

With Prudence and Charity: Toward a Christian Interfaith Theology

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ABSTRACT

Over recent decades adherents of different religious traditions in the US and Europe have been more likely to live in proximity to one another. Diana Eck of Harvard identifies “pluralism” as the creative response of active engagement with this new religious diversity. Pluralism is an “encounter of commitments” in which believers from different communities of faith approach each other with mutual respect, seeking to learn more about each other’s traditions in ways that advance the common good.

This article, responding to Eboo Patel’s call for “a theology of interfaith cooperation,” explores how Christian theology can function as an active, essential component of creative pluralism. Two existing fields within the discipline of theology—the theology of religion and comparative theology—help negotiate thoughtful dialogue amidst difference. However, these disciplines thrive mostly within the academy. This article proposes and differentiates “Interfaith Theology” as a new field within the ambit of pastoral theology, which, using the methodology of practical theology, may help Christian believers deepen their understanding of the dynamics and goals of interfaith relations. Motivation, method, content and sources for interfaith theology are explored to show how believers can seek a deeper understanding of their own faith as they engage in empathic dialogue with believers from other traditions.

INTRODUCTION: THE NEW RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Political upheavals, economic pressures, religious persecutions, and other social factors have led to significant increases in global emigrations over the past several decades.¹ The United States remains the most popular destination for migrants, but Europe and Asia host the largest populations of migrant peoples.² One result of these mass movements of individuals and families is a new kind of religious diversity.

For centuries religious diversity in the West comprised an array of Protestant denominations, along with Catholics, Orthodox Christians and Jews.³ In the new religious diversity of the 21st

¹ The Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations publishes statistics on international migration through its Population Division. “In 2013, 232 million people, or 3.2 percent of the world’s population, were international migrants, compared with 175 million in 2000 and 154 million in 1990.” See “International Migration Report,” *United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division*, accessed September 5, 2014, <http://esa.un.org/unmigration/wallchart2013.htm>.

² “Seven facts about world migration,” *The Pew Research Center, Fact Tank*, accessed September 14, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/09/02/7-facts-about-world-migration/>.

³ For an overview of the history of religious diversity in America, see Randal Balmer, “Religious Diversity in America,” *TeacherServe, National Humanities Center*, accessed September 30, 2014, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/twenty/tkeyinfo/reldiv.htm>.

century, Americans are just as likely to have Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Muslim, or Baha'i neighbors. The same is true in the UK and across much of Western Europe and Australia.

Diana Eck, whose work as a professor of religion at Harvard inspires the Pluralism Project, has written extensively on this new diversity in American society and religion.⁴ In her analysis, she distinguishes between *diversity* and *pluralism*. Diversity, as she defines it, is simply the geographical proximity of religious or cultural difference. Emigration of the kind that has marked the past 20 or 25 years has resulted in this new diversity. The reaction of individuals, social groups and political institutions to this religious diversity is mixed. Less enthusiastic responses tolerate, ignore or exclude those new immigrants who are so different by virtue of their religion and culture. Exclusion can be extreme, institutionalized and induce violence.⁵ Another response is to insist on assimilation. Assimilation tolerates and even affirms the differences, but simultaneously expects those differences to fade over time, to disappear under the accumulation of generations.⁶ People are expected eventually to become "more like us."

Pluralism, as Eck defines it, is a more positive response to the new diversity.⁷ Pluralism is an active and interested engagement that reaches across religious and cultural borders. It seeks to understand the world from the perspective of the neighbor, colleague, or friend whose religious beliefs are different. It works to appreciate how the other person's culture and religion prioritize values such as family, work, wealth, food, or leisure. It may even explore how the language of the other expresses feelings and insights in a spoken and embodied idiom so different from the dominant cultural norm. Pluralism is a dynamic response that embraces difference with mind and heart.

⁴ For her richly textured and extensively documented exploration of this new diversity see Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious Pluralism: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001). For the resources of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, see www.pluralism.org. For analysis and assessment of how the American mainstream is coping and struggling with the new diversity, see Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁵ Hostility due to religion has been increasing worldwide. See "Religious Hostilities Reach a Six-Year High," *The Pew Research Center, Religion and Public Life Project*, accessed October 3, 2014 <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/religious-hostilities-reach-six-year-high/>.

⁶ See Jacob L. Vidgor, "Measuring Immigrant Assimilation in the United States," *Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, Civic Report #59*, October 2009, accessed October 5, 2014, http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_59.htm. Vidgor notes that the rate at which immigrants are assimilating, based on economic status and language, has slowed in recent years.

⁷ Eck, *A New Religious Pluralism*, 70-77; see also Eck, "What Is Pluralism," *The Pluralism Project*, accessed September 15, 2014, <http://pluralism.org/encounter/challenges>, where she outlines the five dimensions of pluralism. Pluralism was the topic of Eck's Gifford Lectures, entitled "The Age of Pluralism, Gifford Lectures, 2009," accessed September 15, 2014, <http://pluralism.org/pages/events/archives/2009/spring/gifford>.

Eck's pluralism is an "encounter of commitments."⁸ Those who willingly engage others from different faith traditions do so while remaining committed to their own. Dialogue does not dismiss difference but seeks to understand it and thereby grow in understanding of and respect for the other.⁹ Pluralism is not only a socially beneficial and personally fulfilling response to the new diversity. As an active, energetic and empathetic engagement with religious diversity, pluralism is as essential to humanity's future as comparable efforts in sustainability, human rights, and citizen diplomacy. It is a necessary virtue for citizenship in societies that hope to build structural justice and to promote peace.

