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# Openness, Commitment, and Confidence in Interreligious Dialogue: A Cultural Analysis of a Western Debate †

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**Abstract:** In Western theological reflection, the relationship between openness and commitment in interreligious dialogue is often construed as a relationship between two ends of a seesaw or two arms of a balance; raising one end lowers the other, and one cannot therefore be simultaneously fully committed and open. In critical conversation with the work of Catherine Cornille and Marianne Moyaert, this paper argues that this perspective is related to a specific understanding of the “subject position” of the religious subject in late-modernity which is characterized by the subject–object divide. This divide characterizes many modern and postmodern epistemologies of religion, so that both commitment and openness are primarily rooted in the capacities of the religious subject. However, the Christian faith understands faith as a response to the divine initiative of God in Christ, and therefore understands commitment as grounded in confidence in this decisive divine salvific event. From this standpoint, both full confidence and openness are reconcilable and can even strengthen each other rather than being considered incompatible and in competition.

**Keywords:** interreligious dialogue; openness; commitment; postliberalism; language game; contrast experience; subject position; confidence



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## 1. Introduction

This paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate in the theology of religions on the proper relationship between openness and commitment in interreligious dialogue. How much openness to the other, and to alternative positions, and how much commitment to one’s own faith is needed and appropriate when engaging in dialogue with other religions and worldviews? What is the appropriate balance and relationship between openness and commitment? This question is crucial for our lives, relationships, and identities in a multireligious world and has been central to reflections on the nature of the interreligious encounter. This issue is equally relevant for dialogue and witness in Northern Atlantic cultures and other contexts where more secular worldviews form the main conversation partners. The modern and late-modern world easily associates the Christian desire to share the faith with the idea that such people are “dogmatic,” uncritically committed to inherited views, and are therefore unable to engage in open dialogue with other people. Perhaps this late-modern context makes it hard to be both committed and open, and so Christians tend to invest themselves in either open dialogue or committed witness but are less often able to combine both attitudes. In what follows, I will use the expression “interreligious dialogue and witness” as a term that also covers Christian encounters with secular worldviews which can be considered either “quasi-religious” or “pseudo-religious” attitudes to life (van den Toren and Tan 2022, pp. 210–13; Hamilton 2001).

The question of how to relate commitment and openness is important for both dialogue and evangelism. The World Council of Churches’ (WCC) affirmation, *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (TTL) (CWME 2012), truly notes:

Dialogue and mission are distinct but interrelated. [ . . . ] evangelism is not the purpose of dialogue. However, since dialogue is also ‘a mutual encounter of commitments’, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ has a legitimate place in it. Furthermore, authentic evangelism takes place in the context of the dialogue of life and action, and in ‘a spirit of dialogue’—‘an attitude of respect and friendship’. (CWME 2012, para. 95; quoting Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue 1991, para. 9)

Many everyday interreligious encounters cannot be classified as either “evangelism” or “dialogue” but instead combine aspects of both or move between the two. Such encounters are part of long-term friendships, family, and neighborly relations. They may well be more important for, and characteristic of, interreligious encounter and our understanding of it, rather than more formalized settings of either dialogue or evangelism.

As an intercultural theologian, I am interested in how current debates about openness and commitment are shaped by the North Atlantic cultural and social context. I use contrast experiences of different ways of encountering the relationship between openness and commitment in other contexts as a trigger to explore the way Western cultural and social contexts shape our understanding of the relationship between openness and commitment. I subsequently ask in what ways the North Atlantic context may hinder the understanding of this aspect of interreligious encounter and more specifically the nature of the Christian encounter with other religions. I will argue that this tension between openness and commitment is related to what I call the “subject position” of the knowing subject in Western late modernity. From a Christian theological perspective, we will need to have a different understanding of this subject position in relation to God’s self-revelation. For Christians, the word-pair “commitment and openness” should be understood as a relationship between “confidence” and openness, in which a high degree of confidence can nurture openness rather than diminish it, and vice versa.

## 2. Contrast Experiences

An important feature of cross-cultural living and intercultural encounters is what we may call “contrast experiences.” With this, I refer to an unforeseen shock that certain things we take for granted, and may even consider natural and incontestable, suddenly become a feature of our particular cultural or social location. In intercultural theological reflections, such contrast experiences can function as triggers that prompt us to explore certain aspects of cultural, social, or religious settings in depth in order to work out how they shape, enrich, and possibly distort the theological understanding and religious practices of ourselves and others. I suppose that Lamin Sanneh’s influential reflections on the differences between Christian and Muslim attitudes towards the translation of the Holy Scriptures and religious contextualization were triggered by such contrast experiences (Sanneh 1989). In my own theological journey, such contrast experiences have, for instance, led to critical reflections on the role of materiality in the Western Christian understanding of salvation (van den Toren 2017a; translation forthcoming) and on the meaning of the victory of Christ (van den Toren 2017b). In my understanding, such contrast experiences are part of “the logic of discovery” rather than “the logic of justification”: they trigger us to question given positions based on unquestioned presuppositions or angles that shape the discussion of which we may not even be aware. However, the justification of position will depend on how well theological positions do justice to the subject matter in question, whether it will be the nature of salvation encountered in Jesus Christ and its meaning in a particular context, or whether we are concerned with particular practices of interreligious dialogue or the place of commitment and openness in the faith of followers of Jesus (cf. van den Toren 2015).

