

**THE  
KENOTIC  
CHRIST  
AND  
RELIGIOUS  
PLURALISM**

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# **THE KENOTIC CHRIST AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

A Christian's christological view necessarily affects her or his relationship with the religious Other. In an exclusivistic christology, the Other is treated as one who is to be converted, or as an enemy. In an inclusivistic christology, the Other is treated as an anonymous Christian, or as one who may have wisdom but still incomplete without the full knowledge of Christ.

In this paper, I will attempt to reconstruct my understanding of christology beyond the exclusive-inclusive theological views about Christ. Based on David Jensen's *dialogical christology*, I would venture on a view of Christ that would be dialogically open to, and genuinely embracing of, the Other in the context of religious pluralism in a global era. This reconstructed christology would then be tested in my experiential dialogue with a Buddhist friend as we deal with the difficult doctrines of *God* and *Transformation*.

In the process of evaluating my present christological view, I also have to rethink my understanding of certain theological terms that have been dear to me: *truth*, *religion*, *doctrine*, and *theology*. A brief discussion of the implications of this reconstructed christology to ethics and ministry will also be pointed out.

## 2. BEYOND CHRISTOLOGICAL EXCLUSIVISM AND INCLUSIVISM

Christian faith, by definition, centers on the person of Jesus Christ. Emil Brunner once said that, "the center and foundation of the whole Christian faith is Christology, that is faith in Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup> For most Christians, christology is the central doctrine. As has been pointed out earlier, our christological view necessarily affect our relationship with the religious Other. At this point, it is important to briefly look back on how christology and its implication to the religious Other is approached both in the Roman Catholic and Protestant theologies. I will also try to express how I interacted and responded with these views.

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<sup>1</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Mediator* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947), p. 232.

*Exclusivist Approach.* The Catholic doctrine *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*—that is, outside the church, there is no salvation—is a classic summary of the exclusivist approach to truth. This teaching is rooted in Catholic Christology. Since Christ is the only Truth (Jn. 14:6) revealed by God in human history, and since the church is understood as the historical extension of Christ's truth and presence on earth, then salvation can only be received in Christ, through the Church. Pope Pius IX articulated this during the First Vatican Council:

The Son of God, redeemer of the human race, our lord Jesus Christ, promised, when about to return to his heavenly Father, that he would be with this church militant upon earth all days even to the end of the world. Hence never at any time has he ceased to stand by his beloved bride, assisting her when she teaches, blessing her in her labours, and bringing her help when she is in danger.<sup>2</sup>

This is echoed in the official teachings of the Church as exemplified in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* of 1908:

[I]t is to the Church that Christ has committed those means of grace through which the gifts He earned for men are communicated to them. The Church alone dispenses the sacraments. It alone makes known the light of revealed truth. Outside the Church these gifts cannot be obtained. From all this there is but one conclusion: Union with the Church is not merely one out of various means by which salvation may be obtained: it is the only means... This doctrine of the absolute necessity of union with the Church was taught in explicit terms by Christ. Baptism, the act of incorporation among her members, He affirmed to be essential to salvation... The doctrine is summed up in the phrase, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.<sup>3</sup>

Protestants expressed it in a different way: *Outside Christianity there is no salvation*. This is the strongest motivating factor for the modern evangelical missionary enterprise. For example, a definition of *missiology* reads:

That branch of theology which in opposition to the non-Christian religions, shows the Christian religion to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life; which seeks to dispossess the non-Christian religions and to plant in their stead in the soil of heathen national life the evangelic faith and the Christian life.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Norman Tanner, S.J., ed. "Decrees of the First Vatican Council: Session 3—24 April 1870," *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, (<http://www.piar.hu/councils/ecum20.htm>), accessed March 29, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> G.H. Joyce, "The Church," *The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume III*, Nihil Obstat, November 1, 1908. Remy Lafort, S.T.D., Censor; Imprimatur, +John Cardinal Farley, Archbishop of New York (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908); Online Edition (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03744a.htm>), accessed March 29, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Julius Richter, "Missionary Apologetics: Its Problems and Its Methods," *International Review of Missions*, 2 (1913) 540; quoted in John Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Towards a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds. (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 17.