Church leadership has encouraged Christians to embrace religious diversity. In his first apostolic exhortation in 2013, Pope Francis called for an attitude of openness in truth and in love and affirmed interreligious dialogue as a necessary condition for peace in the world, a "duty," an "ethical commitment" for Christians and all religious communities.¹⁰ In 2008 the Anglican Communion Network for Interfaith Concerns published a document on interreligious relations, *Generous Love: The Truth of the Gospel and the Call to Dialogue: an Anglican Theology of Interfaith Relations*.¹¹ In his forward to this document, the Archbishop of Canterbury cites the "urgency and significance" of interfaith relations, and the need to draw together the rich theological reflection of recent decades to help Christians negotiate the new diversity. There is also the landmark 2011 statement *Christian*

⁸ Eck, "What Is Pluralism?"

⁹ Eck's understanding of "pluralism" needs to be distinguished from John Hick's use of the term "pluralistic" which defines his approach to understanding the plurality of religions. Hick argues on a philosophical level that all religions express some dimension or aspect of the divine, while all religious language is culturally bound and so provisional and limited with regard to revelation. See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Second Edition) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 233-245. Eck's *pluralism* is descriptive of interpersonal and intercultural encounter; Hick's *pluralistic* is an interpretive theoretical exercise in the theology of religions.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*: #250, accessed October 15, 2015, <http://www.vatican.va/evangelii-gaudium/en/#2/z>. Francis' predecessors spoke and wrote often of the vital importance of interreligious dialogue. See Paul VI's encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* and his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, and Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (all available at www.vatican.va). The Catholic Church affirmed its commitment to interreligious dialogue with the Second Vatican Council's 1965 Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, entitled *Nostra Aetate* (In Our Time). On Pentecost Sunday in 1964, Pope Paul VI instituted a special department of the Roman Curia for relations with the people of other religions. Known at first as the Secretariat for Non-Christians, it was renamed in 1988 as the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. The Council's publications can be found at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/ (accessed November 2, 2104).

¹¹ Anglican Communion Network for Interfaith Concerns, *Generous Love: The Truth of the Gospel and the Call to Dialogue: an Anglican Theology of Interfaith Relations* (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 2008), accessed October 15, 2014, <http://nifcon.anglicancommunion.org/resources/documents/>

Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct produced by the World Council of Churches working together with the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue of the Vatican and the World Evangelical Alliance.¹²

All these documents encourage Christians to respond to religious diversity with the openness, interest and respect of Eck's pluralism paradigm. The purpose of this article is to explore how the study of theology can contribute to a Christian's exercise of creative encounter with religious diversity. Living amidst a variety of religious and cultural traditions very different from one's own, a Christian can respond with friendliness, openness, hospitality and genuine interest. These all constitute dimensions of pluralism. Theology can enrich and expand a Christian's understanding and exercise of pluralism. Theology can engage the intellect, intuition and imagination to reflect on the experience and exercise of pluralism in light of one's faith.¹³ In turn, such reflection can deepen the believer's commitment to pluralism, and to a life of faith that embraces pluralism as a constituent element of contemporary Christian life in the world today.¹⁴

THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS AND COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY: RESPONSES TO PLURALISM

Two important fields have emerged or expanded within Christian theology in recent decades as creative responses to contemporary religious diversity: the theology of religions and comparative

¹² World Council of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue of the Vatican, and the World Evangelical Alliance, *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct* 2011, accessed November 17, 2014,

http://www.worldevangelicals.org/pdf/1106Christian_Witness_in_a_Multi-Religious_World.pdf. The National Council of Churches also provides resources for interfaith relations. See <http://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/shared-ministry/interfaith/>. There are also significant academic and civic resources for interfaith dialogue such as the Woolf Centre at Cambridge (<http://www.woolf.cam.ac.uk/>), the International Interfaith Centre at Oxford (www.inter-faith.org), and The International Interfaith Organizations Network (www.interfaithorganizations.net) which provides overviews of many interfaith organizations and projects.

¹³ The work of David Tracy continues to enrich the theological enterprise amidst the new diversity. See *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1998); *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion and Hope* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994); and, *Blessed Rage for Order: the New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹⁴ In addition to relationships with adherents of other religions, there is also regular encounter with persons who are members of no religion. According to the Pew Foundation over a billion people or 16.4% of the world population are religiously unaffiliated: "Global Religious Futures," *The Pew Research Center, Religion and Public Life*, accessed November 15, 2014 (<http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/religions/unaffiliated>). There are many varieties of philosophical and ethical viewpoints represented among those who call themselves humanists, and they are worthy conversation partners. Such dialogue can explore common ethical goals and principles even while recognizing significant differences between theistic and non-theistic understandings of what it means to be human and of possible transcendent meanings to life.

theology. The theology of religions studies and evaluates the teachings and significance of other religions in light of the truths and goals of one's own faith. Jesuit theologian Jacques Dupuis has explored and charted the territory of this new field. As a new way of theologizing, the theology of religions uses a method for doing theology through "reflection on dialogue and in dialogue" as the theologian searches for "a Christian interpretation of the surrounding manifold religious reality."¹⁵ In this field such questions as the uniqueness of Christ, the nature of sin and salvation, and the role of the church are explored within the dynamic context of encounter with other faith traditions. The specific Christian doctrine of interest to the theologian remains central even as it is re-examined in light of the faith claims of other religions.¹⁶

