human flourishing, liberation and salvation.

The fact that socioeconomic injustice and discrimination are the major issues taken up in the mission of humanization in Asia and, furthermore, that the predicament of those who are stigmatized and marginalized for their sexual orientation is a dominant issue in the Western world, can provide opportunities for intercultural synodal discernment from the perspectives of Asian, European and other continental churches.

As shown above, the Asian synodal reflection on the mission of evangelization has been specified in terms of inculturation, interreligious dialogue and humanization. Although, in the Asian synodal reflection, the terms mission and evangelization are equally utilized, it must be remembered that mission, indicating the third focus of the synodal process, was commonly used from the 16th century until the end of political colonialism. Mission itself, in the specific sense of *missio ad gentes*, succeeds other terms such as the conversion of the tribal or indigenous populations of the European continent (used until the clash with Islam during the 9th and 10th centuries) and crusade (used practically until the discovery of the New World). Contemporary ecclesial parlance is replete with terms such as evangelization, evangelism, new evangelization and re-evangelization. Evange-

lization (popular among Roman Catholics and Protestant evangelical movements) and evangelism (used by Protestant ecumenicals)—both derivatives of the New Testament *euangelizethai*/*euangelizein*—were introduced into theological debate at the end of the 19th century. The term that was prevalent in the early centuries of the Christian era (up to the 4th century) was witness (Anthony 1999a). Since the term mission still suggests colonial supremacy, it is more appropriate in the multireligious Asian context to utilize evangelization or *missio inter gentes*, in a spirit of mutually sharing the joy of God's mysterious life-giving presence.

5. Conclusions

Our aim was to consider the Asian synodal praxis of *communio*, *partecipatio et missio* as an intercultural lived ecclesiology, postulating *inter gentes* discernment as the core methodology through a series of triangulations of intersecting perspectives. From an all-encompassing theological stance, we describe triangulation in terms of *Cosmotheandric* (God–humanity–creation) communion (Panikkar 1993; Anthony 2014, 2020b), participation and mission. Furthermore, the synodal process is *inter gentes* to the extent that it engages the ecclesial praxis of Catholic communities in dialogue with the Christian praxis of other denominations, the religious praxis of other religions and the ethical praxis of atheists or non-believers. In effect, the synodal process as *inter gentes* praxis *ad intra* and *add extra* develops as a continuum of ecclesial–Christian–religious–humanizing praxis.

Within the Catholic Church, starting with the laity, in an inverted pyramid, the synodal process has shifted from micro and meso levels to reach the macro level of the worldwide Church. This process has engaged the members of local communities, together with their pastoral agents and leaders, as well as making space for professionals and researchers in pastoral/practical and empirical theology. In the present study, an attempt was made to bring into focus the contributions of communities and of their leaders, as well as integrating the results of some empirical research associated with the synodal process and the major themes emerging in the Asian Church.

If synodal praxis is the lived ecclesiology of the baptized, then empirical–theological research is indispensable for diagnosing the state of this praxis. If synodality is a community endeavor and if community provides the criteria for authenticity and success, then empirical–theological research seems ideal for the monitoring of this process, since empirical methodology offers an approach to concretizing the notion of *sensus fidelium* and *consensus fidelium* for moving forward theologically (van der Ven 1993). Empirical research similar to the studies referred to above can make native Christians more conscious of the process in which they are involved as agent-subjects and become more competent in monitoring its progress.

The synodal process is intercultural to the extent that it endorses the triangulation of intercultural hermeneutics (based on diverse linguistic traditions embracing meaning systems), intercultural critique (based on diverse ethical mores encompassing value systems) and intercultural participation (based on diverse expressive features embodying the linguistic, symbolic and artistic domains). In and through the intersection of these modes, synodality evolves as an ongoing process of intercultural discernment.

Given that the synodal process entails the personal agency of believers, it engages the triangulation of thinking, feeling and behaving. Insofar as the synodal process is particularly focused on argumentation, discussion and debate, it is fruitful to be attentive to the three types of thinking that characterize diverse continental populations: exclusive or analytic thinking (Western populations), inclusive or synthetic thinking (Eastern populations) and relational or analogical thinking (Chinese and African populations).

These triangulations underscore the urgent need for a polycentric Church, with the Pope representing the center of unity as *primus inter pares*. The global Church, resulting from the de-territorialization of the Christian faith from the mother church of Jerusalem, must engage in diachronic interculturation, namely, with the historic cultural developments (Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Western, etc.) that have contributed to the shaping of

ecclesial faith. Furthermore, there is now a need for synchronic interculturation to shape future ecclesial developments. In this regard, it appears that the Church of the Third Millennium will be the Third Church, namely, that of the Southern hemisphere (Asia, Africa and Latin America), following the Second Church, namely, the Western Church, which has flourished since the beginning of the second millennium and, previously, the First Church, the Eastern Church of the first millennium up to the schism of 1054 (Buhlmann 1977; ITC 2018, n. 116; Galli 2022, p. 84).

Synodal praxis is a complex transformative process entailing mutual enrichment and reciprocal critique at all levels, namely, at the micro, meso and macro levels. In effect, *inter gentes* implies encountering and listening to alterity, namely, culturally different subjects; this type of encounter does not annul the diversity and differences. The Church should, in fact, be willing to engage in dialogue on the macrocosmic plane, in each situation and time, listening in particular to those on the margins, to secure genuine growth (Pope Francis 2013, n. 171; Martins Filho 2022).

Since there is a need for continuous ecclesial reform and transformation (Pope Francis 2013, n. 26), synodal praxis should make space for disagreement, contestation and dissension as constituent features (Gruber 2020; Join-Lambert 2022, pp. 362–63). This dynamic should lead to communion amidst disagreement, the convergence of plurality in unity, pluriform unity and diversity in harmony (ITC 2018, n. 109d, 111). We may refer to such a state as unidiverse, to apply a neologism by Francis de Sales ([1616] 1997, p. 68). The synodal journey, therefore, is not to be absorbed into one dominant discourse; it is not to be confused with uniformity or homogeneity. It is a journey of interdependence in which unity cannot totally eliminate conflict. It denotes a certain tension between the local and the global, in which neither the whole nor its parts are dissolved (Pope Francis 2013, n. 226–30; 2020a, n. 142, 144 148; Martins Filho 2022). The polyhedral model, open to differential forms of consensus, requires a new model of communication that is pluri-directional and polyphonic, animated by the Spirit (Rush 2022, p. 238; Noceti 2022a, p. 275).

It is unity in diversity that witnesses the presence and working of the Holy Spirit. The discreet and harmonious action of the Spirit overcomes our limited horizons and opens us to the excess of divine overabundance (Galli 2022, pp. 85–90). We are not sure where this journey will take us or how the process will evolve, but we must listen to the divine call and take risks (de San Martín 2022, p. 142). This means having the courage to engage in intercultural theology as radically hermeneutic theology (Gruber 2018) and as process theology, i.e., theology in process, religion in process (van der Ven 2020). In effect, the synodal journey is the way to continually transform the Church, so as to make it an ever-recognizable and effective "universal sacrament of salvation," an "all embracing cosmotheandric communion" in time and space.

The *Instrumentum laboris* for the final stages of this complex synodal path, with its holistic scope, was approved by members of the Secretariat of the Synod on Synodality during their meeting (10–11 May 2023) in Rome. The document, published on 29 May 2023, is mainly addressed to those who will participate in the next session of the Synod of Bishops, scheduled to run from 4th to 29th October 2023. It is our hope that the present study from the Asian perspective is of relevance to the ongoing synodal process.

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Abbreviations

CBCB	Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh
CBCJ	Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan
CBCK	Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea
CBCM	Catholic Bishops' Conference of Myanmar
CBCMSB	Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia–Singapore–Brunei
CBCP	Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines
CBCT	Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand
CCBI	Conference of Catholic Bishops of India
CECAC	Catholic Bishops' Conference of Central Asia
CELAC	Catholic Bishops' Conference of Laos and Cambodia
CET	Catholic Bishops' Conference of East Timor
CRBC	Chinese Regional Bishops' Conference
FABC	Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences
ITC	International Theological Commission
KWI	Konferensi Walifereja Indonesia
PCBC	Pakistan Catholic Bishops' Conference
SGSB	Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops
SMC	Syro-Malabar Church
SMCMAC	Syro-Malankara Catholic Major Archiepiscopal Church

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Intercultural Theology Competence for an Intercultural Faith Education

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Abstract: The article begins with clarifying what an Intercultural Faith Education would mean in a global culture that seems to be growing more pronounced in its pluralistic nature. Taking for granted the evident fact that Intercultural theology is the bedrock for a faith education in an intercultural context, it seeks to enumerate certain specific Intercultural theology competences that can render the process of intercultural faith education possible, significant and feasible. From a catechetical or faith education point of view, it analyses the three perspectives of faith that intercultural theology should promote, namely, the dialogic personalisation of faith, the prophetic challenging of faith and the cohesive exchange of faith—corresponding to personal and interpersonal dimensions, communitarian and social dimensions and expressive and missionary dimensions of faith, respectively. Each of these three perspectives declinate themselves into at least three specific competences, amounting to nine practical competences in all: comparative understanding, critical interpretation, cultural collaboration, the recognition of power equations, the ratification of identity formation, the recommendation of theological *bonum*, equality of expression in faith, an eagerness to learn and empathy in engagement. Interpreting each of these competences and their distinctive contributions, the article configures the foundational framework of intercultural theology for intercultural faith education in terms of these competences.

Keywords: competences; faith; interculturality; intercultural competences; intercultural faith education; intercultural theology

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1. Introduction

Catechesis, pronouncedly understood as a communicative and educational act (DC, nn. 136, 140)[1]—which is also referred to as "Faith Education"—is not merely about information to be passed on. It is essentially about growth and maturity that is to be effected in a person and in a community as a result of a pedagogico-communicative process. When such a catechetical pedagogy is formulated, keeping in mind the task of promoting a wholesome experience of interculturality for an individual, for the community and for the society at large, in which the particular community finds itself embedded, it would be termed Intercultural Catechetical Pedagogy (ICP)[2]—in other terms, Intercultural Faith Education (IFE). The present article intends to understand, from a Catholic point of view, the place of Intercultural Theology Competence within this IFE by first enumerating what could be identified as the four goals of IFE from a Catholic understanding today, laying out the understanding of Intercultural Theology within the Catholic theologising. From these two basic scaffoldings, then, the article delineates the Intercultural Theology Competence for IFE.

2. Intercultural Faith Education: The Four Goals from a Catholic Perspective

The current *Directory for Catechesis* calls this "Catechesis at the Service of the Inculturation of Faith" (DC 2020, nn. 394–408).[3] In one of the articles (n. 396) which could be key to gathering the catechesis–inculturation link to which the catechetical document subscribes, there is an elucidation of the aim of such a process. Calling attention to the task of catechesis

"to bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of culture and cultures" (John Paul II 1979, n. 53; as cited in DC 2020, n. 396), four interim goals are outlined, in terms of which the aim of IFE can be understood and brought to its accomplishment. The goals mentioned are: understanding culture as the hermeneutic setting for receiving, personalising and sharing faith; enabling, in a practical sense, an experience of faith; sharing, in appropriate ways, the faith a person or the community has received and lives; and nurturing a life that becomes, in itself, a witness to faith.

2.1. Understanding and Interpreting Christian Faith in the Intercultural World

One of the primary goals of faith education, identified as such by the *General Directory for Catechesis*[4] and inspired by *Catechesi Tradendae*, is reiterated in the *DC* too:

> "at the centre of every process of catechesis is the living encounter with Christ [. . .] Accordingly, the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ; only he can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity." (John Paul II 1979, n. 5.)

> "Communion with Christ is the center of the Christian life, and as a result the center of catechetical action". (DC 2020, n. 75)

Encounters are the crux of IFE, and they should consist of creating opportunities, processes and means of promoting a profound experience of faith, without which "one would be deprived of a true encounter with God and with one's brothers; the absence of content would block the maturation of faith, keeping one from finding meaning in the Church and living the encounter and exchange with others" (DC 2020, n. 80). This conviction of the *Directory* is affirmed and broadened by Pope Francis, who, in his recent encyclical, calls for promoting not merely events of encounters, but "a culture of encounter capable of transcending our differences and divisions [. . .] where differences coexist, complementing, enriching and reciprocally illuminating one another even amid disagreements and reservations" (Francis 2020b, n. 215). Arriving at this complementing coexistence would not be possible, as the encyclical cautions, without being aware of the dangers of a false openness (Francis 2020b, n. 145) and narcissistic self-centralisation (Francis 2019, n. 146), moving towards a healthy openness that "never threatens one's own identity" (Francis 2020b, n. 148).

The position of the *Directory* on catechetical pedagogy for a pluricultural context can be gleaned from two key articles: one states that "the goal of Revelation is the salvation of every person, which is realized through an original and efficacious *pedagogy of God* throughout history" (DC 2020, n. 158); and the other explains that "the specific contribution of catechesis to evangelisation is the attempt to enter into relationship with the experience of persons, with their ways of living and the processes of personal and community growth. Inculturation, is at its heart, aimed at the process of internalization of the experience of faith" (DC 2020, n. 396). Understanding and interpreting Christian faith experience as handed down, communicated and shared, and as lived by each person surrounded by his or her proper ambience, would be the incontestable goal of a faith education with an intercultural perspective.

Hence, one of the pronounced goals of IFE is empowering and enabling the believing persons and the faith community to understand and interpret Christian faith from an intercultural point of view. This perspective of life, without a doubt, needs to be translated into practical means of living the Christian faith.

2.2. Practical Means of Living Christian Faith in an Intercultural Mode

Interpreting and understanding Christian faith from an intercultural perspective, when done with genuine conviction, leads to a practice and a consequent way of life. As the *Directory* notes, "Catechesis makes the initial conversion ripen and helps Christians to give a complete meaning to their existence, educating them in a *mentality of* faith in keeping with

the Gospel, to the point of gradually coming to feel, think and act like Christ" (DC 2020, n. 77). The mentality of faith—feeling, thinking and acting like Christ—consists of criteria for practically living out the Christian faith. In terms of such faith, "in ecumenical contexts and those of religious pluralism, care should be taken to familiarize catechists with the essential elements of the life and theology of the other Churches and Christian communities and of the other religions, so that, with respect for everyone's identity, dialogue may be authentic and faithful" (DC 2020, n. 144). It is clear that the *Directory* envisions faith education as "*pedagogy of faith in action,* together with *initiation, education* and *teaching,* always having clear the unity between content and the way in which it is transmitted" (DC 2020, n. 166). The *Directory* further sets out that faith education should prepare persons in an ecumenical and intercultural situation towards an ability to explain clearly the doctrine of Catholic faith, without losing sight of the principle of the "hierarchy of truths", to represent, in a correct manner, the teachings of the other Churches and to know precisely what divides and what amounts to one's unique identity while living in contact with the persons of other confessions (DC 2020, n. 345).