Theological and philosophical reflections on the nature of interreligious dialogue are often conducted in a relatively context-less fashion with references to religious epistemology, religious identity, hermeneutics, etc. This may be counter-intuitive because people involved in interreligious dialogue are generally well aware of the degree to which cultural

frameworks and social context shape religious practices and understandings. For example, authors refer to the impact of the relative novelty of experiencing religious pluralism in the North Atlantic and to a sense of guilt about Europe's colonial past (Hick 1988, p. 17f). Yet, in general, reflections on the way cultural values, social relationships, and philosophical presuppositions share different approaches to interreligious dialogue are too seldom made explicit and are a matter of critical consideration. Gavin D'Costa has argued that Western approaches to religious pluralism have been deeply influenced by modern epistemology (D'Costa 2009, pp. 57–102), and Talal Asad has shown how Western understandings of the proper place of religion in society have equally been shaped by modern ideological interests (Asad 1993, 2003). In this paper, I want to focus on more recent approaches to religious pluralism that are shaped by postmodern understandings of language and culture. I will also refer to this context as late modern because it cannot be understood apart from modernity, and because some of the cultural factors at hand characterize both more modern and more postmodern approaches to religious plurality.

The contrast experience triggering these reflections is a growing awareness on my part that the relationship between religious openness and commitment in a religiously pluralist context is experienced differently in the late modern West than in many other parts of the world. With a rough indication, one can say that in the West the two are often treated and experienced as two arms of a balance. Raising one end lowers the other, which means one cannot be fully committed and fully open at the same time, thus highlighting the need to look for the right balance. Paul Knitter uses the metaphor of a “teeter-totter” or seesaw to structure the debate between different approaches to the theology of religions that either put their weight on commitment and less so on openness, or vice versa (Knitter 2002, pp. 212, 241).

I have the impression this is not the case in other parts of the world such as the Middle East, South Asia, and South-East Asia, where Christians have continued to live in religiously pluralist contexts since Christianity was introduced. Of course, not all Christians in those societies will be equally open to their neighbors who belong to other religious communities. This will at least partially depend on personality traits and social location, as it does in the West. However, it seems that many of those who are genuinely open to the experiences, insights, and perspectives of religious others would not experience that as a threat to their own commitment. Prime examples of this are Christians who are involved in evangelism, either formally appointed to do so by their churches or informally sharing their faith in Christ with family and friends. As far as I am aware, little research has been conducted on how these believers combine openness and commitment. This might well be a sign that this relationship is not as problematic as it is among Western participants in interreligious conversations. Studying how this works out in lived religion and ordinary theology would be of great value for the intercultural study of interreligious encounter. I encountered such unexpected ways in which Christians combined openness and commitment during a three-month sabbatical in Malaysia. Christians form a minority in this country which is largely Muslim but also contains a significant presence of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Chinese religions.<sup>1</sup> More research on this is needed, but these limited experiences suffice as a trigger and motivation to explore the relationship between openness and commitment in the North Atlantic context.

Equally or more theologically relevant would be an intercultural comparison on how the New Testament relates to this question. For the first generation of followers of Jesus, the relationship between openness and commitment does not seem to be an issue in the same way as it is today. These believers are deeply committed to Jesus Christ as “the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6, New Revised Standard Version [NRSV]) and they are convinced that “there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12, NRSV). Yet, unlike many Western Christians today, they do not seem to worry about how to square this with the religious plurality amongst which they live. They do not only see their position as contrasting with other “religious options” (though that language would be anachronistic), but see their message as against the grain

of the shared approach to religious pluralism that characterized most of the Hellenistic world (Hurtado 2016, pp. 37–76). However, it did not stop them from dialoguing and debating intently with others (cf. Acts 17:17; 19:9). For many of them, this dialogue was not merely a dialogue with outsiders, but a recollection of an inner dialogue they had with themselves in the course of their conversion process. The experience of the encounter with the risen Jesus played a crucial role here.