Paul Knitter and John Hick also provide helpful paradigms and definitions for understanding this important field of contemporary theology.¹⁷ Knitter proposes a set of five models or paradigms used in developing various approaches to the theology of religions. These include replacement, fulfillment, mutuality, and acceptance. Each model describes a basic dynamic that informs the analysis of Christian teaching in light of the faith claims of other religions. Knitter's multiple paradigms expand older models of apologetics or proselytism that informed the Christian study of other religions in the past. John Hick offers penetrating analyses of the philosophical and theological understandings of the contemporary experience of religious plurality.¹⁸

Comparative theology is another expanding field in Christian theology that is situated in the dialogue among religions.¹⁹ Though it shares many similar interests with the theology of religions, it

¹⁵ Jacques Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 11. See also Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

¹⁶ Francis Clooney provides a definition of the theology of religions as "Christian reflection on the general idea of other religions, in light of some particular understanding of the Christian faith." See Francis X. Clooney, "The emerging field of comparative theology: a bibliographical review (1989-95)," *Theological Studies* 56, no. 3 (1995): 521-550; 521. For an exquisite example of a contemporary study in comparative theology see Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *His Hiding Place is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

¹⁷ Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002); John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (London: SCM Press, 1995).

¹⁸ In addition to his *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Second Edition), (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), see also John Hick *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Second Edition), (Louisville, KY: John Knox Westminster Press, 2004). I would note again that Hick's *pluralistic* model of understanding religions is an interpretive theory in the theology of religions; Eck's *pluralism* is descriptive of interpersonal and intercultural encounter

¹⁹ Comparative theology is not a totally new endeavor for Christians. For an overview of its history and development in previous centuries see Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 24-40

is distinguished by its method of comparison. The comparative theologian, rooted in and committed to a specific tradition, reflects on, compares, and seeks deeper understandings of particular teachings by exploring their theological analogues in other religious traditions. Its method and attention account more fully for the complexities inherent in the teachings of each religious tradition.²⁰ It is committed to the detailed consideration of religious traditions other than one's own, and its method is marked by how the understanding of particular teaching in another religious tradition informs and enlightens the similar teaching in one's own tradition.²¹ As in the theology of religion, the goal of comparative theology is not apologetic, seeking to establish the truth of one religion over the other. Rather the discipline explores comparable religious teachings to disclose the "truth of faith, in the light of their faith."²²

Comparative theology needs to be distinguished from comparative religions. For more than a century, scholars have explored the differences between and among religious traditions. Such studies have comprised the field of comparative religions.²³ In this field religious practices are studied using methodologies associated with or drawn from the social sciences. The comparative religionist approaches such study with purported objectivity. By contrast, the comparative theologian employs solidly theological method and sources, and is motivated by "faith seeking understanding." What the believer seeks to understand is how a teaching or practice or custom of his or her faith is similar to, different from, or otherwise related to a similar teaching, practice or custom of those whose faith commitment is different.

Comparative theology and the theology of religions are important developments. They deepen understanding and increase empathic openness in ways that enrich the contemporary encounter of religions. However, they are largely the province of professors and scholars, requiring significant expertise. There is need for a third theological response to the new religious diversity that draws deep draughts from the waters of comparative theology and the theology of religions, but which is distinguished from these two disciplines by its own proper motivation, method, content and

²⁰ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 15.

²¹ For a superb review of the relationships among comparative theology, the theology of religions and interfaith dialogue see Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 9-16. For an overview of theology and interreligious dialogue see Catherine Corneille, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-religious Dialogue* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

²² Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 15-16.

²³ See the 50th anniversary edition of Houston Smith's class text *World Religions* (New York: Harper One, 2009). Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Comparing Religions* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014) offers a critical analysis by several authors of the field of comparative religion

sources. This third theological response lies more within the field of pastoral theology and is distinguished by its goal of helping Christians develop, practice and sustain creative responses to the new religious diversity.

MOTIVATION FOR A THEOLOGY OF INTERFAITH RELATIONS OR INTERFAITH THEOLOGY

In a 2011 article Eboo Patel and Cassie Meyer, leaders of the Interfaith Youth Core organization based in Chicago, call for a “theology of interfaith cooperation.” As interfaith activists, Patel and Meyer define this theology of interfaith cooperation as “knowledge of how one’s own faith or philosophical tradition offers an imperative for engaging with others.”²⁴ For Christians, a “theology of interfaith cooperation,” or a “theology of interfaith relations,” or more simply “interfaith theology,” means mining Christian thought for tenets and teachings that encourage and guide engagement with believers from other faith traditions.²⁵

The contemporary contexts within which church leaders and members live and work are ever more religiously and culturally diverse. The new religious diversity is becoming part of the ministerial, professional and personal dimensions of the daily lives of Christians of all denominations. With regard to ministry, the seminary professor must prepare students for service in congregations which include interfaith families where spouses come from very different religious traditions. Priests and ministers share civic podiums on a regular basis with rabbis, imams, swamis and yogis. Social workers in church-sponsored projects and services need diversity training and cultural competency to prepare them for the great variety of religious and cultural backgrounds among the populations they serve. Catechists instruct Christian children who daily play and study with classmates who pray and believe very differently from themselves.²⁶

I teach at a Catholic College in New England of 3,000 full-time residential students. The majority of our students are Catholic and Protestant. However, on a typical day I will interact as well with Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Baha’i or Buddhist students and colleagues. Our rosters and residence

²⁴ Eboo Patel and Cassie Meyer, “The Civic Relevance of Interfaith Cooperation for Colleges and Universities,” *Journal of College and Character* 12, no. 1 (2011): 1-9; 5

²⁵ The Pontifical Council for Interreligious dialogue cites as one of its goals “the formation of people dedicated to dialogue.” See “Nature and Goals,” *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue*, accessed October 15, 2014,

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_pro_20051996_en.html.