The tasks thus outlined for catechesis as a means of rooting a believing person in a Christian community are: proclamation of the kerygma, enabling the faith community to become a true community of life and of faith, ensuring a basic knowledge of the Bible and the doctrines of faith, paying attention to symbols, gestures and ceremonies in the moments of liturgy and those of popular piety, caring for those who drift away from the community and paying attention to those who return to the community, making them feel welcomed and not judged and facilitating a joyful restoration and a compassionate reincorporation (DC 2020, n. 353). Faith Education, therefore, has the task of accompanying the faithful in every aspect of their practical living of faith, especially in contexts that are more complex and demanding.

In the recent magisterium, Pope Francis speaks of the importance of dialogue in the context of arriving at solidarity but underlines the need for an adequate preparation of the faithful for this process. He emphasises that "just as there can be no dialogue with 'others' without a sense of our own identity, so there can be no openness between peoples except on the basis of love for one's own land, one's own people, one's own cultural roots" (Francis 2020b, n. 143). Evidently, one of the prominent tasks of Faith education is to strengthen that identity and reconcile it in practical ways with the process of living and sharing faith in a community and among communities. Living Christian faith in an intercultural mode is a special task for which the faith community needs to equip itself by pedagogical and theological means, understanding and owning their proper culture and respecting and appreciating the interacting cultures, along with taking their experience of faith seriously. The practical means used by the process of faith education and the practical ways of living one's faith promoted by such a process aid in the achievement of another goal of IFE—that of sharing faith in an intercultural context.

2.3. Intercultural Approach to Sharing Faith

A discussion on the practical means of living one's faith in any context, given the innate nature of Christian faith, invariably includes a discussion on the communitarian dimension of such a faith and its shared nature within the community of practice. It is with this background that the *DC* warns that faith education "cannot be reduced to the conveying of a message, but is first of all sharing the life that comes from God and communicating the joy of having met the Lord" (DC 2020, n. 68). Observing the contours of the present situation, the *Directory* states that "the co-existence of different faiths in schools, universities, and other areas of life, or the rise in the number of mixed marriages, urge the Church to reconsider her pastoral care and her catechetical initiatives in reference to the concrete situations that are being created" (DC 2020, n. 343). Amidst such reality, faith education has to "foster understanding and encounter [. . . as] appropriate means for avoiding superficial and harmful generalisations" (DC 2020, n. 351), which are highly possible given the pluralism that prevails. Faith education has to empower the believers to realise the potential of the

Gospel "to unleash forces of true humanity, peace and justice" (DC 2020, n. 103), the forces that make Christian faith comprehensible, desirable and acceptable in the current scenario. The process of faith education has to adopt "the languages of peoples' cultures, through which the faith is expressed in a characteristic way, and helps ecclesial communities to find new ones adapted to the hearers" (DC 2020, n. 206). This is an approach that is entirely open and ever-evolving, because the setting on its part is constantly changing. This approach, in fact, makes faith education "a setting for the inculturation of the faith" (DC 2020, n. 206). Much more than the terms such as proclamation, announcing or transmission, a term such as "sharing" faith, in all its simplicity, proves efficacious in a setting of interculturality owing to the fact that the elements of interiorisation and mutuality are enshrined within it, and that is what faith education is all about.

It is the same conviction that the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* reiterates, proposing "dialogue" as that mentality of sharing: "Approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these summed up in the one word, 'dialogue'. If we want to encounter [. . .] one another, we have to dialogue" (Francis 2020b, n. 198). Quoting *Querida Amazonia* (Francis 2020a, n. 108), Pope Francis exhorts that "in true spirit of dialogue, we grow in our ability to grasp the significance of what others say and do, even if we cannot accept it as our own conviction. In this way, it becomes possible to be frank and open about our beliefs while continuing to discuss, to seek points of contact, and above all, to work and struggle together" (Francis 2020b, n. 203). Dialogue is in no way a justification of relativism, as the magisterium itself points out specifically, but a seeking of both the light of reason and the light of faith, sharing what is known and experienced with each other (Francis 2020b, n. 185). IFE works on this framework—the framework of sharing faith with each other—as a means of entering into an encounter with persons as individuals and as communities of practice. Especially in contexts that are complex and diverse, the dimension of sharing faith makes sense on two broad levels—the intra-ecclesial level between the communities of Christian faith and the extra-ecclesial level towards the cultures and communities of other faith traditions. The *National Catechetical Directory* (*NCD*)[5] of India, which affirms the above fact, says:

> Our Christian communities in India are diverse and complex in reality. As members of the Body of Christ, His Church on earth, we are called to enter with respect and love into the life of the community to which we belong or are sent as ministers of the Word. Each community then is our community; each person in it is our sister or our brother. As fellow pilgrims, we journey together. We need each other, and finally we will be judged on the basis of our relationship to each other. (NCD 2015, n. 214)

At the first level, it takes the form of faith education and prepares the members of the community for the second level, where it assumes the form of dialogue. Will this encounter of dialogue with another culture, or faith tradition or denomination, give rise to a *risk*—as that of being persuaded by the alternative or being "led away" from the person's original stance? In fact, the encounter should create that *risk* (of even being persuaded to change positions) if the process of dialogue was true, sincere, healthy and authentic. However, a crucial task of a holistic faith education is to prepare persons for such encounters, enabling them towards a mature understanding of their faith stance. Such "mature" understanding consists of knowing one's stance without being conditioned or fettered by it in the act of listening to the other during the encounter. The *NCD* therefore establishes the tasks of Catechesis in terms of the evangelising mission of the Church in a pluralistic society, an evangelisation that is characterised by four essential dimensions, namely, incarnational, dialogical, liberative and ecological dimensions. Accordingly, specific tasks such as interreligious dialogue, inculturation and intercultural dialogue, integral liberation and environmental sensitivity form integral parts of an IFE (NCD 2015, n. 284). The loftiest of the goals of faith education is witnessing one's faith in and through one's own life.

2.4. Witnessing Christian Faith in an Intercultural Setting

Faith Education, as a process of enabling the development of faith[6] in a person and in a community of believers, has cumulative levels of growth indicators. Fowler (1981, pp. 115–213), in explaining the stages of the development of faith, indicates that, from the time the faith of a person or a community grows to be individuative and reflective, it is constantly challenged to grow to be conjunctive and universalising. At these stages, one indispensable indicator is the capacity of the person and the community to witness the message that they live and proclaim. Not merely those who have the care of the community and the faith educators who are involved in the process directly but every person being educated in faith and every believer is obliged to grow in his or her life of witness, in keeping with their state of life. As responsible and contributing citizens, as the *Directory* states, faith education "contributes to an organic formation of the personality of the believer [. . . and faith education seeks] to illustrate the noble significance of human engagement in the world; support Christian witness in the workplace; help the faithful to be a leaven of reconciliation in situations of conflict; encourage efforts for the humanisation of work; urge the defence of the rights of the weakest" (DC 2020, n. 393). The *Directory* presents the mentality of dialogue itself as an experience of witness, in a context where there are differences of opinions and ideologies. It says, "dialogue remains the only possible solution, even when faced with the denial of religious sentiment, with atheism and agnosticism" (DC 2020, n. 315). One of the specific attentions that an IFE should possess, as the *Directory* notes, is "to encourage in all believers *a missionary impulse of witness* to the faith; of *collaboration* in defence of human dignity; of affable and cordial *dialogue,* and where possible, of the explicit *proclamation* of the Gospel" (DC 2020, n. 350). Witness, in an intercultural context, "involves openness of heart, the capacity for dialogue and for relationships of reciprocity, the willingness to recognise the signs of goodness and of God's presence in the people one meets" (DC 2020, n. 33) or encounters in day-to-day life. Faith education, therefore, is not something to carry out purely with doctrines and truths to be understood, memorised and believed in, but it is about living the right values, gradually becoming, as persons and communities, more and more prophetic, conforming to the image of Christ. It is here that Pope Francis collocates solidarity which, "as a moral virtue and social attitude born of personal conversion, calls for commitment on the part of those responsible for education and formation" (Francis 2020b, n. 114). The encyclical identifies the crucial role that the families, teachers and communicators have to play in the formation of persons and communities towards this aspect of witness, collaboration and common thinking and towards building up the entire humanity and the cosmos. Witnessing in a intercultural setting would also mean "combatting the structural causes of poverty, inequality, the lack of work, land and housing, the denial of social and labour rights [. . .], confronting the destructive effects of the empire of money" (ibid., n. 116).

The cruciality of Christian witness becomes more intense in situations of a plurality of cultures, where, as the Indian directory notes,

> proclamation must be made, above all else, by witness. A Christian or a group of Christians, in the midst of the community in which they live, must show that they are capable of understanding and accepting others and of cooperating with all those who are seeking to protect what is noble and good. They can radiate their faith spontaneously through values that transcend common values, hope in things which are unseen [. . .]. By bearing such silent witness, Christians can inevitably arouse a spirit of enquiry in those who see their way of life. Witness of this kind constitutes in itself a proclamation of the Good News, silent, but strong and effective. (NCD 2015, n. 91)

The above quoted directory places a noted emphasis on the responsibility of the faith education process in enabling the educand and the educator towards growing into and becoming an "effective witnesses" to the persons of other faiths and traditions, who look up to the Christian community for edification. This is essentially understood and explained as faith-fostering in a pluricultural setting (NCD 2015, n. 145).

The aim, therefore, of IFE is to orient faith education processes founded on sound intercultural theology, guided by a systematic intercultural pedagogy and empowered by a dynamic intercultural communication in order to enable the faithful and the community of faith towards understanding and interpreting the Christian faith from the perspective of the intercultural world, empowering them with a practical means of living Christian faith in such an ambience, with an approach of dialogical sharing and witnessing practice. IFE promotes the communion of persons and communities through Christians reaching out to each other and to the world, celebrating the differences and diversities that enrich existence and humanity. IFE empowers a believer to personalise the salvific message that Christ has offered to the whole of creation and witness it in every thought, word and choice of action. IFE acts as a locus in itself, as it brings together varied approaches within catechetical initiatives in a given setting, in the context of the family and the family of families—the faith community, which is concretely and competently aided by the institutions that serve as arms of the community of faith. The Christian, or a believer in Christ, is a concrete person in life, with context proper to him or her, who finds him/herself at a particular phase in life and in meaning making. The shepherds who have the care of this community and the faith educators who take this concrete praxis forward need to be formed with care and have to collaborate with each other in accomplishing this aim. In this article, we consider Intercultural Theology, which is one of the three componential disciplines just mentioned, the other two being Intercultural Pedagogy and Intercultural Communication

3. Intercultural Theology and the Evolving Face of the Church

Intercultural Theology, especially considering the consciousness of the world at large today, is inevitable as an approach. The reason for this is that intercultural theology "tries to integrate and bring together what belongs together within a common field of discourse. It explores the interconfessional, intercultural and interreligious dimensions of Christian faith" (Küster 2014, p. 171). It would by now be out of place to analyse the stance of the Catholic Church regarding intercultural theology, for it would sound redundant considering the openness with which the Church considers the three essential dimensions of intercultural theology: a deep interculturality, a deliberate interreligiosity and a dialogic interdenominationality. Hence, a Catholic-specific outlook of intercultural theology should be presented before the related specific competences for IFE are explored.

Within Catholic circles of theologising, intercultural theology "emerged as an attempt to secure a lasting position for the interrelated discipline of missiology, comparative religion and ecumenics", observes Küster (2014, p. 171). Answering the question of whether the Catholic Church did recognize and engage in intercultural theology right from the beginning would much depend on what we mean by the "Church" and by the "beginning"—the former referring to the underlying ecclesiology and the latter to the implied missiology. This draws our attention to the paradigm shifts in the course of the history of the Catholic Church regarding the models of mission (Wijsen 2001). One of the initial paradigms was built on a conviction that the so-called pagans who were outside the church had no possibility of salvation and that they had to be brought in—the delirious efforts of proselytisation. What followed was a paradigm of church-planting, which was in reality a transplantation of the European Christianity in places—the establishment of the Christendom. Another model was that of the adaptation of Christianity by way of some externals such as the liturgical language, vestments and rituals, where the aim of planting the churches remained the same while the method changed, albeit the outcome was always that the non-Christians entered the church—the adaptation model. A later model was inspired by a recognition of Christ already present in the non-Christian cultures and the need to help the non-Christians discover this active presence in their lives—the "unknown Christ" and the "anonymous Christianity" models.[7]

Observing the evolving face of the Church in this regard, it could be noted from records that there has been a definitive shift in perspective in theology worldwide, which is finally beginning to recognize and acknowledge that "theologies being inherited from the

older churches of the North Atlantic community did not fit well into [. . .] quite different cultural circumstances" (Schreiter 1985, p. 1). Vatican Council II marked the beginning of an outspoken support for the view that there is a need to adapt theological reflection to the local circumstances, which was explicitly outlined in the decree on the Church's Missionary Activity *Ad* Gentes (1965) and was followed by the missionary theology of Pope Paul VI in his address to the Bishops of Africa in 1969 and, in a very special way, in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of 1975, which was an outcome of what he gathered from the Synod of Bishops, which discussed the evolving question of the mission of the Church. Historically, even as these shifts in perspective were taking place, in Latin America, there was another movement gathering momentum from the need of the times and circumstances, and it was referred to as the "theology of liberation". The Catholic Bishops who gathered at Medellin in 1968, along with a publication by the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Guttiérez in 1973, *A Theology of Liberation*[8], brought this approach to the attention of the whole world. Incidentally, liberation theology did not restrict itself to the Latin America, but the approach became a common denominator to what was going on in Africa and Asia—the attempts at experiencing, exploring and expressing Christian theology rooted in their specific circumstances, which were so different from those in Europe or North America. This shift was indispensable for three reasons: because there were new questions emerging in the circumstances that were so new and strange; because the old answers were found to be insufficient and unnecessarily foisted on persons and communities; and because a new kind of Christian identity was evolving with changing concrete contexts, needing prompted procedures and historical experiences (Schreiter 1985, pp. 1–3).