This view of truth among Christians worked hand in hand with Western colonialism. The British East India Company and its evangelical business leaders, for example, helped in the “evangelization” of India in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. A historian reports:

The Indian territories were allotted by providence to Great Britain, wrote Charles Grant, the evangelical chairman of the British East India Company’s Court of Directors, “not merely that we might draw an annual profit from them, but that we might diffuse among their inhabitants, once sunk in darkness, vice, and misery, the light and benign influence of the truth, the blessings of a well-regulated society, the improvements and comforts of active industry...”<sup>5</sup>

Until now, for many Christians who describe themselves as *conservative evangelicals*, the Gospel is often reduced to the Great Commission (Mt. 28:18-20). Christianity is then perceived as an exclusivist faith against all other pagan religions. Schwöbel comments:

The question that arises when God is presented as being exclusively at work in Christianity is whether this does not reduce the universality of God to such an extent that God is made to appear as the tribal deity of a rather imperialistic form of Western Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

An exclusivist approach to christology can be summarized as follows:<sup>7</sup> (a) Christ alone is God’s direct self-revelation and the church is the only vehicle of such God’s revelation; (b) Christianity alone possesses the full knowledge of God; (c) Christianity arose from, and alone proclaims, God’s saving act in the atoning death of Christ; (d) Christianity, despite all its historical defects, is the only religious movement to have been founded on earth by God in person. In an exclusivistic christology, the Other is treated as one who is to be converted, or, as an enemy.

My ministry and career in the evangelical missionary movement was necessarily dependent on an exclusivist christology. But a change was necessary because I began to see the exclusivist christology to be too presumptuous, almost claiming to have a monopoly of the Divine intervention on earth. I soon, or perhaps not soon enough, realized that Christianity

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<sup>5</sup> James Morris, *Heaven’s Command: An Imperial Progress* (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), p. 74.

<sup>6</sup> Christoph Schwöbel, “Particularity, Universality, and the Religions,” *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Gavin D’Costa, ed. (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> Hick, p. 21.

does not own God. Now I have this strong conviction that Christians like me must be aware of our own particularity even as we worship the God beyond *God*.

*Inclusivist Approach.* During the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965) the Roman Catholic Church virtually repealed the *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), declared that “man—every man without exception whatever—has been redeemed by Christ... because with man—every man without exception whatever—Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it.”<sup>8</sup>

John Hick observed that the Protestant thinking has moved in the same direction:

The new consensus, or near consensus, that has emerged out of this trend away from the old exclusivism is today generally called inclusivism. The Christian mind has now for the most part made the move from an intolerant exclusivism to a benevolent inclusivism... Non-Christians can be saved because, unknown to them, Christ is secretly “in a way united” with them.<sup>9</sup>

An inclusivist approach to christology can be summarized as follows: (a) Christ is God's direct self-revelation; (b) Christianity alone possesses the *full knowledge of God* but other religions and cultures may possess some Christ-like principles or truths although incomplete; (c) God's saving act in the gracious atoning death of Christ includes all people whether they are aware of their salvation-in-Christ or not. In an inclusivistic christology the Other is treated as an anonymous Christian, or, as one who may have wisdom but still incomplete without the full knowledge of Christ.

The christological approaches of Gavin D'Costa and M.M. Thomas helped me in my theological journey from exclusivism to inclusivism. During those long hours of flight and waiting time in various airports, I used to have spiritual and ethical struggles regarding the kind of global mission and evangelism I was called to lead based on an exclusivistic christology. I used to wonder a lot how those non-Christian religious leaders, whom I met in various

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<sup>8</sup> *Redemptor Hominis* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1979), par. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Hick, p. 22.

countries, perceived me as a missionary leader. D'Costa's and M.M. Moore's writings helped me during those times of my initial struggles in facing the reality of a pluralistic global community.

Here's how D'Costa's theses helped me moved from exclusivism to inclusivism, as it appeared in my spiritual journal:<sup>10</sup>