Especially in the earliest days, the startling conviction that God has raised Jesus from death was obviously crucial and was the ignition point for the new level of enthusiasm among Jesus-followers and for the emphasis on these high claims about him. The proper response to the claims that Jesus' followers urged was to accept them and to live in full trust in Jesus' status and efficacy. (Hurtado 2016, p. 69; cf. Wright 2003)

In this paper, I focus on the relationship between openness and commitment in religious epistemology on a theoretical level. This issue does not merely play out at the theoretical level, however, but also in the psychological and sociological reality of interreligious encounter in our society. We easily suppose that in a religiously pluralist society, those who are fully convinced of the truth of their religious position and consider it of ultimate value for all are fundamentalists and that those who are fully open are relativists. Given that many Christian believers find both attitudes unhealthy—and this for good reasons—they try to find a livable position somewhere on the line between full commitment and full openness. These psychological and sociological realities of fundamentalism and relativism may also be closely related to the cultural and sociological make-up of late modernity in the West, but this will require further research.

### 3. The Need for Both Openness and Commitment

Some older approaches to interreligious dialogue argued that one needs to be completely open to the religious other if one wants to engage in genuine dialogue. According to Paul Knitter, one of the “[c]onditions for the possibility of fruitful interreligious dialogue” is that . . .

. . . religious believers cannot approach the table of dialogue with claims (on or below the table!) of having ‘the final word’ or ‘the definitive revelation,’ or the ‘absolute truth,’ or the ‘absolute savior.’ (Knitter 1990, p. 31)

This is a position, however, that is more easily taken by individual thinkers than by religious communities. We already pointed to the WCC affirmation, TTL, which sees dialogue as “a mutual encounter of commitments” (CWME 2012). This could be understood as the type of commitment that Langdon Gilkey (1988) describes as a “relative absoluteness” (p. 47) which accepts “a rough parity . . . the co-validity and co-efficacy of other religions” (ibid., p. 37) with “an absolute commitment” to “our ultimate value or values” and “a view of all of reality” (ibid., p. 45). However, most Christian communities and many other religionists are committed to the idea that their religious tradition is the steward of a unique and final access to ultimate reality that is not on par with other religious traditions, be it the canonical witness to Christ, the Quran as the revelation received through Muhammad as the seal of the prophets, or the teachings that arose from the enlightenment experience of Gautama the Buddha. Demanding that people relinquish such commitments would therefore a priori exclude many or most religious people from the dialogue. Furthermore, all participants have certain religious and other commitments when engaging in dialogue, even if they do not formulate them in ways that we understand to be related to particular religious traditions. Examples of this could be: “in interreligious dialogue, we always need to recognize that the divine remains a mystery beyond all human formulations” (cf. Samartha 1988) or that “religions are only good in so far as they contribute (or at least do not diminish) justice and human flourishing” (cf. Knitter 1990; Aloysius 1988). If people had no such commitment whatsoever, they would probably not engage in the exhilarating, yet arduous and time-consuming work of deep dialogue.

For Christians, commitment is a direct result of their allegiance to Jesus Christ whom they recognize as Lord over all. However, what that commitment means is contested precisely because we see in our pluralist society a need to combine that commitment with an openness to others, both religious others and others who embrace a secular worldview and lifestyle. Hans Küng argues that such openness, which he calls “dialogability,” is required by the “modern Enlightenment ideals such as freedom, autonomy and tolerance” and by “insight into the *historicity of truth* and the *relativity of one’s own standpoint*” (Küng 1991, pp. 239, 240, italics in the original). Yet, though attention to dialogue has flourished in the context of modernity, insights into the historicity of human knowledge are rooted in Christian anthropology, which is aware that human knowledge is different from the all-encompassing knowledge of God. Human understanding is always shaped by a particular location within creation and from a particular historical, cultural, and social perspective (cf. van den Tooren 2011, pp. 96–105). Twentieth century ecclesial and ecumenical documents have also stressed the importance of religious freedom, which has been championed under the conditions of modernity, but which is actually rooted in the Christian conviction that God invites human beings to freely respond to God’s offer of covenantal love (John Paul II 1991, para. 8; CWME 2012, para. 96; Lausanne Movement 2010, para. IIC.6).

Hans Küng (1991) and Catherine Cornille (2008, 2013) rightly consider openness and commitment or dialogability and steadfastness as *virtues*. They cannot be merely commanded. They are attitudes that need to be nurtured and that demand a certain level of religious and personal maturity. They also come in degrees: one can grow in both openness and commitment.