Precisely in this context, there was a shift of great importance offered by the thought of Joseph Blomjous, Bishop of Mwanza, who was considered an important spokesperson at Vatican Council II and its spirit post-event, inviting the missionaries to speak more of "interculturation" than of "inculturation," because what is envisioned is not merely an interaction between the gospel and culture, as if they were two monolithic meaning systems, but an encounter between multiple cultural orientations (Wijsen 2001, p. 221). Robert Schreiter (1985, pp. 5–7) offers a map indicating the remarkable itinerary of the Church in this shifting perspective. He claims that one of the initial approaches the Church employed in this shift can be identified with the term *indigenous theology*, which highlights the fact that theology is done by the local people of a geographical area, as contrasted with "outsiders." What stands out here is the integrity and the identity of the project as being against a universal and perennial theology. However, this term does not win the favour of everyone, not even a majority, due to a colonialist background to which it seems linked, be it in Africa, or in India or even elsewhere. As a replacement, some Protestant evangelical circles spoke of *Ethnotheology* (Tippet 1972; Luzbetak 1976), which focussed on the specificity of theology for a given cultural area and a given cultural group, depending heavily on cultural anthropology. The Catholic Church used the term *inculturation* as a combination of two fundamental principles from two different fields: the theological principle of incarnation and the social science process of enculturation. Though this term is so widely used in the recent Catholic epoch, evidently, this noun lacks an adjectival form that can qualify a theology. It hence had emerged as a readily accepted term, *contextual theology* placing a grave emphasis on the context from and in which theology was done. *Local theology*, Schreiter (1985) claims, comes the closest to the Vatican Council II's parlance, *ecclesia particularis*—that is, the theology of the local church. This term resonates with the Vatican Council II's position that the Universal Church exists in local or particular Churches (Lumen Gentium, n. 23).[9] From a "translation" model, which is too prototypical, through an "adaptation" model, which is way ahead but still not sufficient, the Church has evolved enough to uphold local theology that takes a "contextual" model seriously, with either an ethnographic approach, which insists on integrity and continuity, or a liberation approach, which seeks change and discontinuity, as explained by Schreiter (1985, pp. 6–16) in his analysis. Though what Schreiter calls *local theology* is very close to the subject of prime

interest of thought here (intercultural theology), it can conveniently be said that there is still something lacking. Notwithstanding this, most of the foundational elements that could be identified in the yet-to-be-defined intercultural theology can be found in the local theology, to which—and, in reality, beyond which—the Church is prepared to commit itself. There could be, however, a few elements that cause a considerable concern for the orthodoxy and integrity of the theology of the Catholic Church, which shall be addressed and clarified as and when they arise. With that background of the history and the evolving state of intercultural theology, it would be proper to discuss where we stand presently.

4. Intercultural Theology and Its Understanding Today

A direct understanding of intercultural theology could be perceiving it as "the theological reflection upon the process of interculturation. Intercultural theology is not a new theological discipline, but a new perspective and a new method in theology" (Wijsen 2001, p. 221). From the just-described history of the 1970s, there could be three plausible reasons identified for the rise of intercultural theology. The first is the demographical development: whereas, in the beginning of the twentieth century, two-thirds of all Christians lived in Europe and North America, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the same two-thirds are found in the global south, giving rise to new models of churches and newer local theologies. The second is a socio-philosophical development: that the erstwhile for-the-most-part unquestioned European theology was being questioned not only from outside of the region but also by secular philosophies from within—the most prominent of these tendencies being secularisation, which had by then pushed the Christian frame of reference to the society to its fringes. The third is a very Catholic development: the Second Vatican Council, which recognised and approved the shift that was happening and challenged churches everywhere, in and through the documents produced, to become self-reliant, mature and local in matters such as finance, personnel and theology (Wijsen 2001, pp. 221–22).

Hollenweger, as the pioneer of the field, had laid down some practical conditions that justify and give rise to intercultural theology. A recalling of those premises could help grasp the original sense of intercultural theology. The first of these premises is that all theologies are contextually conditioned and that there is nothing wrong with this. Another theology from another context might indicate how much one's own theology is conditioned, parochial or ideologically captive, and one cannot ignore those signs and indications. However new or contextual, there is a common denominator—a point of convergence or contact—and that is the Scriptures.[10] When various perspectives encounter each other, there is bound to be a creative tension, and it is precisely in this creative tension, with the "widest possible perspective", that theologies appropriate to a situation are developed. When it comes to the Universal Church, the loyalty can never be to a nation, or a class or a culture. Such a disposition would provide the necessary context in which true creative theologising could take place (Hollenweger 1986, pp. 28–29).

These presuppositions lay down a fairly basic framework for what could be understood as intercultural theology, consolidating the experience. These propositions not only consolidate the field or sub-field of intercultural theology; they make us rethink the future of Christianity, or other religions or any faith for that matter. They do this by insisting on two important sets of data: "one, phenomenon of a global 'cultural circulation', and two, the problem of coping with irreducible 'otherness' in terms of society, culture and religion. Both sets of data meant that believers, any believers, were aliens to the world they knew, with a transitory model of interpretation in order to put their trust into what is not transitory" (Ustorf 2008, p. 12). That is why the focus on this approach to theology today, and its global acknowledgement definitely opens a new horizon of understanding something that has been going on for centuries but which hardly had the opportunity or the possibility of making it to the vanguard.

Another current understanding of interculturality in theological pursuits would be to look at it from the perspective of the secularisation theory of the postmodern world, which

is characterised by functional differentiation[11], which takes away the pro-society image of religious institutions, individualisation[12], which sidelines the institutions in favour of the individuals, and rationalism[13], the fruit of enlightenment that brings into question everything that goes beyond human reason. The secularisation theory, authors say, had predicted a progressive marginalisation of religion in society or even a disappearance of it, but it had gone wrong somewhere in its forecast. Observing the changes today, what could be said at most is that religion has been reinterpreted in the last three-to-four decades as it never has before (Giordan 2008). "Pluralism is the most relevant aspect, specifically denoting the socio-religious situation of the contemporary world, since it forces us to re-examine and rewrite the relationship between all the various religions as well as the beliefs, rites and moral convictions at the centre of traditional religions" (Giordan 2008, p. 204). If it is relationship to the sacred that religion is all about, then the evolving difference is as follows: while, in the traditional religion, the said relationship was based on obeying the authority of the religious institution, in the postmodern society, it begins with the heart of the subject who wills that relationship; there is no legitimation or approval from another agency that is considered necessary or even important anymore. This is, in crux, a shift from the religious dimension to the spiritual dimension. The emergence of the new understanding of the concept of spirituality—though spirituality is no new term to religion—is seen in the shift from the theological interpretation to a sociological usage of the term (Giordan 2008, pp. 203–6).

> The primacy of spirituality seems to offer a totally new possibility for theological dialogue in intercultural perspective simply because it no longer starts from the exclusive defence of its patrimony of rites, beliefs and moral norms, thus stressing the differences and marking insurmountable borders between true and false, fair and unfair, appropriate and inappropriate; the spiritual perspective highlights dimensions of believing that encourage the different theological systems to confront one another and debate together. (Giordan 2008, p. 208)

Theology, in an increasingly globalised and pluralist context, has to take into serious consideration the specific dimensions of spirituality today, such as personal yearning or searching, freedom of choice, individual experience, authenticity, vitality, simplicity, essentiality and universality (Toffanello 2000, pp. 7–24). These dimensions of openness are those which make theology develop a perspective such as interculturality. It needs to be reiterated in this context that intercultural theology "is a methodological rather than an ideological commitment and as such, can be practiced across the spectrum of theological opinion" (Cartledge and Cheetham 2011, p. 3). Being a methodology of theologising, intercultural theology comprises of, or amounts to, certain competences that are present or that can be developed.

5. Intercultural Theology Competence towards Intercultural Faith Education

Guided by the pioneering contributions of thinkers such as Hollenweger, Margull, Friedly and others who had laid the foundation for intercultural theology, those of scholars such as Küster, Schreiter, Wijsen and others who interpret intercultural theology for the new millennium and pastoral theologians such as F-V Anthony, Scheuerer and others who deepen the practical dimensions of intercultural theology for pastoral and missiological imperatives of the Church as a faith community, there can be a list of intercultural theology competences spelled out towards IFE. These competences, considered here, aim at enhancing the effectiveness of faith education interventions in an intercultural setting. Intercultural competences comprise three constituent elements: the cognitive facet of knowledge and the awareness of one's culture, others' cultures and cultural groups; the affective traits such as respect for one's self and the other, openness to the other, curiosity towards new knowledge, acceptance of differences and appreciation of the same; and operative capabilities such as observing, understanding, interpreting, evaluating, relating, rethinking, challenging and reshaping (Anthony 2016, p. 710). Considering these constituent elements and corresponding to the three criteria that scholars propose for an intercultural competence, namely,

"connecting people from other backgrounds, performing in achieving task-related goals and enjoying the pursuit of common goals in a culturally diverse environment" (Brinkmann and Weerdenburg 2014, p. 15), three intercultural theology competences for faith education that could be delineated here are: the dialogic personalisation of faith, the prophetic challenging of faith and the cohesive exchange of faith.

5.1. Dialogic Personalisation of Faith

Faith education, as a process of enabling a person and the community as a whole to mature in faith, has, for its core content, theology—faith seeking understanding and faith seeking a meaningful communication of itself to oneself and to the world around. In an intercultural setting, the process invariably takes on a dialogic dimension—a dimension that makes ample space for meaning making and mutual sharing, leading to "an intercultural conversation" (Toren 2015, p. 10) well beyond mere indoctrination. In fact, "intercultural theological dialogue is [. . .] in principle a trialogue, a three-way conversation [. . .] in which the third or rather the first voice is the voice of God who Himself in the Scriptures and through the Holy Spirit addresses His church" (Toren 2015, p. 14). The self-revelation of God in the Scriptures, in faith experiences and in daily events and encounters has to be recognised, received and personalised in the sense of a dialogic relationship with God. Such a competence by which to arrive at a dialogic personalisation of faith would comprise three constituent capacities.

The first of these is ***comparative understanding***, pertaining to one of the rudimentary tools of intercultural theology: comparistics. Along with the capacity to understand one's own faith and its expressions, intercultural theology competence would enable a person understand one's faith in comparison to that of the other and understand one's faith expression in comparison to the way another expresses his or her faith, which could be the same as or different from one's own. The comparison and consideration of differences need not be always with an out-group component. This is evidenced by the insistence on intra-religious dialogue as a prerequisite for effective interreligious dialogue. This could be understood with the help of Panikkar's *diatopical hermeneutics*, which "stands for the thematic consideration of understanding the other without assuming that the other has the same basic self-understanding and understanding as I have" (Panikkar 1979, p. 9; as cited in Chung 2009, p. 188).

The second constituent capacity within this competence would be ***critical interpretation***, an intercultural hermeneutics that would refrain from making the entire attempt an individualistic enterprise but rather a community approach, without being overconcerned about harmonisation but being open and recognitive towards differentiation, making the process more relational than instrumental and focused on an existential understanding of faith rather than a purely theoretical and prepositional understanding (Bujo 1998; as cited in Ariarajah 2005, p. 94). By enabling persons and communities to look at oneself through the eyes of the other, in and through comparative understanding and a critical interpretation of one's own world of faith, intercultural theology makes a difficult task possible: that of clearly perceiving our own tacit cultural presuppositions rather than others'. In this way, a critical self-understanding of believers and believing communities is achieved, contributing to a relevant IFE (Toren 2015, pp. 3–4).

The third constituent element would be a ***cultural collaboration***, that is, the capacity of cultures and persons from different cultures to take up the task of arriving at common goals, a shared vision and a holistic growth plan. Intercultural theologians look with surprise at the attitudes of subtle or explicit superiority of the Christian consciousness over the so-called others. Be it the implicit insistence on the absolute finality of Christ and the uniqueness of the Christian religious position by the inclusivists, or the more gross expression of superiority by the exclusivists, there is something that does not correlate with the intercultural hermeneutic ideal. However, the historical developments and the global cultural changes constantly, and fortunately, keep challenging these attitudes and their rationale (Ariarajah 2005, p. 92).

The three capacities presented as constituents of the dialogic personalisation of faith competence could be analysed parallel to the three modalities proposed by Anthony towards intercultural dialogue effectuated by intercultural theology, namely, intercultural hermeneutics, intercultural critique and intercultural participation (Anthony 2013, pp. 95–97). Intercultural Catechesis, rendering specific the objective of a catechetical process, has to concentrate not merely on understanding one's faith but on doing it in relation to others and in dialogue with the other(s), both intra- and extra-communities.

5.2. Prophetic Challenging of Faith

Holistic growth in faith would mean that one's faith has been tested, challenged and reinforced proportionate to the individual's personal, professional and public or interpersonal experiences in life. This forms an essential intercultural theology competence, as intercultural theology insists that one engage in "prophetic dialogue" (Toren 2015, p. 13),[14] which, according to missiologists and intercultural theologians, could become an apt alternative to the understanding of the Mission of the Church in the world of this millennium. Identifying this prophetic dialogue as a foundational category for practical theology, Gerard Hall enumerates "witness and proclamation; liturgy, prayer, and contemplation; commitment to justice, peace, and the integrity of creation; interreligious dialogue; inculturation; and reconciliation" (Hall 2010, p. 35) as essential components of the mission in the present times. In the context of intercultural theology, this would primarily be a self-challenging aspect of faith and the aspect of faith challenging the "world." The same becomes a specific competence when considered in terms of intercultural theology as the core content of IFE. The prophetic challenging of faith, as a competence, would consist of three constituent capacities.

The first is the capacity of the ***recognition of the existing power equations*** in the field of theology. Intercultural theology, by its fundamental instincts, remains aware of these dynamics in any process of theologising—from whose point of view the process is undertaken, who the theologising subject is and who the cultural "other" is, how the equation between these two is constructed, what the presuppositions that operate at the ground level within this process are and various such issues. Scholars would even go on to declare that "if we are equally welcoming to all voices, there is a danger that the voices of the strong will drown out the voices of the vulnerable and the weak" (Toren 2015, p. 12). Looking beyond the boundaries of the dominant forms of Western academic discourse, intercultural theology enables a much wider theological conversation by developing apt skills and an updated knowledge (Toren 2015, pp. 4, 8, 12). This would essentially be an awareness and a clarity that not everything is ideal and totally unbiased in the way faith and its expressions are handed down in practice. Without this capacity, the process of faith education, or the communication of faith, would be too naïve for an intercultural context.