²⁶ For studies on the religious complexity and diversity of major U.S. cities see “Landscape,” *The Pluralism Project*, accessed October 27, 2014, <http://pluralism.org/ocg>.

halls reflect the new American diversity as we welcome the latest waves of immigrants and international students to America. The conversations, questions and directions that arise while teaching Christian theology to students from increasingly diverse religious and cultural backgrounds are shaped by that diversity. The context within which most professors in the US, the UK and Europe teach theology or religion becomes more diverse by the day.

The new religious diversity is also a dynamic dimension of health care and social services, of the hospitality and entertainment industries, and of business enterprises, information technology, and security. In the trades and service industries people from very different cultural backgrounds and religious convictions work side by side, sharing common tasks and goals. The new diversity has changed the nature of most workplaces. Our colleagues and supervisors, our customers and shareholders include many persons who come from religions and cultures different from the Christian majority. All these situations call for the church to help its members reflect on and prosper in an ever more religiously diverse world.

On the personal level, many Christians live and thrive in interfaith marriages and families. Their domestic love and filial piety stitch new threads into the latest fashion of Joseph's many-colored coat. Friendships develop among school children of different religious backgrounds for whom the encounter of cultures is a part of classroom learning and schoolyard play. College roommates mix social life, studies and questions of religious difference as a matter of course.

The church has a responsibility to encourage and help Christians respond to religious diversity with the openness, interest and respect of Eck's pluralism paradigm. Interfaith theology, as proposed in this paper is a theological discipline designed to focus on how Christians can negotiate the new religious diversity of today's world. Interfaith theology is envisioned as a systematic, critical and appreciative study of interfaith relations, motivated by the desire to understand these relations in light of Christian faith. As such it is a theological and pastoral response designed to promote mutual understanding across religious borders by committed members of different faiths. As preparation for interfaith dialogue, interfaith theology explores ways to reflect thoughtfully and respectfully, from the perspective of Christian faith, about the lived experience of encountering and interacting with people from different traditions whose faith commitment and religious practice is as important to them as Christianity is to oneself.

This kind of theological reflection upon personal or professional relationships with committed believers from diverse traditions moves those relationships to deeper levels. When a

believer takes the time to reflect thoughtfully, from the perspective of Christian faith, upon the meaning and dynamics of sustained, empathic relationships with others who believe differently, then those relationships undergo a qualitative change. Interfaith theology transforms interfaith relationships. It deepens one's commitment to "the other" and honors our shared relationship by bringing it into the orbit of "faith seeking understanding," that is, of thoughtful search for the deeper meanings of faith experience amidst the new diversity.

THE METHOD OF INTERFAITH THEOLOGY

As one begins to reflect theologically on the existential situation of the new diversity, the question emerges of how to go about this task. Each field of theology has its proper method, developed over many years of research, interpretation and dialogue. Scriptural hermeneutics, moral theology, social ethics, historical theology, the systematic or constructed study of doctrine, ecclesiology, and so forth: all these fields have their own content, proper method and identified sources to support and guide the believer's search for better understanding of this or that aspect of faith. In previous pages we briefly reviewed some distinctive characteristics of methodological considerations in the theology of religions and in comparative theology.

While searching for and exploring theological tenets that encourage religious pluralism, interfaith theology will dialogue with many different fields of theology. Yet interfaith theology is distinguished by its own particular motivation and existential context, namely to explore how one's Christian faith contains imperatives to engage in interfaith dialogue and relationships. So the question arises of how to go about determining what kind of theological method will be most effective. The method of practical theology seems best suited to the pastoral motivation and pluralistic context of interfaith theology.

Practical theology is a contemporary theological endeavor that reflects on the religious practices and experiences of a Christian community in order to understand the doctrine that informs the practice of Christian life. In turn, informed by hermeneutics, practical theology allows religious practice and lived experience to critique how doctrine can be understood in new ways—reinterpreted or theologically reconstructed, if you will—in light of the faith community's contemporary, cultural context.²⁷

²⁷ Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 5-12. See also Gerben Heitink, *Practical theology: history, theory, action domains: manual for practical theology*

In the view of practical theology, the need for careful reconsideration and rereading of Christian doctrine arises when the situation confronting a community of faith raises questions about its normative practices and the doctrine that informs those practices. Practical theology is faith seeking understanding when the world of the believer is changing in significant ways, ways that put pressure on how the believer understands and appropriates his or her faith and the received interpretations of doctrine.

The new religious diversity is certainly such a situation. When multiple members of Christian communities encounter believers from other religious traditions, become their colleagues at work, share social and civic concerns, and even become personally intimate, sooner or later received theologies, teachings and texts of their Christian faith are heard, read and critiqued in new ways.²⁸ The methods of practical theology offer congregational leaders and members ways of negotiating such significant social changes by bringing their existential questions and practical concerns into sustained, fruitful dialogue with church doctrine that informs and enriches their faith.

In his *Practical Theology: an Introduction* Richard Osmer provides one model for the method of practical theology.²⁹ Osmer's model proposes four "core tasks of practical theological interpretation," with each task responding to an existential question facing the Christian community. A brief review of the four core tasks and their corresponding existential questions will help to illustrate how this proposed method of practical theology can enrich interfaith theology to help Christians navigate the new religious diversity.