Even though it is now widely agreed that we need both openness and commitment in order to engage in interreligious encounter (Küng 1991; Küster 2004; Cornille 2005), it has proved harder to decide how the two should be balanced. In modern pluralist approaches to religious diversity, the relationship between commitment and openness was not so much of a problem—or perhaps the problem easily hid itself from view. For example, in the pluralism represented by John Hick or Stanley Samartha, the religious commitment to one’s proper tradition is basically a “relational distinctiveness” (Samartha 1988, p. 70) that reflects the loyalty of children to their father while realizing that others are similarly loyal to theirs (Ariarajah 1985, pp. 21–27). The absolute commitment is to the divine mystery beyond words that is only partially and presumably equally expressed in different religious traditions. The problem with this configuration of commitment and openness is that it replaces the commitment of particular religious traditions with another religious commitment to a new pluralist understanding of the divine mystery. In the process, representatives of such pluralism deny the legitimacy of the strong commitments people have to their particular religious traditions and hides the particularity of the supposedly overarching pluralist religious perspective from view. This pluralist perspective may be rooted in a Kantian distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal, as in Hick (1989, pp. 236–46; cf. Knitter 2002, p. 115f; Moyaert 2012, p. 31f) or in an *Advaita Vedanta* metaphysics of a divine mystery beyond all human words, as in Samartha (1988, pp. 72–81). In this way, such pluralisms are equally as inclusivist or exclusivist as the positions they critique (cf. D’Costa 1996).

Postmodern or postliberal reflections on religious pluralisms are much more aware of the inescapable historical location of particular religious traditions and the concomitant challenges for interreligious encounter. Catherine Cornille refers to *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* in one of her book titles because of “the impossibility of reconciling religious commitment with the recognition of the radical equality of religions” (Cornille 2008, p. 88). She supposes here that full openness and full commitment are incompatible: our religious stance demands full commitment, but our religiously plural world demands that we approach religions openly as fundamentally of equal value. Both attitudes cannot be fully maintained at the same time. The certainty of the exclusivist is therefore “at the expense of openness” (Moyaert 2012, p. 27). As Marianne Moyaert (2011, p. 278) states: “There is no correct proportion [between openness and commitment], no definitive answer,



no exact balance. [ . . . ] This fact yields a certain restlessness, even discomfort." Openness requires that we put our own commitments into the balance, yet our own religious identity requires that we remain faithful to our tradition with its commitments. Interreligious dialogue will therefore always create an awareness of the fragility of religious identity (cf. the title of [Moyaert 2011](#)).

#### 4. Dialogue Encounter of Traditions and Interreligious Hermeneutics

In this paper, I use Moyaert and Cornille as the most important conversation partners on the relationship between openness and commitment. Both have contributed to a broader movement of the theology of religions which has recently moved beyond earlier debates that were structured by the typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. In line with the postmodern awareness of the particularity of religious traditions, they intend to leave behind the more modern approaches that tended to be based on implicit or explicit understandings of some sort of universal nature and/or of religion. One of the critical questions that needs answering is whether they have sufficiently done so. Moyaert and Cornille are also worthwhile conversation partners because their theoretical approaches reflect broader post- or late-modern cultural sensitivities about how religious plurality is understood and approached. Modern pluralist approaches such as those of [Hick \(1988, 1989\)](#) and Wilfred Cantwell [Smith \(1988\)](#) did, to some degree, reflect modern sensitivities. Similarly, Moyaert and Cornille reflect postmodern sensitivities, and elements for their ideas are more widely reflected in broader contemporary attitudes towards religious pluralism beyond the academy. It seems to me that one aspect of their approach to religion that is more widely shared is that religion is not about some shared religious experience, but that religions may, in their particularity, represent diverse (yet each in their own way valid) lifestyles that help us organize life and give meaning to experience. Finally, these authors allow us to explore and evaluate how their approaches to religious pluralism—and the broader cultural attitudes they reflect—relate to a particular late-modern or postmodern Western context.

As indicated, these authors are representative of a wider move towards recognizing the particularity of different religious traditions. [Knitter \(2002\)](#) labels this as the "acceptance model" which he adds as a new model in the theology of religions beyond the earlier exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist models (which he labels, respectively, as the "replacement model," "fulfilment model," and "mutuality model"). [Knitter \(2002\)](#) notes the link with the postmodern context (pp. 173–78) and the postliberal theology of George Lindbeck c. s. (pp. 178–90), which later plays a crucial role in the work of [Moyaert \(2012, p. 35\)](#) and [Cornille \(2005, p. 35\)](#). Knitter sees this acceptance model represented in Paul Griffiths, Mark Heim, and the comparative theology of James Fredericks and Francis Clooney. Yet for our purposes, the later contributions of Moyaert and Cornille are important because of their work on openness and commitment.