However critical the person is, there is a need for the ***ratification of identity formation***, based on the principles and convictions that are passed on, received and personalised as componential elements of Christian faith. This capacity for the ratification of identity formation has to be acquired by the person and the community involved, aware and conscious of the possible biases yet with freedom and dignity. As persons and communities, they realise that they have equal rights, possibilities and duties of making sense of their faith in terms of their personal identity, their identity in relation to the experience of God that they have and their identity in communion with the faith community within which they share the common faith. This happens in an interactive process between the individual and the community and between the local community and the global community. Hence, theology at this stage cannot be labelled merely as "local", as it were, but it gets ratified as *glocal*, as "it has a local colour, but it is linked to global flows and networks" (Toren 2015, p. 4).

Recommendations of theological bonum, to oneself and to the other, are a sign that the previous two capacities have been achieved. Unless a person or a community has already worked through the power equations within a theological framework and has ratified one's

own identity in relation to the Other and the other(s), the person or the community would never come forward to propose or recommend a theological value or virtue or goodness (in a single term, *bonum*) to the other. This is an essential part of maturing in faith, where one's theological convictions and ethico-spiritual principles are considered, judged and valued by the person or the community as worthy of being recommended to the other. The ultimate theological *bonum* is God, the person of God and the presence of God with the person or the community. When an intercultural conversation stops short of arriving at this point, addressing and defending values such as freedom, mutual respect, empowerment and others, it remains still non-theological. However, there are numerous values, in addition to the aforementioned, that bring the person and the community to the ultimate theological *bonum*, the chief of those being the Gospel and the Reign of God (Toren 2015, pp. 12–14).

The three capacities within the competence of the prophetic challenging of faith pay due attention to the multiplicity that is involved in the process of making sense of faith. It cannot be merely an individual person with God, or a community by itself in direct correspondence with God, where faith is experienced, expressed and espoused. The intra- and extra-personal and the intra- and extra-community conversation is the actual ground where this process takes place, hence the importance of the need for IFE to develop the competence of the prophetic challenging of faith, enabling individual persons and communities to understand and live their faith in an increasingly mature manner.

5.3. Cohesive Exchange of Faith

There exists a familiar charge that faith education, to a great extent, remains "silent in the field of human relationships concerning justice, freedom, and national and international sharing [. . .] because of the view that Christian life is primarily a matter of individual sanctification and salvation. [. . .] it avoids social analysis and its political implications" (Balasuriya 1984, pp. 226–27). This remark of a passionate faith-sharer is simply a call towards a socio-politically conscious faith education, which is informed and upgraded by various universal movements and thought processes that unceasingly call for more universal thinking and openness. These movements recommend "drawing up pedagogical methodologies for the young, tracing one rather obvious issue to its roots and its worldwide ramifications, If the search continues with openness and commitment to other issues, it can lead participants to a more global understanding of a local situation" (Balasuriya 1984, p. 238). This is exactly what intercultural theology, as content, can do to the process of faith education, pushing it to the limits where the person and the community are urged to share their faith towards creating a cosmic community. It is a specific competence that intercultural theology could bring into the process of the maturation in faith and its expression, a competence that could be noticed in three dispositions.

The first disposition is that of ***equality in the expression of faith***. It could be a naïve system which requires that an individual accepts what another says, or a section of a community assents to what another holds true, without any critical thought to it. Equality in the expression of faith would require that every person and every community of faith feel the liberty and the necessity to make sense of the experience—both individual and communitarian and both personal and passed on—in one's own way. This also requires that one respects the liberty and capacity of the other. As communities too, in spite of differences such as levels of socio-economic and intellectual sophistication and historical and temporal dominance, individual faith experiences and expressions have to be respected, listened to and affirmed for what they are and what they stand for. Critical intercultural theologians note the fact of the demographic shift of the "centre of global Christianity from Europe and North-America to Latin-America, Africa and Asia" (Jenkins 2002; as cited in Toren 2015, p. 4), calling for a greater disposition to look to the Global South for more current inspiration.

The second essential disposition is that of an ***eagerness to learn***. The disposition of equality of expression does not in any way mean a relentless thrusting of individual ideas within a community or various communities on each other. It has to be accompanied

by a sincere eagerness to learn from the other. At times, intercultural theology could be mistakenly reduced to finding a commonality, a common language and a common ground by which we would celebrate a convenient similarity. However, the arduous truth is that intercultural theology goes in search of those dissimilarities that are buried in the grand narratives (Chung 2009, p. 189), making one progressively vulnerable but intensely capable of learning from the other. Those adept for an intercultural theological process of growing in faith are those who, apart from knowing their faith deep, are open to understanding the perspective of the other with their heart and mind.

A third disposition, undeniably connected to the other two, is that of ***empathy in engagement***. Intercultural theology needs to be a process, an experience and an encounter lived together; it cannot be a means, a strategy, a scheme or a diplomacy. Intercultural theology has to be a theological effort at encountering the other with empathy, which means not insisting that the other feels what one feels but rather striving as best as one can to feel what the other feels. This disposition can lead to mutual understanding, respect and, more importantly, appreciation towards the contribution made to each one's growth and to the common growth as a community. IFE has to lead one to not merely share one's faith but to enrich one's own faith by the sharing of the other and by encountering the other with an empathetic spirit.

These dispositions, apart from building up the faith of the individual and that of the community, build the community itself. This, perceivably, is another core objective of a holistic faith education. The competence for the cohesive exchange of faith enables persons and communities to share their faith, share their lives and build the community on the faith and life that are shared by people of God.

6. The Six Dimensions of Faith Education Covered by Intercultural Theology Competence

The three competences explained above and the corresponding abilities enumerated cover, in fact, the six comprehensive dimensions in which faith education has to enable and empower a person to progress and develop (See Table 1). The dialogic understanding of faith makes the person grow in his or her personal faith conviction, in dialogue with those of the others, interpreting one's own faith in relation to the faith experience of the other and critically ready to make sense for each other and to collaborate in initiatives for the common good. The prophetic challenge of faith enables a person to develop a sense of community with the healthy formation of identity and strong convictions of theological *bonum*, which make one capable of building one's community and doing one's best for the society at large. The cohesive exchange of faith prepares the person for exercising one's own right to faith expression with an unassailable respect for the same right of the other. Both are willing to learn from each other and to empathise with each other, engaging in making the world a better place for everyone.

The *General Directory for Catechesis*, which had guided the catechetical ministry of the Church over the first two decades of this millennium and has just been replaced by a new version, in its fourth and fifth chapters,[15] had outlined the project of opening up the education of the Christian faith to the concrete social, religious, anthropological and cultural situation. *GDC* affirmed that knowing in depth the culture of those who are being educated and the extent to which it has influenced them, recognising the inevitable "culture" dimension in the Gospel itself and its expression through the centuries, proclaiming the transformation that the Gospel can bring about in culture, witnessing the presence of the seeds of the Gospel in culture(s), promoting the new expression of the Gospel arising from the evangelised culture and maintaining the integrity of the content of faith without, at the same time, losing sight of the cultural and historical circumstances of those who are willing to grow in the faith are fundamental duties of faith education (GDC 1997, n. 204). These serve as a foundation for the intercultural faith education that is relevant for our times. Faith, theology as making sense of and communicating of that faith, pedagogy that determines the mode and means that communication needs to adopt and all related

processes within this framework of communication construct (Anthony 1995, pp. 303–4) what has already been defined and termed as IFE.

Table 1. Intercultural Theology Competences for Faith Education.

	Competences	Abilities	Dimensions	
1	DIALOGIC UNDERSTANDING OF FAITH	Comparative understanding	Personal	Interpersonal
		Critical interpretation		
		Cultural collaboration		
2	PROPHETIC CHALLENGE OF FAITH	Recognition of power equations	Communitarian	Social
		Ratification of identity formation		
		Recommendation of theological bonum		
3	COHESIVE EXCHANGE OF FAITH	Equality of expression in faith	Expressive	Missionary
		Eagerness to learn		
		Empathy in engagement		

With the emergence of intercultural theology in the so-called mainstream theologising circles, and keeping in mind the widening horizons of faith education as faith sharing, intercultural theology competences are indeed practical abilities to be developed in an individual and in faith communities as a not only tools for faith education but as the fundamental criteria and categories of faith education.

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Notes

1 *Directory for Catechesis* is the official and universal guideline for the ministry of Catechesis all over the world in the Universal Catholic Church. It is henceforth referred to as *DC* in the text and as DC in reference citation.

2 ICP—*Intercultural Catechetical Pedagogy* has been proposed as a Doctoral Thesis of the author of this article in the year 2021, as a result of empirical research conudcted in the context of Tamilnadu, India (Lourdunathan 2021).

3 Chapter XI in Part III of *Directory for Catechesis* is entitled "Catechesis at the Service of the Inculturation of Faith" and contains 15 articles; see, (*DC*, nn. 394–408).

4 *General Directory for Catechesis* is the precedent version of *Directory of Catechesis*, which had served the ministry of catechesis in the universal Catholic Church from 1997 until the publication of the new *DC* in 2020. It is henceforth referred to as *GDC* in the text.

5 National Catechetical Directory of India is the official and national guideline for the ministry of Catechesis in India, published by the Commission for Catechetics, within the Conference of Catholic Bishops in India. It is henceforth referred to as NCD in the text and as NCD in reference citation.

6 Here, one needs to consider closely James Fowler's theory of the stages of development of faith, which outlines the six progressive stages of faith. What begins as an undifferentiated faith develops through the stages of becoming intuitive-projective faith, mythic-literal faith, synthetic-conventional faith, individuative-reflective faith, conjunctive faith and universalising faith. These stages are mostly related to the progressive chronological age of a person, but they can also mean the very quality of faith in progressive stages. The theory can serve as a framework for enabling the faith maturation of a person and of a community (see Fowler 1981, pp. 115–213).

7 For a short understanding of both the "unknown Christ" of Raimon Pannikkar and the "anonymous Christians" of Karl Rahner, see (Sinner 2005, pp. 186–201). The author points to the three classical categories of inter-religious interaction—exclusivism, inclusivism (within which he places Karl Rahner) and pluralism (where he refers to and expands on Raimon Panikkar).

[8] (Gustavo 1973). We see that this was first published as *Teologia de la liberación: Perspectivas.* Lima: CEP, 1971, and the English version of the same text came out later.

[9] *Lumen Gentium* 23, speaking of the unity in the Universal Church, says of the particular, or, in our usage here, local Churches that "it is in these and formed out of them that the one and unique Catholic Church exists." See, VATICAN COUNCIL II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, n. 23; henceforth referred to as LG.

[10] Hollenweger, being from the Reformed-Pentecostal background, stops with the Scriptures as the point of common contact. In the Catholic sense, it would necessarily be twinned with the other pole: tradition.

[11] Functional differentiation refers to the process in history when certain social activities were transferred from the religious institutions to the secular institutions—for example, the activities such as education and healthcare were taken up by the state. See (Giordan 2008, p. 203).

[12] Individualisation is a process which challenges the monopoly of truth claimed by the traditional religious institutions, instead giving the authority to the individual to decide what to believe and what to choose. See (Giordan 2008, p. 203).

[13] Rationalism is the critical relationship between society or individuals and tradition, rediscussing everything—beliefs, practices, moral norms, etc. See (Giordan 2008, p. 204).

[14] Cf. Toren (2015, p. 13), where the author cites Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder (see Bevans and Schroeder 2011). Stephen Bevans, in a paper named "Mission as Prophetic Dialogue" for the X General Chapter of the SVD Congregation, explains that the term "Prophetic Dialogue" was adapted as a theme for their Chapter in 2000 and that the Indian theologian Michael Amaladoss already used it in a phrase in 1992—"Religion is called to enter into a prophetic dialogue with the world" (see Amaladoss 1994, p. 72).

[15] Chapter 4 of *GDC* was "Catechesis in the socio-religious context", paragraphs nn. 193 to 201 of which deal with the pluralistic situations and the ecumenical context; Chapter 5, "Catechesis in the socio-cultural context", includes paragraphs nn. 202 to 214, which deal with the duty, significance and process of the inculturation of faith in the present times. These two chapters serve as a great impetus to further the task and the spirit of encounter between faith and cultures.

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Rethinking the Intercultural Potential of Religious Education in Public Schools: Contributions from Intercultural Theology

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Abstract: This paper asks how intercultural theology can inspire a critical and constructive reflection on the intercultural potential of non-confessional religious education (RE). Taking the Norwegian non-confessional RE subject as a starting point, the paper draws attention to the tendency to present religions, worldviews, and denominations as single entities with distinct characteristics. As emphasized by Jackson, Jones and Meyer, and others, a systemic-oriented approach will largely capture the institutionalized sides of religion. Consequently, in schools, the intercultural dimension of RE can easily be reduced by emphasizing students' need for encyclopedic knowledge about different traditions, overlooking how religion is embedded in social life and transforms, develops, and interconnects through everyday practices outside of institutionalized religious life. This line of argument sets the stage for the next part, examining how intercultural theology can create critical awareness of the inner diversity and interconnectedness of denominations and religious traditions. The paper argues that the descriptive and normative framework of intercultural theology can inspire educators to reflect critically on the intercultural dimension of a non-confessional RE.

Keywords: religious education; intercultural theology; intercultural education; classification of religions and denominations

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1. Introduction

In this article, I reflect upon how intercultural theology can provide a critical and constructive foundation for reflecting on the intercultural dimension of the non-confessional study of religions and worldviews in public schools. Interpreting intercultural theology as an in-between theology that addresses the oscillation between the particular and the universal (Gruber 2018; Wrogemann 2021), I ask how attention toward context and cross-boundary relations may critically challenge a common world religion-oriented didactic within the subject of religious education (RE) (see, e.g., Anker 2017; Enstedt 2020; Jackson 2014; Skeie 2009). When the teaching of RE relies on a classification system rooted in Western Protestant Christianity, which presents faith traditions as homogenous and unchanging over time, the intercultural potential of the subject can easily be reduced. The need for rethinking the intercultural dimension of non-confessional RE would thus mean counteracting the removal of religion from context and distancing faith traditions from lived experience. As such, the article at hand proposes a reflection on how insights from intercultural theology can provide a critical and constructive voice for enabling non-confessional RE in public schools to contribute to students' intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

By framing intercultural theology as an in-between theology, Wrogemann (2021) identified a theology that reflects not only the "emergence of new culturally contextually local varieties of Christianity" (p. 8) but also "processes of constructive boundary work over against other religions and worldviews with their competing truth claims, values, and practices" (p. 9). From this perspective, intercultural theology helps us understand both the complexity of the continuously ongoing contextualization of the Christian universal message of salvation through Christ and the interrelations between the Christian faith

and other religions and worldviews. Intercultural theology draws attention toward the transformations that take place at the boundaries between religious communities. By turning to intercultural theology as an in-between theology, the paper aims to answer the following research question: What resources can be found in intercultural theology to enhance students' ability to interpret, relate, value, and interact with cultural differences through non-confessional RE in public schools?