The first of Osmer's four tasks is the *descriptive-empirical* task. It helps formulate the basic question "What is happening?" In our fast-paced, media-driven world, it is important to find the time and make an effort to describe carefully what is actually going on around us, to help people name the change and identify the various aspects of their experience of this change. This first task transforms what is often a confusing blur of passing encounters with a thoughtful analysis of the growing religious diversity in contemporary culture. The application of the descriptive-empirical

(William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999). I favor Hans-Georg Gadamer's understanding of hermeneutics as found in *Truth and Method* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004). See also Philippe Eberhard, "Gadamer and Theology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9, no. 3 (2007): 283-300.

²⁸ In his *Introduction to Theologies of Religion*, Paul Knitter writes of the "problem and promise" that Christians experience when they are "bewildered and befuddled" by the "diversity and vitality" of other religions (p. 1).

²⁹ Richard Robert Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 2008), 4ff).

task to interfaith theology helps the community to frame and respond to the realities of global migrations. It helps people “name” the reality, promoting ever greater clarity about just what is going, and how it is affecting people.

This first task also provides the opportunity for people to express their feelings and concerns about the changes they experience in their culture and their daily life. Pastorally it is important to provide a safe context within which believers can explore and explain the affective dimensions of the new diversity. Their feelings may include everything from fear, anxiety, anger and confusion to excitement, interest and curiosity—and many sentiments in between. Communities of faith need to confront the reality of the new religious diversity, to name it and how it has affected them, so they may be less likely to ignore or deny it, or be left to deal with it on their own without the church’s help.

The second task in this practical theological method is an *interpretive* one. “Why is it happening?” This second step helps the community to frame and respond to pressing questions such as: Why are there so many different kinds of believers and religious traditions in my corner of the world now? When did all this happen? What social, economic and political forces have led to this new situation? Is it happening in other places, and how are other Christians dealing with it?

The interpretive task moves beyond objective description of the situation and beyond subjective exploration of our personal reactions to it. It seeks deeper understandings of the causes and particular circumstances that have pushed real persons and actual families to leave their homes and countries, so often in pursuit of a just society where they and their families can live in peace. Ideally, the interpretive questions listed above are best posed and answered in the company of and conversation with those immigrants who are now our neighbors or colleagues, or whose parents have made this journey. What in particular led this person or that family to come here into my world? How has the world situation affected them? What have they suffered? What are their hopes? Why specifically have they come here?

In fact, much of the dialogue that occurs in interfaith gatherings at the local level involves this process of interpretation. Participants share with each other the meaning of their lives and their family histories. In turn, shared interpretation leads to growth in empathy as descriptions of global emigrations give way to personal encounters with immigrants in search for peace and promise. The disconcerting and baffling experience of the new diversity becomes more personal and so more manageable.

The exercise of the interpretive task may lead to questions of “why” on a different level as well, namely on the level of meaning or purpose. We may begin to ask specifically religious questions such as: Is this part of God’s plan? What is the meaning of all this change for my life and how I live my faith? What does it mean for these new persons in our midst, and for the future of our communities? When such questions of meaning begin to emerge, we move into the next stage or step. This is the *normative* task, the third in Osmer’s model.

The normative task, as applied to interfaith theology asks: What in our Christian tradition can help us find our way through all this change and diversity? Are there teachings and tenets of our faith that we can draw from in order to negotiate these challenging times of change in creative, redemptive ways? The interpretive task opens into dialogue with the many aspects of Christian theology.

For example, one might explore scriptural passages that deal with the encounter of religions throughout biblical history. The story of Jonah and Nineveh (Jonah 4); injunctions of how to deal with “aliens among you (Exodus 22, 23; Leviticus 17, 18, 19, 23, 25; Numbers 15, 35; Deuteronomy 24);” Jesus’ relationships with those beyond his Jewish community, such as the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15), the Roman centurion (Luke 7), and the sole, grateful leper who was a foreigner (Luke 17): all such texts provide material for “interpreting” the existential question of how to understand and negotiate the new religious diversity.

The questions that arise in the normative task lead through and beyond scripture to explorations of other fields of theological reflection in the search for Christian teachings and principles that encourage creative responses to the new religious diversity. In this process interfaith theology becomes a constructive theology. It draws not only from scripture, but also from the rich tradition of two millennia of Christian theology. It taps into the deep wells of Christian thought for streams of wisdom that can refresh our contemporary understandings of the human quest for meaning across religious and cultural traditions. We will offer some further reflections on how one might go about constructing an interfaith theology in the next section of this paper.

Attempts to construct an interfaith theology will sooner or later also bring it into dialogue with the theology of religions and comparative theology. Many ideas and models from these two fields can support the pastoral goals of interfaith theology, namely, to help Christians live authentic lives of faith amidst the “encounter of commitments” that is pluralism.

Osmer’s fourth task is a *strategic* one. It asks on very practical levels, “How might we

respond?” “What’s the next step?” “How do we act amidst changing circumstances and significant evolutions in society and community?” Believers draw wisdom from their reconsideration, their re-reading, their renewed understandings of scripture and tradition in light of the new diversity. During this fourth stage we discern together what practical advice that wisdom might offer to help us respond in faith, hope and love to the contemporary situation? If there is what might be called an ethical dimension to interfaith theology, it emerges in this fourth, strategic task.³⁰

The aim of practical theology is to reflect on, interpret, and evaluate a particular lived experience of faith. It develops and draws on the practical wisdom of the faith community, the *sensus fidelium*, and puts that wisdom in creative dialogue with the received doctrine of the tradition. With the benefit of such reflection, interpretation and evaluation, the believer who is seeking to understand his or her experience, can gain insight into how best to respond to that experience.