[Lindbeck's \(1984\)](#) crucial contribution to this conversation is his so-called "cultural-linguistic theory of religion." This approach primarily understands religions as language games in line with Wittgenstein and as symbolic systems that give meaning to life, as developed in cultural anthropology by Clifford Geertz. Geertz himself was influenced by Wittgenstein ([Geertz 1973b, p. 12](#)) and saw cultures as semiotic systems that demand "thick description" so that one can understand them in their irreducible particularity. In comparison to modern pluralism, this understanding of religion reverses the relationship between religious language and religious experience. Religious language is not seen as a symbolic expression of a pre-existing religious experience; rather, it is the religious tradition and language that make the experience possible ([Lindbeck 1984, pp. 36, 41; Moyaert 2012, p. 35f](#)). In cultural anthropology, this crucial understanding of culture was used for a description of religions from an outsider perspective. The crucial move that Lindbeck makes is that he now also accepts this as an appropriate description for religions in general, and Christianity in particular, from an insider perspective. This has major implications for the reference of religious language. Where believers tend to understand religious language

as referring to or being representations of a transcendent reality, Geertz understands this transcendent reality not as something that is discovered or recognized, but as a creation of the imagination:

[A] religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz 1973a, p. 90, italics in the original)

A continuous debate concerning Lindbeck's proposal has investigated what this means for the nature of Christian faith, doctrine, and theological language. Lindbeck is not entirely clear and consistent in his reflections on the nature of "first order language" of faith expressed in the Christian life, such as in prayer and worship. This language can have an ontological referent beyond the speaker and the speaker's community (Lindbeck 1984, pp. 35, 51, 66). However, Lindbeck's expressions that religions "construe" or "create" reality, and the concept of "performative language" suggests that the truth of expressions such as "Jesus is Lord" are the result of the right use, rather than a recognition of a reality independent of the user (ibid., pp. 47, 65, 117). The second-order language of doctrine and the third-order language of theology merely refer to the first order language and practice of the Christian community (ibid., pp. 113–24; cf. van den Toren 2011, p. 49f).

Moyaert and Cornille are both critical of Lindbeck's tendency to see religions with the language of Kuhn as "incommensurable" (ibid., p. 48). This would limit interreligious dialogue to "ad hoc" exchanges where occasional cultural–linguistic overlap can be noted (ibid., pp. 129, 131; Moyaert 2011, p. 159) without due attention to the possibility of interreligious dialogue (Cornille 2008, p. 187). Lindbeck makes religious traditions fundamentally incommensurable and untranslatable (Moyaert 2011, p. 159). He rightly shows that we should be careful not to look for superficial parallels and translations, but that does not mean that dialogue is impossible. Yet, Lindbeck's proposal does not do justice to the reality that religions are not closed systems but continuously interact with the cultures around them and other religious traditions they encounter (cf. Tanner 1997, pp. 104–19). In contrast, both Cornille and Moyaert approach religions as fundamentally "cultural–linguistic systems" which then leads to a hermeneutical approach to religious difference. "[T]he search for God can never be done outside of hermeneutics" (Moyaert 2011, p. 278; cf. Cornille 2008, p. 6f). Moyaert argues that we should move beyond a theological approach and soteriological openness to interreligious dialogue, to a hermeneutical approach and hermeneutical openness (Moyaert 2012, p. 38). She develops this hermeneutical approach with reference to Paul Ricœur. According to Ricœur, the reader must move from a pre-critical or naïve reading via a critical phase that places the text at a distance, to a new appropriation of the text that leads through an enlarged self by exposing ourselves to the text (Moyaert 2012, pp. 42–44; cf. Moyaert 2014). The focus on hermeneutics corresponds to a focus on practices that is equally in line with such postliberal approaches (cf. Winner 2018, pp. 167–80), when it is said that "Particularists thus speak of religion as a way of life, a pattern, or a paradigm. [...] Religious identity is acquired not by digging into one's deepest self but by becoming a member of a community" (Moyaert 2012, p. 35f; cf. Lindbeck 1984, p. 132).

We see the same postliberal tendency to focus on religion as a cultural–linguistic reality in Cornille's work and her focus on tradition. In her chapter on "commitment," she formulates this consistently as "commitment to a particular religious tradition" (Cornille 2008, pp. 59, 94).<sup>2</sup> In her reflections on Christian commitment, she notes "the epistemic priority for believers of faith and revelation" (ibid., p. 8) and the necessity of understanding the virtues needed for interreligious dialogue as "embedded within Christianity" (ibid., p. 11). She does not reflect on the central place of commitment in the Christian tradition to Jesus as the Christ.<sup>3</sup> She does not explore why Christians are committed to this particular tradition, a question that seems to me, cannot be answered apart from the Christian commitment to Christ. Alister McGrath criticized Lindbeck's *Nature of Doctrine* because it treats doctrine as embodied in a community and a linguistic tradition, and does not

ask after *The Genesis of Doctrine*: why did Christians begin to believe in these doctrines? According to McGrath, this question can only be answered with reference to the narrative of Jesus Christ, which I would call the witness to the person, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (McGrath 1990, pp. 100–2). In the same way, we need to question Cornille and Moyaert about the *genesis of this tradition*, of this cultural linguistic interpretation or reality and the genesis of the commitment to this tradition.