The paper is structured as follows. First, I introduce the characteristics of non-confessional RE in public schools, highlighting the increased role of intercultural understanding that has been associated with the RE subject. Here, I use the Norwegian RE subject as an example, which illustrates the strong position that the world religion paradigm still has in the non-confessional study of religions in schools. Second, I draw attention to the tendency to introduce religions and other belief systems as single entities that reflect largely the institutionalized sides of religion. The danger is thus that the teaching of RE overlooks the fact that religions and worldviews are deeply embedded in social life and transform, develop, and interconnect through everyday practices outside of institutionalized religious life. As a consequence, the intercultural dimension of RE can be reduced to a question of how to provide students with facts and informational knowledge about the different belief systems. In doing so, there is a risk of distancing religion and worldviews from lived experiences. In the remainder of the article, I turn to the framework of intercultural theology, asking what resources can be found to create a critical awareness of the inner diversity and interconnectedness of denominations and religious traditions when teaching RE in public schools. It is worth noticing, however, that I do not engage with questions of how the field of intercultural theology relates to other ways of doing theology, for example the hermeneutical structure of contextual theologies. As such, the paper does not engage with questions of whether intercultural theology is, in fact, theology at all. My intention is rather to investigate how a reflexive approach to theological thinking that is aware of the fluidity and ambiguity of religious traditions can inspire a critical reflection on the intercultural dimension of non-confessional RE.

2. Non-Confessional, Intercultural RE

In recent years, the complex processes of globalization, internationalization, and immigration have continued to change the global landscape of education (May and Sleeter 2010; Wolff and Ehrström 2020). As a result, the increasingly diverse backgrounds of students have contributed to reshaping the conditions for learning in many classrooms, making cultural, linguistic, and religious plurality an integral part of the educational experience. For public schools bringing together a diverse body of students, a major task is thus to meet the needs of diverse learners by creating an inclusive and learning-friendly environment for all children and young people (Nieto 2017). In this way, public schools play an essential role as an arena for co-creating community. By affirming and recognizing the value of diversity in the classroom, teachers can contribute to the academic and social achievements of all students, resulting in the latter having a greater sense of belonging, more participation, and enhanced social cohesion.

For this reason, RE in schools has become an important tool for preparing students for intercultural interaction and collaboration. Both non-confessional and confessional approaches to RE have been faced with the challenge of increased globalization and pluralism, resulting in the need for a stronger emphasis on interdenominational and interreligious learning (Jackson 2014; Schreiner 2007). As can be seen, for example, in the work undertaken by the Council of Europe (2022) on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue, RE education, regardless of model, has the potential to enhance students' understanding of worldviews and the beliefs of people that differ from their own and to enable students' competence to navigate and feel at home in a diverse society. In many countries, the subject of RE is thus closely associated with the ideals of intercultural dialogue, emphasizing opportunities for better understanding, transformation, and new insights.

An example of this is the non-confessional Norwegian RE subject, which has been highlighted by school authorities since its introduction in 1997 as a subject for intercultural understanding (Ministry of Education 2020). Although the RE subject has been often debated in the Norwegian context and met international critique for implicitly giving Christianity a privileged position within it, the latest changes have been more informed by religious studies perspectives than by Christian theology (Bråten 2015; Skeie 2022). These clarifications have favored didactical approaches whereby students learn about different religious and secular worldviews in a pluralistic and non-partial way, underlining that religions and beliefs should be introduced according to their own particular characteristics and with the same pedagogical principles (Skrefsrud 2022). Hence, composed as a common school subject, the Norwegian RE subject aims to give learners intercultural competence, enabling them to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes that support their ability to understand cultural complexity and to interact with people from different backgrounds (Ministry of Education 2020).

However, as noted by Skeie (2009, 2020), von der Lippe and Undheim (2017), and others, the world religion paradigm still has a surprisingly prominent position within the Norwegian RE subject. Based on the latest reform, the curriculum aims to counteract a one-dimensional world religion approach by emphasizing perspectives on contemporary religion and worldviews in favor of a historical and chronological presentation of religion (Skeie 2020). In addition, interdisciplinary themes were introduced to help students see the value of different perspectives for discussing complex issues, such as how religious worldviews can contribute to sustainable lifestyles. Nevertheless, the classification of religious communities, religious phenomena, and even secular worldviews into an orderly system seems to be persistent in both teaching and learning materials in the Norwegian context (Schjetne and Hansen 2021). Introducing the phenomena of religion to students in school, the ideal of bringing order, system, and intelligibility to the range of knowledge about religion and worldviews seems to be more important than introducing students to the complexity of religious practice and experiences.

As noted by Jackson (2014), Enstedt (2020), and others, the classification of religions and denominations for didactical reasons is not restricted to the Norwegian RE context. In many classrooms across Europe, the teaching of religion continues to follow a systemic-oriented approach, describing and comparing the various religions and denominations within them as single entities. Inspired by the influential work of Smart (1977, 1996) on the different dimensions of religions, a common approach to RE is thus to introduce students to the origins, historical developments, and common practices of the major world religions and their denominations. Through such an approach, students learn about the various world religions by highlighting their specific characteristics, common themes, similarities, and differences, examining the different ways in which the religions and specific directions within them interpret life and reality (see, e.g., Beyer 2015; Enstedt 2020; Nyangweso 2022).

Such a way of framing religion, however, has been critically questioned for several reasons. In his influential work on non-confessional RE, Jackson (1997, 2004, 2014) critiqued the tendency to conceptualize and reify religions into abstract systems of specific beliefs and practices. According to Jackson, such a conception of religion runs the risk of being one-dimensional, as it primarily draws attention to the institutionalized sides of faith traditions. A system-oriented understanding of religion thus tends to overlook how religious experiences and practices are embedded in social life and transform, develop, and interconnect through everyday practices outside of institutionalized religious life.

In Jackson's (2004) critique of essentialist readings of religion, the alternative is not to reduce religion to personal experiences or to promote a theory of religious relativity whereby the individual creates his or her own religious life world in isolation. Rather, Jackson (2004, 2014) argued that the most appropriate and realistic alternative would be to identify religious traditions and denominations as actual sociocultural realities. Embedded in different social and cultural contexts, religions are created and re-created in response to their surroundings.

An example of this is the contemporary context of ecological destruction that challenges faith communities "to ask what change religion can make to climatic and environmental change" (Bergmann 2015, p. 32). Within a scenario of rapid, widespread, and intensified climate change, Christian eco-oriented theology offers both an ecological critique of Christian theology and a theological critique of environmental destruction (Skrefsrud 2021). In turn, this makes it extremely difficult to argue for an essentialist and universal understanding of, for example, Christian identity, presupposing that the substance of the Christian church is unchangeable by nature and functions as an independent and self-referential system. For Jackson, it was thus imperative to imply a dynamic understanding of religion, exploring how religious traditions unfold, change, and interconnect in different social, cultural, and historical contexts.

The difficulty of classifying religions and denominations brings us to the concept of intercultural theology, which, in contrast to sharp classifications and border drawing, aims to explore what happens when borders become blurred. How can intercultural theology shed light on how we can consider the intercultural dimension of RE to help develop education that fosters democratic citizenship and enhances social cohesion?

3. Intercultural Theology: Some Insights

An important background to intercultural theology is provided by the fact that religious differences continue all too often to be a source of tension, conflict, and discrimination both between people from different beliefs systems, religious worldviews, and secular models of contemporary societies, and within different religions and denominations (Council of Europe 2006, 2022). As such, Jackson's critical perspective on the conception of world religions can be said to correspond to the main characteristics of intercultural theology, emphasizing dialogues and interrelations between theological expressions from different parts of the global church. Built on the critique of a static and essentialist understanding of religious identity, intercultural theology acknowledges "the fundamental instability of identity: identity cannot be traced back to an unchangeable essence but is constituted only in and through discursive processes" (Gruber 2018, p. 10). Hence, within the framework of intercultural theology, "Christian identity is not simply given and static but must be renegotiated again and again" (Gruber 2018, p. 10). Intercultural theology is thus a theological reflection upon the process of interculturalization and the interconnectedness of cultures, undermining the idea of an "essence" of Christianity that is explicated in the tradition in different places and times (Gruber 2018).

Similarly, Wrogemann (2021) emphasized the Christian foundation of intercultural theology, relating the concept to the complex interplay of universality and particularity within and between the different Christian faith traditions:

> Intercultural theology reflects the missionary/boundary-crossing interactions of the Christian witness of faith motivated by the claim to universal validity of its message of salvation. In the interplay between the respective cultural, religious, societal, and other contexts and actors, these interactions lead to the formation of multiple strands of local Christianities. Knowing that they belong together places before these strands the task of continually renegotiating normative contents of Christian doctrine and praxis in the tension between universality and particularity. (Wrogemann 2021, p. 3)

Hence, as we can see from Gruber's (2018) and Wrogemann's (2021) ways of framing the concept, intercultural theology has its origin in Christian thinking and aims to see the nuances of how the Gospel relates to the dynamics of different cultural contexts. Nevertheless, as noted in the introduction to this article, Wrogemann (2021) articulated an understanding of the framework of intercultural theology that reflects a broader scope beyond just highlighting the interconnectedness of Christian faiths or following the myriad footprints of Christian life and thinking around the globe. For Wrogemann (2021), intercultural theology refers to a variety of "processes of constructive boundary work" (p. 9), including an understanding of how people from different religions and worldviews

can find opportunities for cooperative, constructive, and positive interactions. Thus, according to Wrogemann (2021), applying intercultural theology would mean engaging in a cross-cultural as well as inter-cultural processes, which also implies seeking a deeper understanding of how religion is embedded in contemporary society. From this perspective, going beyond a specific "Christian" theological activity, intercultural theology draws attention to the intellectual and spiritual resources of people of different religious beliefs, how they interact, intersect, and diverge, and the role that the phenomena of religion can have in different contexts. Intercultural theology thus becomes a corrective to the tendency toward theological imperialism that has infected Christian affirmation for several centuries (Waigi Ng'ang'a 2017). As a concept, intercultural theology can also function as a counter voice against attempts to reduce the complexity of religion by detaching faith traditions from context and people's lived experiences.

As such, intercultural theology emphasizes a dynamic understanding of religious identities and traditions. Within the perspective of intercultural theology, the construction of religious traditions can be seen as a result of what Hervieu-Léger (2000) called "a chain of memory" (p. 171), meaning that religious traditions exist in the dynamic transfer between individuals, binding groups of people together in the past, present, and future. Such a dynamic understanding thus challenges the conventional conception of tradition as beliefs, values, and practices that do not change, but remain the same from generation to generation.

According to Hervieu-Léger (2000), a conventional view on tradition and identity places these concepts in contrast to the fragmentation of modern identities; thus, as modern society becomes more complex, unstable, and fluid, the individual turns toward tradition to look for consistency. However, within such an understanding, religious traditions are reduced to a cultural memory of the past, which is an effective way of making religion irrelevant; thus, according to Hervieu-Léger (2000), "To say that religion has to do with tradition, namely with continuity and conformity, in a world dominated by pressure for change, effectively denies it any active social or cultural role in modern society" (p. 86). Hence, to avoid a static understanding of tradition as a nostalgic, exotic, and impertinent remembrance, the chains of memory, which in a modern society are more difficult to maintain as a living source of meaning, need to be rediscovered. Within the perspective of intercultural theology, religious traditions transform in the relocation between the generations and develop in a dialectic between continuity and change. Bergmann (2004) described such a dynamic as follows: "Something should remain the same, something should be left forever and something should be renewed and reconstructed in a new key. Something has to be invented" (p. 152).

To clarify the argument, within the discipline of intercultural theology, a dynamic understanding does not mean that religious traditions have lost their meaning or are no longer significant as systems with a particular content and specific practices. Religions, worldviews, and different denominations can certainly be described and identified, both with regard to their own characteristics and in contrast to each other. However, the concept of intercultural theology reminds us of the ongoing dialogue between and within different traditions and worldviews. Traditions are constantly evolving in processes of interexchange and transformation, which draws attention to the lived and concrete reality. As such, intercultural theology attends explicitly to the diverse groups of people who make up the various and complex religious traditions. Instead of seeing religion and worldview as abstract and disembodied ideas, intercultural theology moves toward the embodied practices of living in a diverse context.

4. Implications of Intercultural Theology for Non-Confessional RE

How can such an elaboration on intercultural theology inspire a critical and constructive reflection on the intercultural potential of non-confessional RE? As previously mentioned, scholars have for a long time critiqued a pedagogy that continues to view and present religious traditions as constructed systems largely disconnected from the ordinary

experiences of children and young people (see, e.g., Anker 2017; Enstedt 2020; Jackson 2014; Skeie 2009). In an interconnected and complex world, however, such an approach is not sufficient. If the aim is to understand how religions and worldview make up the concrete lived reality of many people, and to develop students' skills and capacity for engaging with people of diverse backgrounds, lecturing on the traditions by using a more traditional approach toward world religions needs to be reconsidered.

First, I believe the framework of intercultural theology is an important reminder to myself and others working with prospective teachers in teacher education about what kind of competence teachers need within the field of religion when entering the classroom. From studies, we know that issues of diversity and social justice in teacher education are often concentrated on linguistic diversity (Burner et al. 2018; Strand and Hessel 2018). Strand and Hessel (2018), for example, identified linguistic proficiency as the absolute key factor in educational achievement in a diverse classroom. While I would not dispute such an assertion, there is a risk within multicultural education and social justice education of viewing competence within multilingualism as the sole target, thereby overlooking other dimensions of diversity, including religious diversity (see also Pfeiffer 2012). Many teachers may thus feel that they are not well-equipped to engage deeply and fully with religious complexity and see it as beyond their area of academic expertise to make meaningful connections between religious diversity and other types of diversity.