Methods in practical theology such as Osmer’s provide helpful guidance for an interfaith theology designed to help Christians reflect on and respond to the new religious diversity. Future development of method for interfaith theology will be further enriched by importing ideas and models from other practical theologians.³¹ Interfaith theology, like practical theology, is an initiative *in medias res*. It is a contextual theology arising from the particular cultural transformations resulting from the new religious diversity. Many church leaders and members at international, national and local levels are already attentive to and involved in interfaith dialogue. Interfaith theology, guided by a clear and intentional theological method can become a valuable aid for their work. Attention to methods such as Osmer’s will enhance how interfaith theology can become part of a pastoral response that encourages pluralism.

THE CONTENT OF INTERFAITH THEOLOGY

The content of interfaith theology emerges as believers ask and propose answers to the four existential questions in Osmer’s method as they are applied to the new religious diversity. What is happening and how has it affected me? Why is it happening and how has it affected the new immigrants and our communities of faith? How do I understand what is happening in the light of my Christian faith? How should I respond in accord with principles of Christian ethics? Intimations,

³⁰ The 2011 WCC statement mentioned earlier, *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct*, focuses on ethical issues

³¹ See Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski, eds., *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: an Introduction* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2014).

allusions and answers that arise in the dialogue among the questioners slowly produce building materials to construct an interfaith theology. Those who want to understand and respond to religious diversity begin to articulate theological positions that inform ways of living creatively, thoughtfully and fruitfully in religiously diverse societies, all the while deepening their own Christian life and faith commitment.

Intuitively there seem to be three categories of long-standing, traditional Christian tenets that are pertinent to pluralism and from which to begin to construct interfaith theology. These three categories are: the common humanity of all persons; the common good of every society and of all humankind; and the humility and hope before the Holy One found in all religious traditions. As Christians engage in conversations that are shaped and guided by Osmer's four questions, thoughtful response to and theological reflection on religious diversity more often than not arises from one of these categories.

Within each of these three categories there are scriptural themes, theological ideas and stated Christian doctrines that can serve as the building materials for interfaith theology. In a short article like this, it is possible to do only a preliminary review of some of those themes, ideas and doctrines. But such a preliminary review is instructive for understanding the nature of interfaith theology as a constructive theological enterprise.

The first of the three categories, theological reflection on the common humanity of all persons, draws from at least three basic Christian doctrines and associated scripture and theology. These are: God as Creator of all things, and of all persons in the divine image (Genesis 1:27; see also 5:1-3; 9:6); the Incarnation as the profound and mysterious historical revelation and affirmation of the divine destiny of humanity (John 1:1-5; Colossians 1:15-20); and, the presence, power and activity of the Holy Spirit throughout all creation for the sanctification of all persons (John 3:8).

The vast theological wisdom in each of these areas, developed over centuries by Christian theologians, and affirmed in contemporary relevant church documents provide extensive content to enrich interfaith theology.³² In the section above on method, we explored how practical theology

³² The most recent publication of the Vatican's Pontifical Council on Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue in Truth and Charity: Pastoral Orientations for Interreligious Dialogue* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014) provides a rich, up-to-date summary of the work of the Council over many decades, including suggestions of theological themes basic to interreligious dialogue (see especially #17-20). Two previous documents of this Council are important for the development of interfaith theology: *Dialogue*

brings Christian teaching into fruitful dialogue with the daily experience of believing Christians. Empathic and open response to the new diversity and to encounter with other faith traditions can lead to new and deeper understandings of Christian theologies of creation, incarnation and sanctification, and indeed to new understandings of the Trinitarian God as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. These basic Christian teachings, through the hermeneutic circle of practical theology, are received and appreciated in new ways, ways that open the believer to the presence and power of God in other faith traditions and at the same time deepen a Christian believer's understanding of and commitment to Christian teaching and tradition. A dynamic interfaith theology can lead to new developments in theological anthropology.

The second of the three content categories for interfaith reflection, the common good of every society and of all humankind, can draw from at least two areas of moral theology. One is the long tradition of natural law theory. Though much discussed and debated by contemporary moral theologians, natural law theory affirms a universal law superior to the positive laws of particular societies and states, and shared across all cultures and religions. In its various iterations natural law theory provides theological perspectives from which to reflect on the moral and legal wisdom, knowledge and practice in other religious traditions. As such it could become an important dimension of interfaith dialogue which includes reflections on sin and injustice.

Another aspect of interfaith reflection on the common good is ethical considerations of universal human rights. Rooted in the covenantal and prophetic traditions in sacred scripture, issues of social justice and the imperative of peace are foundational for a Christian interfaith theology. The ecumenical document previously mentioned *Christian Witness in a Multi- Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct* is a good example of theological reflection on human rights, justice and peace in the service of interfaith understanding and relations.³³ Human rights, social justice and commitment to peace are ethical considerations that inform proper Christian comportment for interfaith dialogue. They are also basic values shared with other religious faiths and as such provide

and Mission (1984), accessed October 16, 2014, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue_and-proclamatio_en.html; and, *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991) accessed October 16, 2014, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue_and-proclamatio_en.html.

³³ This document was a common effort by the World Council of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue of the Vatican, and the World Evangelical Alliance, accessed November 5, 2014), <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents>.

a common meeting place for dialogue.