## 5. Critical Evaluation

As I indicated earlier, from a sensitivity sharpened by intercultural exchange, I want to ask the following: In what way are approaches to religious pluralism and to openness and commitment in interreligious dialogue, which we may label “particularistic” or “postliberal,” shaped by their late modern Western context? Here, I want to draw attention to what we may call the “subject position.” With this I refer to the understanding of the role of the knowing subject. In modern pluralism, this is the universal Kantian subject that relates to a shared noumenal world, yet is only able to express this experience symbolically, without the possibility of knowing in any way how this symbolism corresponds to the noumenal world. In the postliberal approach, it is the subject that basically shapes the world either individually or communally through language and practice. In both understandings of the human epistemological predicament, the knowing subject is (again, either individually or communally) left with their own mental and symbolic world that becomes an impenetrable screen. The subject is unable to relate to the world beyond because of the modern chasm between the knowing subject and the objective world. Postliberalism reinterpreted this chasm between subject and object, but did not overcome it (van den Tooren 2011, pp. 69–77, 87–89; cf. Cornille 2008, p. 62f).

Given this understanding of the subject position, openness and commitment are indeed in competition. They relate to each other as two ends of a seesaw or two arms of a balance, at least as far as openness and commitment function at the same level: commitment to the truth and universal validity of one’s own position on the one hand, and, on the other, openness to the truth claims of the other that may challenge mine. Both the commitment and openness are grounded in our human subjectivity. If one is committed to one’s own truth, one has little reason to be open to exploring another’s truth and doing so might even be dangerous for one’s own convictions. If, to the contrary, one is truly open due to an awareness of the cultural particularity of one’s own understanding, one is no longer able to claim universal validity for one’s religious position. This will then lead to a range of intermediate positions which combine a certain degree of commitment with a degree of openness. However, if there is a gain in openness, this will mean a loss in commitment, and vice versa.

In this understanding of the epistemological *condition humaine*, openness and commitment function as two arms of a balance. At the psychological and sociological level, this corresponds with the persistent late-modern worries and warnings about the twin dangers of fundamentalism and relativism. If this is the only epistemological stance possible, these worries may indeed be justified, because then a courageous stance for truth only seems possible by closing oneself or the community off from other perspectives. Moreover, an open attitude to other perspectives seems to necessarily eat away the basis of one’s commitment to even one’s most fundamental convictions and values. The same understanding of this inverse relationship between commitment and openness, also leads to the fact that in this context those who make staunch truth claims, particularly of a religious nature, are easily labelled fundamentalists. For the same reason, those who plead for openness are easily labelled relativists. While different people and communities are more worried about one danger or its opposite, in this framing of the opposition they breathe the same cultural air.

Here, I may need to clarify myself. I am not trying to diminish either the importance of tradition and practice for understanding religions, or the importance of careful hermeneutics for interreligious encounter. In actuality, the issue is the postmodern and postliberal framework in which religions are *primarily* seen as symbolic systems and language games.



If religion is understood in this way, one will not be able to understand or do justice to other religious approaches to openness and commitment that are shaped by different presuppositions and by a different understanding of the subject position of the person of faith. If this postliberal approach to religious difference is taken as normative, there is a strong preference for engaging with other religious voices that share the same fundamental self-understanding of religion and religious language. This has the corresponding danger that interreligious dialogue with others that have strong and even absolute commitments may become virtually impossible. We already noted that this may include many, if not most, religious people.

As a Christian theologian myself, this understanding of commitment and openness is also problematic because the underlying understanding of the subject position does not do justice to the historical Christian understanding of the human relationship with God. This is not the place to develop or even give an outline of an alternative Christian religious epistemology, to which I have contributed elsewhere (van den Toren 2011, pp. 93–153). A mere indication will need to suffice in order to show that the subject position of the religious knower, as understood in the context of modernity and postmodernity, cannot be taken for granted. It cannot be accepted as the starting point for interreligious dialogue. Respect for the radical particularity of different religious perspectives will mean that the understanding of the subject position will itself need to be one of the themes of interreligious dialogue.

Of course, epistemology is a wide-ranging subject on which we can only touch briefly here. In more general terms, both the late-modern understanding that places the knowing subject over and against the world differs from the Jewish–Christian understanding of the human being. The epistemological challenge is not to overcome or accept a chasm between the knowing subject and the object world, in which the subject cannot move beyond the categories of the mind or culturally shaped language games or symbolic systems. Because the image of God is squarely part of the world, this means that we know the world as part of it, by indwelling it (van den Toren 2011, p. 127f; cf. Polanyi 1962). Therefore, human beings can only know if we begin with a basic attitude of trust in who we are and in the world in which God has placed us, as is expressed in the tradition of “common sense epistemology” developed in the line of the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid (1710–1796) (Reid 1975). Consequently, the human epistemological predicament is not how to overcome the chasm between subject and object, but working out which experiences, voices, and traditions can be trusted in a society of competing views that interpret experience in a variety of ways that are often incompatible.