For teacher education, the framework of intercultural theology provides a critical foundation for designing courses that may help student teachers to explore the interconnections between religious diversity and intercultural education. An issue to discuss and investigate would be, for example, what kind of values and emotions underlie the social commitment of religions or denominations. The practice of providing for the poor and meeting the basic and complex needs of communities, groups, families, and individuals has deep roots within the rich diversity of religious and secular world-view traditions (Bergmann 2004; Welsch 2017). In this regard, it would be interesting to look at which traditional resources are called upon in working toward the improvement of people's lives, and how the different traditions give grounds for their empowering engagement with and for those who are vulnerable, oppressed, and experiencing exclusion for some reason and not able to fully participate in social, economic, and cultural life. Similarly, intercultural theology can stimulate teacher education courses that explore the conditions for inter- and trans-religious collaboration, the situations in which horizontal solidarity is called upon and emerges, and how social change and the empowerment of people and communities can be a result of such an interfaith engagement.

Second, and closely related to the first point, I see potential in intercultural theology for inspiring teacher educators and teachers to visualize the teaching of RE as more than conducting an academic exercise. Rather than reproducing a pedagogical approach in which students memorize facts and encyclopedic information about religious traditions, the discipline of intercultural theology can encourage more creative tasks and assignments inviting students to reflect upon the implications of religious complexity and diversity. This would help strengthen the links between schools and students' personal lives, attempting to position schools as a continuity to personal experiences and vice versa.

In an example of interfaith education, Jones and Meyer (2022) reported from a course organized around "memoirs and first-person narratives from a variety of religious and ethical traditions" and conducted with students in one of the boroughs of New York. Rather than lecturing about the various worldview traditions using a traditional world religions approach, the students were introduced to personal life stories about the role of religious beliefs and practices in everyday life. As noted by Takacs (2022), such a pedagogical approach would "move toward the embodied practice of living (justly, equitably) in a religious, culturally, and racially diverse world" (p. 2). As such, there is an applied dimension to an RE pedagogy inspired by intercultural theology. Pedagogies inspired by intercultural theology "attend explicitly to the concrete, lived reality of diverse communities;

religion is not an abstract, disembodied idea, but is only ever encountered embodied, emplaced, and enacted in the world" (Takacs 2022, pp. 2–3).

In the same example, the students were given the opportunity to explore the various topics of religious literacy, starting with personal narratives (Jones and Meyer 2022). In this way, students' understanding is constructed through an inductive reasoning. The process of learning begins with concrete learning experiences and continues with reflective observations, discussions, and finally abstract conceptualizations (see, e.g., Dodman et al. 2022). Specifically, personal narratives would function as an introduction to students' work on the history, origins, and beliefs of several of the religious traditions and how the traditions continue to be shaped and transformed by cultural and social contexts. The starting point in personal life stories can also open up students' further exploration of how religious faiths and worldviews relate to political, cultural, and social life across time and space. Critical to such a pedagogical approach would be the importance of understanding expressions and practices of faith in context. From the perspective of intercultural theology, students thus need to be conscious of the importance of the situation for shaping theology, and that religions and worldviews are closely interwoven into all dimensions of human experiences.

Third, and lastly, I shall draw attention to the skills and abilities that may follow from an intercultural theology-inspired study of religions and worldviews in public schools. When the teaching of RE helps students to see the tension between the universal and the particular, they are trained to be conscious of context, place, and identity and to see how a situated theology developed within a certain social and historical situation relates to other interpretations of faith. For example, working with the different ways of framing the mystery of salvation through Christ, students are given the opportunity to reflect upon both the contextual characteristics of theological interpretations and the relations between them. In addition, students are given a foundation for analyzing how lived experiences interconnect with religious practices and beliefs. By connecting the rich diversity of religions, denominations, and worldviews to lived reality, students are encouraged to see the significance and key functions that religion may have for people's everyday lives in contemporary society.

From this background, one can argue that when perspectives from intercultural theology are incorporated in RE, students are given the opportunity to develop the capacity to engage with people from diverse backgrounds in an open and trustful way. According to Nussbaum (1997), such capacities involve tolerance and respect, the ability to understand with depth and nuance, and emphatic listening, which she framed as being an intelligent reader of a person's story. As noted earlier in the article, within the framework of intercultural theology, human experiences cannot be understood correctly without grasping the diverse religious influences that shape the cultural context. For the teaching of RE in public schools, such insights would have the potential to enhance students' ability to establish connections and build relationships based on nuanced understandings that may combat religious stereotypes and misconceptions.

As emphasized by Vavrus (2010), a major goal for all subjects in an intercultural-oriented education is that students "come to realize that they are not outside of the history that unfolds in front of them" (p. 29). Hence, for Vavrus, as well as for scholars such as Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), Mayo (1999), and others, there is no such thing as a neutral process of education. School and education transmit the dominant culture and contribute to the reproduction of the power relations and hierarchies within society. It is therefore imperative that students develop a deepened understanding of their own positionality and of how cultural aspects and personal lived experiences engender them toward certain perspectives. Sieck (2017) framed such competence as "metacognitive capabilities" (p. 1), meaning that students come to discover how they are embedded in social practices themselves. Through such discovery, students can engage critically with reality and learn how to participate in transforming the often-hidden mechanisms that reinforce social inequalities. This competence is certainly not restricted to students but would also be

highly important to develop for student teachers. Hence, intercultural theology can inspire both school and teacher education to enhance a critical self-understanding.

Within the framework of intercultural theology, I see an important critique of a world religion approach in RE that distances the topic from lived experiences. As argued, I believe that such a way of framing the RE subject demonstrates a removal of scholarship from context. It constructs an understanding that religion can be studied as detached from human experiences and thus creates the illusion that knowledge exists independently and can be obtained through "objective" observations of the world. As such, intercultural theology reminds us that the production of knowledge demands a practice of positioning involving a self-critical awareness. Hence, in the framework of intercultural theology, there lies a challenge for RE in public schools to critically examine teaching and learning practices that reduce the variations of religions, worldviews, and denominations to simple categories for placing, labelling, and thereby controlling people. Without this critical perspective, it is easy to overlook the dynamics and inner diversities of beliefs and practices and instead construct a stereotypical description that fails to understand others' ways of life.

5. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have foregrounded the framework of intercultural theology to discuss its significance for non-confessional RE in public schools. My interest has been the question of how intercultural theology can support and inform a dynamic understanding of religious traditions in contrast to an essentialist and system-oriented reading. If we believe that religion is about more than abstract systems of beliefs, and that learning about religion in schools should also invite and integrate lived experiences, interreligious and interdenominational issues, the framework of intercultural theology can be a useful correction to existing practices.

While my starting point has been the Norwegian non-confessional RE subject, I believe that drawing on intercultural theology in a critical discussion on system-oriented approaches to RE would resonate with a variety of models for RE. In Europe, for example, the experience of RE is highly diverse, and different models are rooted in and shaped by specific complex situations. Nevertheless, as noted by Schreiner (2007), "all existing RE approaches are challenged by recent developments in society and in Europe" (p. 14). Hence, in many countries, confessional approaches to RE are also themselves seeking ways of responding appropriately to the increasingly pluralist reality. As such, reflecting upon the critical and constructive potential of intercultural theology is also relevant to the many examples of confessional RE being open to interreligious and interdenominational learning.

Analytically, the study of relations between intercultural theology and intercultural RE should not overlook the risk of intercultural theology itself becoming a political tool for programming RE in ways that extend power and domination. As noted by Jackson (2014), the expectations that European politicians and educational policy makers hold toward RE and its mediating role in schools may paradoxically reduce the subject to an instrument for solving existing problems of living together in complex societies. However, such problems and conflicts lie beyond the scope for school and RE to solve alone. Thus, to claim that intercultural theology is the only possible construct on the basis of which RE should be remodeled can lead to a new form of imperialism where one authoritative concept is replaced with another.

Against this background, it is important to underline that intercultural theology provides one of several opportunities to rethink intercultural RE. Future research should further examine how the framework of intercultural theology continues to challenge the subject of RE and how intercultural theology can be complemented with a wider range of perspectives and intercultural frameworks. As I have shown, the idea of intercultural theology itself can help us engage critically with such issues in a way that goes beyond a one-dimensional approach to RE.

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Article

The Impact of Cultural Diversity on End-of-Life Care

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Abstract: Despite the universality of death for humanity, end-of-life care needs and expectations are highly unique and influenced by the individual's cultural conditioning, values, and beliefs. In the pursuit of quality end-of-life care provision within the increasingly complex and diverse contemporary medical context, it is vital for cultural idiosyncrasies to be taken into consideration in order to attend to the individual patient's needs and end-of-life goals. Palliative chaplains, as the spiritual care specialists within the multidisciplinary healthcare team, play a crucial role in the support and facilitation of the holistic vision of end-of-life care delivery. However, the capacity of the chaplains to become culturally competent practitioners are often insufficiently addressed in their professional educational pathways, creating additional challenges for them in their practice. Using Hong Kong as a case study, this article examines the impact of cultural diversity on the effectiveness of the chaplains' delivery of end-of-life spiritual care. Specifically, special attention will be focused on two identified challenges resulting from the lack of integration of local cultural understandings within the religion-cultural practice framework of chaplaincy formation: the cultural taboo of death, and the cultural idiosyncrasies in end-of-life communication. This article hopes to raise awareness of cultural incongruencies within the current chaplaincy professional formation and development, and to initiate further attention and efforts to support chaplains in becoming culturally competent practitioners in the pluralistic healthcare landscape.

Keywords: end-of-life care; cultural diversity; Chinese culture; chaplaincy formation; palliative chaplaincy; Hong Kong; cultural-congruent care

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1. Introduction

With rising awareness and recognition of the need to provide quality medical care that addresses the multitude of complex needs in life-threatening illnesses, which technical intervention alone cannot meet (McCue 1995), contemporary medicine has increasingly advocated for a holistic vision of healthcare, which incorporates other dimensions of care like religion and spirituality. Within this holistic vision of end-of-life care, which strives to pay equal attention to a patient's physical, psychological, social and spiritual needs (Savel and Munro 2014), palliative chaplains are the spiritual care specialists responsible (Puchalski et al. 2009), within a multidisciplinary healthcare team, for attending to the spiritual needs of patients and their loved ones in the dying experience, such as life support issues (Carey and Newell 2007) and death anxieties (Cooper 2011, p. 20). Meeting the patient's spiritual needs is closely correlated with the enhancement of patient (Astrow et al. 2007) and family (Daaleman et al. 2008; Wall et al. 2007) satisfaction with overall care. Most importantly, end-of-life spiritual care is particularly crucial at this acutely vulnerable time of the patient's illness experience, when physical healing is no longer a possibility and supportive comfort care has become the priority (Billings and Pantilat 2001; Sulmasy 2006). At the final margins of life, when end-of-life treatment plans are shifted towards palliation, the effectiveness and quality of care are highly dependent upon its alignment to the patient's individual end-of-life goals (Meier et al. 2010), which are shaped by a multitude of factors, including culture and spiritual beliefs (Balboni et al. 2007).

Even though dying is a universal experience for humanity, no one responds to death in the same way, since their interpretation and understanding of suffering, illness and death are culturally impacted (Long 2011). Cultural influence on the difficult decisions faced at the end-of-life is particularly pertinent, as it determines how death and dying are understood by the individual patient and their loved ones (Ludke and Smucker 2007). Cultural idiosyncrasies must therefore be taken into consideration when devising end-of-life care plans, which should be influenced by cultural beliefs, values, and practices (Crawley et al. 2002). In other words, the cultural competency of end-of-life care professionals across the disciplines, including the chaplains, is key to quality care for the diverse patient population being served in a contemporary medical setting (Bullock 2011).

Yet, even with the recognition of the significance of providing culturally congruent care, the effective delivery of culturally competent end-of-life spiritual care is not easily attained in practice (Ho et al. 2018). Many factors contribute to the challenges faced by chaplains and their ability to deliver effective, timely and culturally sensitive end-of-life spiritual care. Such hurdles are plentiful to begin with but become even more difficult to navigate when serving a diverse, multicultural patient population within the acute medical setting. In that situation, the challenges include their need to work under the urgency of time limitation in the end-of-life context at the same time as acquiring knowledge and appreciation of different cultural significance to best minister to their individual care recipients. However, the capacity to meet such demanding and evolving challenges and needs within the chaplain's role of "brokering diversity" (Pesut et al. 2012) to recipients from a wide spectrum of cultural and religious backgrounds is not always sufficiently developed in chaplaincy formation, where little to no attention is paid to the importance of culturally pertinent interaction in end-of-life care. The lack of formation leaves the practitioners having to face and manage these complex and critical situations alone.

I came to the realization of the need for an emphasis on culturally pertinent interaction in chaplaincy formation from my experience in the practice itself. I was trained in an Anglican theological institution and have been a hospital chaplain in Hong Kong, with a focus on palliative care, for the past five years before and still after completing my doctoral studies in Practical Theology.

In this article, I will investigate the impact of culture on the effectiveness of chaplains' practice of end-of-life spiritual care. In order to do so, I will focus on the situation in Hong Kong as a case study to examine how the chaplains' professional formation causes challenges in their practice. More concretely, I will especially pay attention to challenges related to a lack of integration of local cultural understandings into the practice framework learn during the formative years.

In order to examine the intricate and complex relationship between culture and the practice of spiritual care, Hong Kong, with its colonial history and its position as a bridging site between China and the rest of the global world (Postiglione 2006), provides a fitting milieu for such an examination. China's Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong[1] has been described as resembling a "fault line", torn between competing for Western and Chinese cultures (Purbrick 2020). Even though Hong Kong is inhabited by a multitude of ethnic groups representing a wide array of cultures, languages, and beliefs (Anderson 2021, p. 249) and is known as "a cultural and linguistic melting pot" (Gibbons 1979, p. 113), over 90% of the population is ethnically Chinese. This is partially why, despite the fact that the majority of Hong Kong residents identify more with the West (Purbrick 2020, p. 480), traditional Chinese cultural influence remains a deeply rooted presence in Hong Kong. Thus, the distinctiveness of the local context provides a helpful platform to assess and identify any existing gaps in the current formation and equipping of palliative chaplains to become culturally competent practitioners within the secular and pluralistic medical settings.