The third category of traditional Christian tenets essential for a constructive interfaith theology is humility and hope before God. This category comprises both existential and eschatological dimensions of Christian theology. Humility is recognition of our status as creatures before an infinite and omnipotent Creator. Humility and its foil, original pride, are a major leitmotif in biblical and theological history.³⁴ As such humility recommends itself as an essential attitude and posture for a Christian's encounter with other religions in the unfolding of history, and in the development of doctrine which that encounter can inspire. Humility is also an attitude and posture before the Infinite Holy One that Christians share with other religions, particularly within the mystical traditions and communities that have been part of all of the world's great religions.

An interfaith theology must also take account of Christian eschatology and the theological virtue of hope. Theological reflections on the kingdom of God, death, judgment, heaven and hell all serve to broaden and deepen the foundations of interfaith theology. These themes will likewise be understood in new ways as they are integrated into interfaith dialogue through the method of practical theology.³⁵

A WORD ABOUT SOURCES

The development of content for interfaith theology requires attention to sources. Scripture, patristic texts, and writings from Christian theologians across the centuries are all sources for interfaith theology. Their inclusion in the project of interfaith theology brings such source material to enrich the reflection of Christian believers as they experience the "encounter of commitments" that is pluralism. Interfaith dialogue leads to new understandings and appreciations of the levels of meanings inherent in those sources, as well as reconsiderations and reinterpretations made possible by openness to interfaith encounters.

³⁴ Augustine of Hippo, in commenting on the story of The Fall recounted in Genesis 3, identifies the first or original sin of human kind, *peccatum originale*, as pride (*Miscellany of Questions in Response to Simplicianus* I-2; *Nature and Grace* 3.3). Pride is a denial of our status as creatures. Augustine's theology of original sin as pride has perdured in Western Christian theology. By contrast, Augustine recommends humility—recognition of the divine omnipotence of the creator—as an essential Christian virtue: "This way is first humility, second humility, third humility and no matter how often you keep asking me I will say the same over and over again (*Letter 118*)."

³⁵ It is in the work of constructing content that the practical, interfaith theologian will draw from the resources developed within the field of the theology of religions. In particular, I find the writings of Jacques Dupuis most helpful in this regard

In addition to scripture and theological writings, ecclesial documents from the past 50 to 60 years are also important source material for interfaith theology. Such documents have grown out of interreligious encounters and dialogues held at both formal and personal levels.³⁶ They offer various paradigms for interfaith theology and provide references to biblical and theological sources. Several of these documents have already been cited. As mentioned earlier, the notion of interfaith theology proposed in this article is an exercise *in medias res*. It strives to identify, describe and delineate distinct ways of theologizing in the service of pluralism. Significant reflection on the encounter of commitments is already happening in various Christian communities and contexts, and is well documented. An intentional interfaith theology as described here serves to extend and expand appreciative and critical reflection on interreligious dialogue.

In addition to scripture, Christian theology, and ecclesial documents, sources from other religious traditions can also enrich interfaith theology. These include sacred texts other than the Bible and learned commentaries on those texts. One example of textual commentary very useful for interfaith relations is the book by Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan, *Love in the Holy Quran*.³⁷ Prince Ghazi is also a principle author of the important document *A Common Word between Us and You*.³⁸ His scholarship and his dedication to interfaith understanding can be a rich source of reflection for the development of Christian theologies of grace and sanctification in the construction of interfaith theology.

The extensive writings of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel are another treasure trove of materials for interfaith theology. Rabbi Heschel—who was to have a significant influence on the thinking of Pope Paul VI and Vatican II, especially with regard to interfaith relations—breaks open the scriptural teaching of man and woman and the image of God, and the many levels of meaning of

³⁶ The Vatican provides documentation of interfaith meetings and agreements in the archives of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue over many decades, available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/index.htm. In 2013 the Vatican Press released its third edition of a book that is a compilation of all official Catholic documents regarding interreligious dialogue: Francesco Gioia, ed., *Interreligious Dialogue in the Official Teaching of the Catholic Church (1963-2013)* (New York: Pauline Press, 2014). Pauline Press has published English editions of the previous two compilations (www.pauline.org).

³⁷ Ghazi bin Muhammed, *Love in the Holy Qur'an* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2014).

³⁸ “A Common Word between Us and You,” (Amman, Jordan: The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, Jordan, 2007).

Genesis 1:28.³⁹ Heschel develops a profound theological anthropology that can enrich Christian reflection on the same topic.⁴⁰

David Tracy has written that all Christian theology today needs in some way to address religious diversity.⁴¹ And after his encounter with Eastern religions, Paul Tillich said he wanted to rewrite his *Systematic Theology* so that he could incorporate into his theology the wisdom he found in the religions of the East.⁴² As a new initiative amidst the many fields of Christian theological study, interfaith theology heeds the counsel of Tracy and Tillich both in its attention to source material, and in its overall purpose to study how basic tenets in Christian theology support and encourage interreligious encounter and conversation.

CONCLUSION AND CAVEATS

Interfaith theology as presented in this paper recommends that care for and concern about interreligious dialogue become an explicit topic or focus with the ambit of pastoral theology. Seminary students, graduate students in various theological fields, members and leaders of Christian parishes and congregations, and clergy in continuing professional education programs: all live in increasingly diverse societies where the encounter of world religions is a fact of daily life. Many welcome the opportunity to investigate other faiths as part of their theological studies. Others hesitate, or defer. Some find the new diversity difficult to navigate and fear that theological openness to other faiths is a compromise of their own.