In the more specialized area of religious knowledge, respect for the particularity of different religious traditions will lead us to question the idea of a universally applicable concept of religion (cf. Auffarth and Moher 2006). This also implies that we need to question the idea that there is a universal understanding of the nature of religious knowledge that can do justice to these varied traditions. Postliberals have rightly criticized modern approaches to religious pluralism for forcing all religions into a mold of what the essence of religion is supposed to be. Strangely enough, the reflections of Moyaert and Cornille are themselves formulated in general terms, with little reference to how particular religious traditions would understand the nature of religious language and interreligious dialogue, as well as the relationship between openness and commitment. Naturally, this would differ significantly depending on the traditions concerned, whether it be Primal, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, or another.

In the New Testament, religious knowledge is not primarily understood as an expression of a religious experience, nor as the language and practice of a community shaped by a particular religious tradition. Of course, the New Testament was rooted in an earlier Jewish tradition and was itself part of the initiation of a new tradition with its own distinct language game and set of practices that can be described and analyzed. Yet, this begs the question: how did this tradition come into being? What was its “genesis”? According to the New Testament, this tradition originates as the response of this community to what is experienced as the decisive gift of Jesus and his resurrection, and the gift of his Spirit.

The subject position that fits this relationship is one of trust and confidence, expressed by the term “*pistis*”, meaning faith or trust (cf. Michel 1975). As Karl Barth has so forcefully argued, this tradition cannot be understood as an exemplification of a general human trait, but as the response to an utterly unique person and series of events (Barth 1975, paras. 25–26). The subject and community find itself in a relationship initiated by God. The chasm between the subject and object of knowledge is bridged from the side of this personal God who decisively reached out to humanity. The faith and theological reflection that this generates is shaped by the linguistic tools at hand that influence how this reality is first grasped. And yet, the reality may not fit these preconceptions. We see this in the New Testament, where the followers of Jesus continue to struggle to find language to do justice to the reality they encounter in Jesus of Nazareth and his cross and resurrection. This man did not fit into any of the available boxes and caused a revolution in their thinking about God and salvation. They discovered that he was more than a prophet. He was the one and only Son who revealed God in a unique manner that could not be surpassed before the consummation of history, which he himself inaugurated.

Certainly, this subject position of faith requires commitment. Yet, if faith is the fundamental position, we need to think of the relationship between openness and *dialogability* on the one hand, and commitment, loyalty, and steadfastness on the other, primarily as a relationship between *confidence* and openness. Without confidence, commitment is a relationship whose strength is primarily rooted in the subject. Confidence is also a relational term but is firstly a response to a reality outside oneself. If this is the subject position, confidence and openness are not a zero-sum relationship, constantly competing with each other. Instead, growth in confidence can lead to openness, and growth in openness can build confidence rather than undermining it.

Both Cornille and Moyaert make their arguments on the basis of a postmodern sensitivity for taking the particularity of religions more seriously than was conducted in earlier exclusivist, inclusivist, or pluralist approaches to religious plurality, and rightly so. Yet, they defend the particularity of religions on the basis of general linguistic and epistemological considerations. They pay little to no attention to the particularity of the Christian faith and what a Christian faith would demand in its understanding of the relationship between openness and commitment. In one of the few places where Moyaert (2011) considers the meaning of Christ for the interreligious encounter, she argues:

[T]he incarnation does not remove the restlessness—to the contrary. The incarnation does not allow itself to be established and proven either. God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ does not remove this restlessness (John 14:8). The idea that the transcendent God, the creator of heaven and earth, became incarnate in the son of a Jewish carpenter, who died on the cross and rose on the third day, leans toward the absurd. Universality and particularity come together in Christianity, but how can both be made to square with each other? The incarnation is a mystery of faith. (p. 289)

I have the impression that this understanding of the incarnation is too colored by modern or postmodern concerns—or a combination of both.<sup>4</sup> In the New Testament, the incarnation is indeed a mystery, and one that cannot be proven according to the narrow modern criteria for what counts as proof. And yet, so much of the knowledge we live by does not fit this modern straitjacket. Yet, the New Testament believers and the Early Church proclaim with confidence that here they have encountered the God of all, who eschatologically, and therefore decisively, acted for the salvation of the whole world. Moyaert and Cornille’s general considerations on the interreligious encounter, based on a renewed postmodern and postliberal sensitivity for the particularity of religious traditions, thus reflect the same problem identified by Sue Patterson (1999) in Lindbeck’s cultural–linguistic understanding of theology and religion: “While aiming to be particular, the postliberal model becomes a general theory which then swallows up the particular Christian instance” (p. 44).