2. The Cultural and Religious Background of Hong Kong

Hong Kong evolved from a small fishing village located in the southeast corner of the People's Republic of China when its sovereignty was ceded to the British Government in 1843 during the First Opium War (Carroll 2007, p. 12) to become the current lively cosmopolitan center it is (Tsang 2003). As one of the world's reputed international metropolitan cities, Hong Kong exemplifies a sophisticated multicultural hub. In spite of its growing diversity, Hong Kong's predominant population group is still Chinese (HK Govt Census 2005).[2] Examples of other significant foreign resident groups among the 0.58 million from non-Chinese communities include those from the Philippines (31.5%) and Indonesia (26.2%) together with British, American, and Australian nationals (10%), generating the distinctive "hybrid status" (Carroll 2007, p. 169) of Hong Kong local culture. The diverse and heterogeneous regional demographics have also resulted in an eclectic assortment of religions in Hong Kong. Amongst the various religious communities representing dominant faiths such as Christianity (Protestant and Catholic), Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Judaism (Postiglione 2006) is the "diverse and amorphous" Chinese religion in Hong Kong, which is composed of a syncretic blend of Buddhism, Daoism and a range of practices referred to as "popular or folk religion" (Bosco 2015, p. 8). These traditional customs and practices include expressions of reverence for family ancestors through ancestor worship, which is a significant part of Chinese life regardless of religious beliefs (Lakos 2010, p. 69), as well as geomancy or shamanism (Bosco 2015, p. 8). It is easy to miss the prominence and popularity of Hong Kong Chinese religion in the absence of a government-run department in charge of local religious affairs, unlike the more conspicuous and discernible dominant institutional religions (Liu 2003). For example, in the case of Christianity, despite constituting only 10% of Hong Kong's population, two religious organizations are highly visible: the Anglican Church (Sheng Kung Hui) and Roman Catholic Church (Bosco 2015, p. 14). Even though Chinese religion in Hong Kong is less conspicuous and organized and even though many residents of Hong Kong define themselves as irreligious (Bosco 2015, p. 8) and do not identify with a particular religious tradition (Chan and Lee 1995, p. 85), unofficial cultural and religious practices idiosyncratic to Hong Kong Chinese religion remain a significant influence on the day-to-day life of local residents (Liu 2003). These informal, yet integral practices and cultural customs constitutive of the syncretic nature of Hong Kong Chinese religion (Youngblood 2018, p. 329) guide important life decisions[3] and need to be taken into consideration in end-of-life provisions.

Besides the religious diversity present in Hong Kong, the classical Chinese philosophy of Confucianism must also be taken into account in delivering effective and culturally-congruent end-of-life care to recipients of the Hong Kong Chinese population, as it permeates Hong Kong's religious and cultural background and continues to play a key role in shaping the Chinese people, especially in relation to death and dying (Hsu et al. 2009, p. 153). Confucianism was an expression originally coined in the sixteenth century by Jesuit missionaries in China to refer to the all-embracing Chinese cultural and philosophical-religious thought based on Confucius (551–479 BC) (Hsu et al. 2009, p. 158). Although Confucianism is not commonly categorized as a form of religion, its embeddedness within the Chinese culture remains visible in many aspects of Chinese life (Jacobs et al. 1995, p. 29). The philosophical school of Confucianism, with its ethical emphasis on attaining the harmony of the human world through the cultivation of areas such as morality and social behavior, has had a prominent shaping influence on Chinese thought throughout history (Hue 2007, p. 40). With respect to the end-of-life context, traditional Chinese philosophical and religious thought stemming from Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism significantly shapes the perception and understanding of what constitutes a good death, with considerable implications for effective end-of-life care (Chan et al. 2006, p. 127). As an example, despite the wide overlap between Hong Kong's understanding of spirituality and the Western concept of spirituality associated with the relationship and connectedness of self, others and the divine, as well as attaining meaning and hope (Lin and Bauer-Wu 2003, p. 71), two additional, unique aspects in end-of-life spirituality are discernable in the cultural context

of Hong Kong: the fulfillment of personal responsibilities and the acceptance of death as a life process (Mok et al. 2010, p. 368). These two distinctive facets of end-of-life spirituality reflect the cultural emphasis on an individual's social responsibility toward the collective good of others and are a distinguishing feature of Confucianism (Mok et al. 2010, p. 367). The contextual idiosyncrasies derived from the "secular orientation" (Leung and Chan 2010, p. 160) of Hong Kong's framework of spirituality, with its emphasis on the value of self-knowledge and maintaining harmonious interpersonal relations profoundly impact the cultural comprehension of a good death (Lee et al. 2018, p. 2). These nuanced dissimilarities of Hong Kong culture's understanding of the end-of-life from the Western model become more discernible in the formulation and implementation of palliative practice and profoundly affect the goal of attaining culturally congruent end-of-life care. The pertinence of culture-specific understanding is further enhanced and becomes visible when approached from the perspective of a practice framework that has omitted cultural idiosyncrasies in its design. The unforeseen hurdles emerging from an approach that has insufficiently factored in the intricate complexities of cultural idiosyncrasy will be examined and illustrated in the following sections.

3. Formation of Chaplains

Chaplaincy formation is crucial in developing the hospital chaplain's understanding and ability to fulfill their role in delivering quality spiritual care. To become a hospital chaplain, a person must first attain a bachelor's or master's degree in theology from a seminary or another recognized theological institution. Secondly, a process of practical formation is required to be undertaken with the objective to learn how to work effectively in the complex institutional dynamics of the contemporary healthcare setting. The specific model of this supplementary training may differ depending on the geographical location, but it always involves a period of supervised chaplaincy placement. For example, hospital chaplains in the UK are required to have completed a minimum of six months' chaplaincy placement in addition to postgraduate certificate training.[4] In other parts of the world, such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and Hong Kong, this postgraduate professional development takes place in the form of a chaplaincy accreditation program called Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE).

3.1. Theological Formation

Currently, Hong Kong hospital chaplains are primarily "devout practitioners from conservative Christian traditions" (Youngblood 2019, p. 329). Although there is no available data on the denominational demographics of Hong Kong Christian chaplains, a brief survey of the membership of the Association of Hong Kong Hospital Christian Chaplaincy Ministry suggests that the majority of the registered chaplains are from Evangelical Protestant faith communities.[5] This differs slightly from the case in North America, where there is a comparatively higher proportion of chaplains from Mainline Protestant backgrounds (White et al. 2021, p. 13). Until recently, the Hong Kong chaplain community was constituted of members from the Christian faith (Protestant and Catholic). It was not until 2011 that the Buddhist chaplaincy service came into the scene under the oversight of the Centre for Spiritual Progress to Great Awakening (SPGA) to provide Buddhist spiritual care to fourteen public hospitals in Hong Kong.[6] However, the majority of healthcare chaplains remain a cohort of Christian chaplains. These "Christian faith-based clergy" (Luk 2019) complete theological training in seminary as a foundational step before pursuing additional, more practical, training: CPE. The name 'seminary' is derived from the image of a protective nursery for nurturing growing young plants into maturity and has its historical roots in the sixteen-century Council of Trent (Oakely 2017, p. 223). Traditionally, through the process of seminary education, candidates are prepared for the ordained priesthood (Keating 2012, p. 309) or for serving in "other 'credentialed' lay ministries" (Reisz 2003, p. 29). Concerning chaplaincy formation, seminary formation serves to root the candidates in the Christian faith through a curriculum comprising historical, biblical, theological, and ethical courses

(Calian 2002, p. 12), guiding them to align, clarify, and solidify their vocational calling and identity to serve outside of the Church as hospital chaplains. Seminary formation thus affirms and trains chaplains to embrace the historical vision and role of hospital chaplaincy, to represent and serve on behalf of the church (Pesut et al. 2012, p. 826). The theological formation in Hong Kong seminaries reflects a similar traditional vision to equip chaplains in their vocational calling working in the hospital setting. Amongst the subjects taught in seminaries, courses such as pastoral theology, counseling and family ministries within the core curriculum or offered as electives contribute to nurturing the chaplains for the necessary skillsets in their role to deliver spiritual care to the diverse patient population in their practice. However, in spite of the seminary's long history of instructing future ministers through Christian theological education and priestly formation, the content of the curriculum taught mostly emphasizes scriptural knowledge which has been critiqued as limited and "perfunctory in its spiritual depth and practical value" (Jeynes 2012, p. 70). This lack of practicality and the ensuing need to extend ministers' training beyond seminary theological education became the impetus from which the dual training model emerged, incorporating additional supplementary formation to deepen ministers' practical skills and knowledge in order to serve outside of the church.

3.2. CPE

In Hong Kong, hospital chaplaincy began in 1984 with the first Christian chaplain providing spiritual care as a volunteer within a public hospital (Chow 2015, p. 49). Since then, and with the growing presence of chaplains in Hong Kong, the need to supplement future chaplains' formation has been attained through the training program of CPE. CPE is a methodology that originated in the United States of America in the early part of the twentieth century and which has since become an interfaith professional education program for ministers working in different contexts, including hospital chaplains (Clevenger et al. 2021, p. 223). The rapid expansion of CPE from its inception was part of a larger movement that responded to the perceived insufficiency of theological education at the time with its predominant focus on attaining scriptural knowledge while neglecting learning from human experience, thus neglecting to develop the relevant practical skillsets for ministers serving in the real world (Hall 1992, p. 282). The two founding fathers of CPE, Anton T. Boisen and Richard Cabot, were particularly concerned with the discrepancies of academic seminary education in preparing ministers to serve in the healthcare context, which prompted them to advocate for theological students to have supervised experiences in clinical settings as part of their ministry training (Jernigan 2002, p. 381). Through CPE's traditional action-reflection-action model of learning, students are led through supervision and the practice of self-reflection in their experience of patient engagements with the aim of growing in self-awareness and professional competency (Pohly 2016, pp. 78–79; O'Connor 2006, pp. 90–93). CPE is conducted in units, with each unit consisting of four hundred hours of supervised clinical experience within an approved training center.[7] This program aims to further clarify chaplains' vocational identity, a task initiated in seminary, as well as to enable theologically-trained practitioners to be equipped with practical training to apply their knowledge into relevant and effective ministry (Little 2010, p. 2). In Hong Kong, the predominant training and accreditation model used is patterned from the American Association for Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE). Within the program, the pastoral competence of the students is strengthened to prepare them for the better navigation of the demanding healthcare landscape as spiritual care specialists. The curriculum includes subjects pertaining to pastoral practices, ministerial ethics, interfaith connections, and effective communication skills such as listening, to name a few.[8] Practicing chaplains are required to have completed at least one unit of CPE.[9] CPE in Hong Kong is carried out in a very similarly operated model to the Western contexts, where the program originated, which is not purely secular but is motivated to attend to the pluralistic and religiously diverse needs of the care recipient by focusing more on the inter-religious dynamics within spiritual care encounters.

However, despite the efforts of CPE, there is an increased expression of concern in recent years regarding CPE's efficacy in developing effective professional hospital chaplains with the necessary skills to cope with the evolving demands of institutional dynamics, including the ability to broker diversities in contemporary healthcare (Cadge 2012, p. 83; Fitchett et al. 2015; Massey 2014; Ragsdale 2018; Tartaglia 2015). In the following section, I will proceed to explore this concern regarding the efficacy of chaplaincy formation using the concrete example of Hong Kong. I will focus on how the dual-track formation of Hong Kong chaplains, with their vocational identity founded on deeply rooted Christian values on the one hand and the "non-sectarian, interfaith model of chaplaincy" (Youngblood 2018, p. 331) comprising CPE on the other, reveals unexpected complications unforeseen in the original design of CPE training.

4. From Formation to Practice: The Challenges of Chaplaincy in Hong Kong's Cultural Milieu

In keeping with the rest of the global world, Hong Kong has been striving towards the ideal of a holistic end-of-life care provision in the past few decades, guided by the vision of "being patient-centred, family-orientated, dignity-conserving and culturally-competent."[10] Hong Kong chaplains, akin to chaplains in Western contexts, are trained to become spiritual care specialists working with the multidisciplinary healthcare team to address the multitude of end-of-life care needs underpinned by the said vision. However, unlike some of their Western counterparts, hospital chaplains are not under the direct employment of the hospital institutions but are funded by the church or other Christian organizations and are granted access to work in the hospital by means of an assigned honorary title. Having overcome this unusual first hurdle to have gained access to work within the hospitals, Hong Kong chaplains face other challenges as they seek to apply the skills and knowledge acquired through their dual-track formation in practice.

A general challenge in this transition may not be specific to Hong Kong but could be an experience shared by Christian chaplains in other contexts: the incompatibility of the two modes in chaplaincy formation, theological education and CPE. The conflicting orientations underpinning the two distinctive sources of chaplaincy foundational knowledge—religiously rooted theological education and the more generic and humanistic approach of CPE—become problematic in practice as Christian chaplains are left to reconcile the differences between divergent understandings on their own. One such conflict is related to the chaplains' foundational understanding of commonly encountered issues in the end-of-life context, which has been indelibly shaped by theological formation, yet does not fully align with the secular orientation endorsed by their supplementary training in CPE. For instance, the orientation of the Christian pastoral approach informing end-of-life care is drawn heavily from the Scriptures, modeled after Jesus' dying and underpinned by Christian virtues such as patience, compassion and eternal hope (Vogt 2004, p. 135). Each dying person being cared for is seen not as an isolated individual but a member of the body of Christ, the Church, and is guided and supported towards surrender of the self to God as the vision of dying faithfully (Levering 2018, p. 117). Contrasting with that Christian pastoral directive, CPE's secular, humanistic approach to palliative care emphasizes the "singular existence" (Wu and Volker 2012, p. 477) of each person and the facilitation of personal growth, self-worth, and self-transcendence to reduce death-related distress (Wu and Volker 2012, p. 474). These fundamental dissimilarities in the departure points and orientations underlying the chaplains' dual formation remain unnoticed and unaddressed in both educational pathways but inevitably become perceptible and problematic in practice when chaplains must resolve these unforeseen hurdles on their own in the reality of their critical and urgent circumstances, as will be shown in the sections below.

In addition to this general difficulty, Christian chaplains in Hong Kong encounter further complications as they are compelled to resolve incongruencies arising from the direct application of CPE to the idiosyncratic cultural context of Hong Kong. The Western design of CPE is a baseline flaw in this application, as the framework of CPE was created

for contexts with vastly different socio-cultural backgrounds and religious demographics from Hong Kong such as those of the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Puchalski et al. 2012, p. 417). As mentioned, Hong Kong's predominant religious landscape is of a syncretic and heterogeneous nature which vastly diverges from contexts with the more prominent presence of a particular monotheistic tradition such as Judaism, Christianity, or Islam (Youngblood 2018, p. 333). The disparity which comes from the direct implementation of the CPE model, undergirded by culturally divergent pastoral assumptions and orientations in approaching spiritual needs and care, becomes problematic for chaplains who have been formed and trained with this model. Some of these additional obstacles stemming from cultural disparity in formation faced by Hong Kong chaplains are the taboo of death, and the related challenges concerning end-of-life communication.