For all of them—eager, hesitant or resistant—interfaith theology as outlined here helps root interreligious dialogue in the center of Christian theology as an essential part of Christian faith. It

³⁹ At the Memorial Service for Rabbi Heschel at The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City in 1983, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum spoke in detail about Heschel's (and his own) interactions with Pope Paul VI, Cardinal Bea, and other Catholic leaders at that time. See Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, "Heschel and Vatican II: Jewish-Christian Relations," February 21, 1983, accessed November 15, 2014, http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/Z582.CV01.pdf.

⁴⁰ See especially Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955/1976); Heschel's thought and consultation had direct impact on Vatican II's document on interfaith relations, *Nostra Aetate*. For a good overview of Heschel's theological anthropology see M. Friedman, "Divine Need and Human Wonder: The Philosophy of A. J. Heschel," *Judaism* 25, no. 1 (1976): 65-78. See also Heschel's inaugural lecture at Union Theological Seminary "No Religion is an Island," *No Religion is an Island: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Interreligious Dialogue*, eds. Harold Kasimow and Byron L. Sherwin (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009): 3-22

⁴¹ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 42-43; David Tracy, "Comparative Theology," *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, (New York: Macmillan, 1986): 9126.

⁴² Marc Boss, "Tillich in dialogue with Japanese Buddhism: a paradigmatic illustration of his approach to inter-religious conversation," ed. Russell Re Manning, *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 269.

invites interreligious dialogue to move from the outlying fields of academic electives and find a place in the core curriculum. It plants the seed of pluralism in the humus of the biblical notion of the image of God. It discovers a radical openness to religious diversity in theological anthropology and the Christian theology of grace. It reveals layers of complexity and subtlety in Christology, in the theology of the Holy Spirit, and in eschatology which present opportunities for interfaith understandings arising from within these basic Christian tenets. It chooses to stand with members of other religious traditions in the exploration of moral issues and in a biblically inspired affirmation of human rights and a shared dedication to justice and peace. It humbly observes the piety and fear of the Lord found in other faiths, and reflects with them about mysteries that transcend human knowledge and history.

However, there is also need for pastoral sensitivity to local situations that can impede or prevent fruitful interreligious reflection. Where Christianity is a minority religion, or where its practice is restricted or forbidden, such social and political contexts will inform the questions of or conversations about religious pluralism. Different pastoral concerns in regions or countries that persecute Christians may trump any immediate pursuit of interfaith theology.⁴³

The varieties of social, political and religious situations within which Christians around the world live their faith are constitutive dimensions of the theological enterprise. Interfaith theology, through the exercise of careful theological method, needs to take such situations into account. In countries where religious freedom is guaranteed by constitution or law, that freedom coupled with religious diversity can produce understandings of interfaith theology and its methods such as that presented in this paper. However, theologians, ministers or Christian believers who live, study and teach as members of a minority faith, or as adherents of a faith under duress, are themselves important partners in conversations about interfaith theology and its role in the life of the church. Their voices need to be heard and their situations heeded in the development of ideas about motivation, method, content and sources in interfaith theology.

It should be clear that interfaith theology as defined and described in this paper is not a matter

⁴³ Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, former head of the Pontifical Council on Interreligious Affairs, and Papal Nuncio to Egypt has often addressed the importance of religious freedom for interreligious dialogue. See Michael Fitzgerald, "Peace in the World: the Contribution of Interreligious Relations, (section on "Freedom")" Georgetown University *Pacem in Terris* Lecture Series, February 28, 2005, accessed November 15, 2014, <http://www.georgetown.edu/content/1242663598892.html>.

of religious syncretism or relativism. Eck reminds us that religious pluralism is an

encounter of commitments. Pope Benedict XVI, somewhat more cautious than his immediate predecessors or successor with regard to interreligious matters, continually emphasized the importance of a Christian's basic commitment to Christ and the Gospel.⁴⁴ As recently as October 2014 he wrote, in remarks prepared for the Pontifical Urbanian University, that dialogue with other religions is no substitute for spreading the Gospel to non-Christian cultures and warned against relativistic ideas of religious truth as "lethal to faith."⁴⁵

Within a dynamic interfaith theology fear of religious relativism, indifferentism or syncretism is best met not by retreat from the new diversity. Rather, the kind of responsible, reflective and resourceful theological enterprise recommended here promises an encounter of commitments that benefits all participants in the conversation, each in different ways.

Fifty years ago the Catholic Church approved the following language for *Nostra Aetate*, one of the final documents to emerge from the Second Vatican Council in 1965:

The Church, therefore, urges its sons and daughters to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, together with their social life and culture.⁴⁶

Over the past five decades many Christian theologians and scholars have responded enthusiastically to this call for interreligious dialogue, this encounter of commitments. What the present article recommends is a theological project with its own pastoral motivation, practical theological method, relevant doctrinal content and diversity of sources to help more Christian laity

⁴⁴ The declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus*, written by then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and approved by John Paul II, shows Benedict's concerns about interreligious dialogue. See Joseph Ratzinger, *Dominus Iesus*. Vatican: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2000, accessed November 20, 2014,

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_2_0000806_dominus-iesus_en.html.

⁴⁵ Francis X. Rocca, "Retired Pope Benedict XVI: Interreligious dialogue is no substitute for Mission," *National Catholic Reporter*, October 23, 2014, accessed November 30, 2014,

<http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/retired-pope-benedict-xvi-interreligious-dialogue-no-substitute-mission>. The Urbanian University comes under the jurisdiction of the Pontifical Congregation for Evangelization, a fact which provides context for the retired Pope's remarks.

⁴⁶ Second Vatican Council. *Nostra Aetate*. 1965, accessed November 30, 2014, <http://www.urbandharma.org/pdf/NostraAetate.pdf>.

and clergy “enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions.”

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