## 6. Concluding Reflections

With a Christian reflection on the subject position of the believer as its basis, and in contrast to a late-modern understanding of the subject position of the believer, I have argued that in the Christian tradition, openness and commitment should not be understood as two ends of a seesaw, with radical commitment and full openness as incompatible elements. This gives us reason to take more seriously the examples of New Testament believers and believers from other parts of the church worldwide who seem to be able to combine both. It invites us to explore new ways of Christian existence in a pluralist world, in which confidence and openness can grow together. This has important implications for how Christians can confidently share their faith in the finality of Christ amidst a plurality of worldviews, while still being open to dialogue with and learn from others. Additionally, this means that Christians will need to resist the late-modern tendency to oppose openness and commitment. In this context, we will also need to be critical of the tendency to automatically label anyone with a religious commitment and confidence as fundamentalist.<sup>5</sup>

From a late-modern perspective and its understanding of the religious subject, this Christian theological argument for understanding openness and commitment in a pluralist society as confidence and openness leads to a conundrum. How can I openly dialogue with a Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist, if I have already decided what openness and commitment means from my Christian perspective? The first part of the answer would be that we need to allow other religionists the same particularity in their understanding of openness and commitment as Christians ask for themselves. Different religious traditions also birth diverse theologies of religions. These theologies of religions and their related understandings of openness and commitment also need themselves to be part of interreligious dialogue and witness. This is one of the problems that arises when a particularistic or cultural-linguistic understanding of the theology of religions or any other overall theology of religions is proposed as an overall framework for interreligious dialogue. Of course, it can be argued that there are good reasons to embrace this late modern particularistic understanding of religious plurality. However, real dialogue demands that one lets a Muslim or Buddhist conversation partner present their own understanding of religious plurality and religious language. If they are not late-modern religionists from the North Atlantic world, this will probably not easily fit a particularistic model. Therefore, part of this interreligious encounter and dialogue will also be apologetic dialogue in which different conversation partners are asked to justify both their hope and the reasons for their commitment (cf. [Griffiths 1988](#); [van den Toren and Tan 2022](#)). For Christians, that means that they should heed the exhortation in the first Epistle of Peter, and “[A]lways be ready to make [their] defence to anyone who demands from [them] an account of the hope that is in [them]” and confidence (1 Pet 3:15, NRSV). In 1 Peter, this hope is of course based on the resurrection of Christ, by which believers are given “a new birth into a living hope” (1 Pet 1:3, NRSV).

The second part of my answer to this conundrum would be that Christian confidence need not fear openness which recognizes the otherness of other religionists and people who live with different non-religious worldviews. In line with the subject position of the believer, Christian confidence is not based on a comparison of different religions and worldviews, after which one concludes that the Christian religion is the best and most truthful. Nor is it based on the believers’ ability to answer all the questions that may come to them through the people they dialogue with. In the New Testament, confidence in Christ is based instead on the joyful and grateful recognition that in him we meet the God self who has inaugurated the eschaton by raising Christ as the firstborn of the dead and giving us the Spirit, both as first fruits of the world to come (1 Cor 15:20; Rom 8:23; cf. [van den Toren 2011](#), pp. 204–8). Christians do not claim to fully understand the nature of this event, but merely believe that this person and these events have final significance and give us reason for complete confidence in this God. With this person and these events, the Christian faith stands or falls. From either a modern or a postmodern perspective, this is at the same time both crude parochialism and a decidedly shaky position (note the “or

falls"). If these understandings of the subject position are true, then rightly so. However, a Christian's self-understanding does not fit this perspective of the subject position, and thus their recognition of the God whom they have encountered in Christ gives them confidence that the late modern understanding of the subject is not the human predicament either.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, *because Christ Jesus has made me his own* (Phil 3:12, NRSV, italics from BvdT).

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> An initial exploration of this context was conducted in a recent master's thesis at the PThU defended by Tirtsa Liefing, who shows how Christians living as a religious minority in Malaysia combine commitment and openness to religious others (Liefing 2019).
- <sup>2</sup> Two exceptions in this chapter are the expression "commitment to one's own religion" (Cornille 2008, p. 84) and the idea that commitment "involves assent to a certain worldview and body of teachings" (p. 86), but these do not change the general picture.
- <sup>3</sup> In her chapter on commitment, Cornille (2008) only refers to Jesus in relation to other sources (pp. 69, 85f, 88), but not as part of her own argument.
- <sup>4</sup> The same may be true of Cornille's (2008) appeal to the tradition of apophatic theology (pp. 40–42). More study will be needed, asking whether the broader use of this tradition in postmodern contexts as a defense for a significant degree of theological agnosticism does justice to this tradition. In the New Testament, at least, the awareness of the impossibility to comprehend God (1 Tim 6:16) in no way diminishes the reality that God came so overwhelmingly and decisively near in Christ (Jn 1:18).
- <sup>5</sup> I am aware that this argument has hitherto been theological and epistemological. What is the value of the Christian understanding of the subject position of the believer, for a sociological and psychological understanding of how one can be confident and open in a pluralist society? But that is a question or cluster of questions for a different paper.

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