4.1. The Cultural Taboo of Death

The topic of death is widely accepted as one of the most prominent taboos for Chinese people, who generally would avoid talking about death whenever possible (Zhang 2020, p. 1061) so as to elude attracting evil spirits, bad luck or even premature death (Chan and Chow 2006, p. 1). This distinctive sociocultural phenomenon remains a prevalent influence not only for those living in China but also for Chinese-ethnic residents living in other parts of the world (Hsu et al. 2009, p. 154). As observed by Mark Berkson, the prominent presence of the death taboo in Chinese culture is both reflected in and related to the historical silence of Chinese texts concerning matters of death or the nature of the afterlife (Berkson 2019, p. 35). This silence in classical literary attention toward death extends to and continues to impact contemporary Chinese attitudes through the relative absence of modern research on the ontological nature of death, thus perpetuating the cultural fear of death and the socially sanctioned consensus on the avoidance of the topic, including impacts on the development and delivery of end-of-life care in China (Lei et al. 2022, p. 58).

Moreover, the Chinese death taboo is further influenced by Confucianism and Daoism, two of their prominent native religious and philosophical traditions, which share a common trait in their scarce engagement with mortality and the afterlife but prefer to focus on living well as a way to cope with and find meaning in human finitude (Berkson 2019, p. 12). Confucianism's relative lack of concern for matters of death and its clear focus on seeking ways to live well as a moral being is famously captured in one retort from Confucius when asked about death by one of his disciples saying, "You do not understand even life. How can you understand death?" (Confucius 2000).

A similarly asymmetrical commitment and attention granted towards life, especially the nourishment, prolongation and protection of life, is seen in the teachings of Daoism, which "understands the Dao as pertaining to life but not death" (Lai 2006, p. 83). Collectively, these deeply rooted socio-cultural influences contribute to the ongoing cultural aversion to topics surrounding death and directly impact end-of-life communication and important decisions central to end-of-life care (Thomas 2001, p. 42). Specific to the chaplains' delivery of end-of-life care, the professional training taught in CPE understands the significance of end-of-life communication to be pivotal and can be facilitated by chaplains to attain a form of closure,[11] connection, meaning-making and understanding of self, loved ones, and of death itself (McQuellon and Cowan 2000). However, the entrenched cultural prohibition of attending to topics surrounding death, and the perception that violation of this social norm is "sacrilegious, blasphemous, and disrespectful" (Cheng et al. 2019, p. 760) inevitably complicate the chaplains' delivery of end-of-life spiritual care as guided by their professional formation. For example, due to the cultural taboo of death, it is common practice for clinicians and families to withhold full disclosure of terminal prognosis from the patients even at the critical end stage of their illness (Zheng et al. 2015, p. 294; Tse et al. 2003, p. 339). Truth telling, a preference valued in other Western contexts such as North America (Hinshaw 2022, p. 45), is perceived as a violation of the principle of nonmaleficence causing harm rather than an opportunity for accessing supportive end-of-life care (Blackhall et al. 1995, p. 824; Caine et al. 2018, p. 1412). Practicing under the constraints and complications

of the death taboo, Hong Kong chaplains face additional challenges unaddressed in their professional development to deliver effective and timely end-of-life spiritual care for their Chinese care recipients.

4.2. Cultural Idiosyncrasies in End-of-Life Care Communication

Closely related to the cultural taboo of death is the hurdle impeding Hong Kong chaplains' facilitation of emotionally charged end-of-life conversations, a practice in end-of-life spiritual care valued and emphasized in their professional training. The series of conversations between patients, their families and the healthcare professionals are understood to be critical for quality provision of care where discussions related to end-of-life goals, life-closure issues and anticipatory grief can be addressed (Rando 2000). However, even though these crucial dialogues are widely recognized as key components of holistic palliative care, successful implementation remains an ongoing challenge with many barriers identified such as the clinicians' self-perceived incompetence in breaking bad news, or resistance from patients and families in their denial of the unfavorable prognosis (Larson and Tobin 2000, p. 1573). The difficulties resulting from these barriers to end-of-life conversations are not only shared by Hong Kong chaplains, but the resistance is amplified and made more challenging under the backdrop of death taboo.

In the case of Hong Kong chaplains' practice, an additional obstacle, besides the above-mentioned denial of and reluctance in disclosing poor prognosis with patients, lies in the Chinese cultural aversion to expressing intense emotions. Even though there is an established universality in the physiological patterns of response to emotion-eliciting events, cultural characteristics play a role in the experience and expressions of these emotions (Bond 1993, p. 245). This resistance to emotional expressions is fueled by two cultural idiosyncrasies: the cultural significance of emotional stability, as well as the influence of Confucianism in preserving relational harmony at all times, including end of life.

4.2.1. The Cultural Value of Emotional Stability

Not only are Hong Kong palliative chaplains stumped at the outset with taboo-related obstacles in their role due to the cultural aversion to addressing death, chaplains are further encumbered by the Chinese cultural constraint to express the range and intensity of emotions frequently encountered in tumultuous end-of-life communications.

As chaplains attend to the multitude of complex issues within end-of-life encounters, they are often required to take up the role of a mediator within the triadic communicative process between the care recipients, their families and the healthcare professionals (Ellis 2000). This mediatory role of the chaplains is especially important in the absence of an existing accessible language for conveying the hard-to-verbalize spiritual needs in the illness and dying experience, which when left unattended will likely lead to spiritual pain (McGrath 2002). The necessity of the chaplain's bridging role is made more urgent in the Chinese context of Hong Kong where the death taboo has cultivated general repression of open dialogue around the crucial, yet sensitive and difficult, issues in facing death. This resistance to the chaplains' facilitation of the sort of end-of-life communication that identifies and attends to care recipients' end-of-life goals, a component valued in their training, is compounded by the contextual idiosyncrasies of taboo which actively avoids "talk that meddles with death" (Chan 2009, p. 191) and by the cultural expectation which exalts self-discipline to steer away from extreme expressions (Lin et al. 1981, p. 240) to "follow the middle way" (Man and Chen 1972, p. 390). Under the abiding influence of these components from traditional customs that reinforce moderation in all things, emotional restraint in contemporary Chinese living (and dying) remains widely advocated (Bond 1988, p. 1009), creating the cultural norm where "[f]eelings are not to be spoken but to be sensed and discerned" (Gao and Ting-Toomey 1998, p. 26). In fact, according to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), extreme emotions are pathogenic and detrimental to health, and thus to be eschewed (Bond 1993). These cultural constraints persuading against the expression of extreme sentiment and the lack of a linguistic template for articulating

it, which have remained overlooked or inadequately addressed in chaplaincy formation, become problematic in the emotionally volatile end-of-life context, creating further obstacles for effective palliative care.

4.2.2. Cultural Importance of Maintaining Social Harmony

Moreover, this challenge in the effective facilitation of end-of-life communications faced by Hong Kong chaplains is further complexified by another layer of cultural resistance which acts to fortify the Chinese care recipients' reluctance to enter emotionally turbulent, uncertainty-inducing and intimate end-of-life conversations (Bond 1993). Other than linguistic limitation and social aversion to expressing intense emotions, emotional suppression is also an embedded cultural characteristic that needs to be taken into consideration in practice.

Under the abiding Confucian influence, social harmony is traditionally valued in the Chinese ethos (Hsiung and Ferrans 2007), requiring individuals to fulfill their prescribed roles within the socially sanctioned relational hierarchy to avoid direct confrontations and disharmony (Quek et al. 2010, p. 360). In Chinese culture, the expression and conceptualization of the self are not understood as an autonomous unit with distinctly marked boundaries but are realized in the larger social group where each person fulfills an individual role to maintain collective harmony (Sun 1991, p. 20). The Chinese cultivation of self is thus highly dependent on the fulfillment of social roles, and this has a significant impact on how individuals express emotion. In other words, under the engrained cultural expectation to always preserve accordance, Chinese care recipients may feel the need to suppress or neutralize their emotional display so as to conceal their emotional needs for the sake of preventing disruption of harmony within the relational network (Krone and Morgan 2000, p. 85).

Taken together, these culture-related forms of resistance to end-of-life communications have inevitably created additional barriers for Chinese care recipients to overcome in order to access and receive the chaplains' offer of spiritual care. Hong Kong chaplains, inadequately prepared by a flawed training model, are frequently compelled to navigate unforeseen difficulties as they strive to implement their acquired specialist knowledge and skillsets into their practice, acutely impacting the outcome of effective and timely delivery of quality end-of-life care to those in dire need.

5. Discussion

In order to move towards the attainment of the widely embraced holistic vision of palliative care in the increasingly complex and diverse contemporary healthcare landscape, it is vital for cultural idiosyncrasies to be taken into consideration, especially in the end-of-life care context. Successful delivery of this vision is crucially dependent on the cultural competence of the palliative chaplains to effectively navigate the individual needs and expectations of their care recipients who, in the case of Hong Kong, as in many other global contexts, come from a pluralistic background. However, as exemplified in this article, which has used Hong Kong as an example, there remains a gap in the chaplaincy formational pathways: sufficiently integrating the competence to understand and work with cultural idiosyncrasies into existing training modes. This neglect of adequate attention to the significance of the fundamental cultural differences, visible in the diverging worldviews and unspoken assumptions, inevitably creates additional challenges and unforeseen barriers for the chaplains in their practice. Some of these complications arise from the unaudited application of the Western CPE model in the socio-cultural and religiously divergent context of Hong Kong. Especially perceptible are the impact of the Chinese death taboo on the provision of end-of-life care, as well as the emotional constraints and the preservation of relational harmony which also impact the practice.

A key mismatch stems from the individualistic departure point of the humanist, interfaith training approach of CPE when it conflicts with the relational interdependence and collectivist understanding of personhood, foundational to Chinese culture. This

fundamental divergence becomes discernibly problematic in practice as chaplains strive to implement the skillsets acquired in a model which prioritizes end-of-life communication to a patient population that is culturally less receptive to this approach when coping with their death and dying needs.

The chaplains encounter additional difficulties that could be a result of the deficiencies of their seminary training, which fails to account for practicing in multicultural contexts. The deeply rooted Christocentric worldview underlying the theological formation of the chaplains diverges fundamentally from the philosophical, existential, and ethical orientation encompassed in the syncretic blend of Hong Kong Chinese religion. The clashing disparities between the two dissimilar religious orientations profoundly impact end-of-life care needs and expectations including the ultimate understanding of a good death which the chaplains are motivated to help their care recipients to attain in their practice. In the absence of sufficient efforts to acknowledge, integrate, and reconcile these distinct cultural incongruencies within the chaplains' professional formation, the chaplains are left inadequately prepared for the jarring difficulties encountered in their practice and are further hindered in delivering effective and timely end-of-life spiritual care to those in critical need. Palliative chaplains play an integral role within the holistic vision of modern healthcare, especially in their contribution to spiritual wellbeing for those in the final margins of life. In order for them to fully provide the necessary specialist support, ongoing reflection and identification of challenging areas in their practice may be a way forward to sustain the chaplains in their role within the contemporary medical setting.

Even though the complexities of cultural diversity highlighted in this research have presented additional hurdles for end-of-life care provisions, this review of those challenges may also be productively embraced as a fruitful resource for ongoing theological reflections on the current Christian practice of chaplaincy. The opening for discussion on the topic of culture and end-of-life care could be a step forwards in helping to transform and enhance the practitioner's ability to fulfill their vocational calling in their participation with God's ongoing redemptive work in, to, and for the world. For instance, future research may on one hand turn to explore how different aspects of Chinese culture bear upon and enrich theological reflection and the existing pastoral directives in end-of-life care. On the other hand, it may be an equally fruitful endeavor to focus on the impacts of the religious–cultural framework of CPE on the cultural conditioning of Chinese Christian chaplains, and the potentiality in opening up unanticipated dimensions for fresh insights in end-of-life care delivery by and large. Moreover, other areas for research may include qualitative studies on the perceived gaps in cultural-congruencies from the perspective of care recipients, or how cultural impacts on end-of-life care needs vary with generational differences in their attitudes towards death taboo and the understanding of the collective self. I thus hope that this article will help ongoing discussions to refine and expand on the professional education pathways that support chaplains in becoming culturally competent practitioners to serve end-of-life care recipients in the increasingly complex and pluralistic healthcare landscape.

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Notes

1 Hong Kong was a British colony from 1842 until 1 July 1997 when the sovereignty was transferred back to China. From then, Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC). See: (Carroll 2007, p. 217).

2 In 2016, 92% of Hong Kong population of 6.75 million people were of Chinese nationality (Hong Kong Government Census 2016).

3 Geomancy (fengshui) or spatial harmony is the belief that inappropriate location or arrangement of familial space can instigate misfortune or even tragedy. For more see Chan and Lee (1995, p. 96).

4 For more information on UK chaplains' requirements please see UK Board of Healthcare Chaplaincy (2022).

5 This membership list was faciliated to me via the Associaton of Hong Kong Hospital Christian Chaplaincy Ministry. For more infomration please see: https://hospitalchap.org.hk/ (accessed on 1 July 2022).

[6] For more information on SPGA, please see https://dhchenfoundation.com/initiatives/exercising-kindness-and-compassion-through-buddhist-chaplaincy-service/ (accessed on 1 July 2022).

[7] Each unit can be completed full-time over a ten-week period, or part-time over fifteen to thirty weeks. For more, see Steere (2002, pp. 20–21).

[8] For detail descriptions of CPE curriculum, please refer to https://acpe.edu (accessed on 1 July 2022).

[9] 98 chaplains are registered with the Association of Hong Kong Hospital Christian Chaplaincy Ministry, out of which 31 chaplains have completed at least 4 units of CPE, 35 chaplains with 2–3 units, and 32 chaplans with one unit of CPE. For more informtation on Hong Kong chaplains, please refer to https://hospitalchap.org.hk/ (accessed on 1 July 2022).

[10] Hong Kong healthcare services are primarily operated under the Government's Hospital Authority (HA) which manages all the public hospitals locally. For more on the Hong Kong Hospital Authority's development of palliative care see: Hospital Authority (2017).

[11] As suggested by Pauline Boss in "*Myth of Closure: Amibiguous Loss in a time of Pandemic and Change*", the therapeutic goal of 'closure' is non-realsitic in grieving for the loss of loved ones and should not be viewed as a therapeutic end point. The author agrees with Boss' argument to veer away from striving for the linear vision of the grief process but is using 'closure' here to highlight the chaplains' role in spiritual care encounters to faciliate the movement towards meanining-making and coping with the experience of loss.

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