A trinitarian Christology guards against exclusivism and pluralism by dialectically relating the universal and the particular. My faith in Jesus Christ is re-strengthened in this process because I realized that he is "*totus Deus, never totum Dei*—that is, wholly God but never the whole of God."<sup>11</sup> As a finite person, I cannot all-at-once embrace the infinite universality of God. It was only through my particular encounter with the person of Jesus of Nazareth that I was able to embrace the universal God who became a particular person in space-time history. Through Christ, I am able to embrace God, not exhaustively but relationally. This existential, relational knowledge brought me to a new awareness of the universality of God through the Holy Spirit. I am developing a new appreciation for a Christocentric Trinitarian theology. D'Costa puts it well: "In this way the Trinity anchors God's self-revelation in the particularities of history, principally focused in Jesus Christ—without limiting God to this particularity through the universality of the Holy Spirit."<sup>12</sup> The Christ I have encountered is the norm for understanding God and yet not a static norm. This norm by which I came to understand God is being constantly "transformed and enriched through the guiding/declaring/judging function of the Spirit."<sup>13</sup> This is very significant in my experiential dialogue with my friends who belong to other faiths. First, I'm becoming more aware that the Spirit and the Word are present and active in the world—inside and outside Christianity. This means that the Spirit and the Word are also active and present in the religions of the world. Second, I am becoming more aware that "it is intrinsic to the

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<sup>10</sup> Gavin D'Costa, "Christ, the Trinity and Religious Plurality," *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Gavin D'Costa, ed. (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), p. 16; for a more in-depth discussion of this thesis, see Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

vocation of the church to be attentive to the world religions."<sup>14</sup> The church must not "willfully close itself to the Spirit of truth, which it requires to remain faithful to the truth and be guided more deeply into it."<sup>15</sup> Third, I'm becoming more aware about the purifying process of interreligious dialogue about our knowledge of God's truth. D'Costa explains:

The doctrine of the Spirit thereby provides the narrative space in which the testimonies of people from the world religions, in their words and lives, can unmask the false ideologies and distorted narrative practices within Christian communities. At the same time, it allows Christians to be aware of God's self-disclosure within the world's religions, and through this process of learning, enrich its own self-understanding. Without listening to this testimony, Christians cease to be faithful to their own calling as Christians, in being attentive to God.<sup>16</sup>

In this journey, M. M. Thomas<sup>17</sup> also helped me moved from exclusivism to inclusivism. He presented various aspects of Christ-centeredness, which they learned in their experience of interfaith dialogue on human renewal in the context of India's religious and ideological pluralism:

Christ is beyond my christological propositions that were formulated within my religious history and culture. Through this experiential dialogue with other people from non-Christian communities, I'm opening myself for a continued re-formation of my faith in Christ beyond my absolutization of my christology. If this is so, then it is possible, even inevitable, for me to hold on my faith in Christ within the framework of other religions such as Buddhism.<sup>18</sup> Christ-centeredness in the Christian stance toward interfaith relations provides a principle of spiritual discrimination.<sup>19</sup> Like any other religious human being living in the context of postmodernity, I cannot jump out of my Christian religion and culture. I cannot accept the pluralist's notion of a philosophical Ultimate Reality or liberal pragmatic criteria that do not take my Christian

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> M. M. Thomas, "A Christ-Centered Humanist Approach," *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Gavin D'Costa, ed. (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), pp. 49-61.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

doctrines and my friend's Buddhist doctrines seriously; they are another form of Western imperialism. Jesus Christ provides a universal and transcendent source of criticism of all religions and culture, including the criticism of Christianity itself. Christ, as the criterion of spiritual evaluation of all religions, including Christianity, enables a discernment of spirits in them.<sup>20</sup> There are many aspects in the spirituality of world religions and cultures that are not of God; they are "described in the Bible as forces of darkness, of idolatry, or of anti-Christ."<sup>21</sup> In my experiential dialogue with Buddhism, I must use a mixture of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism in my discernment process. I see exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism operate under a Christocentric lens. With this Christocentric lens, it is possible for me to *exclude* forms of evil and *include* what are good and what are life-affirming values even if they don't have a Christian brand or trademark. The recognition of, and working within, a *pluralistic* society is also possible. M. M. Thomas is positive about this when faced with the challenges of religious plurality in India:

...True equality in a pluralistic society lay neither in the religious idea of equality of religions nor in the idea of equal respect for all religions, but in the equality of persons, that is, the equal recognition and reverence for persons in the integrity of their religious or secular ideological faith-commitments. Indeed, this is the basis on which interfaith dialogue and common struggle for remaking society can best be promoted in pluralistic India.<sup>22</sup>

According to John Hick, inclusivism "does not mean...that the old sense of Christian superiority has died out or that the traditional claim to the unique finality of the Christian Gospel has been rescinded."<sup>23</sup> Hick continues:

To abandon this claim to an ultimate religious superiority is therefore to pass a critical point, entering new territory from which the whole terrain of Christian truth is bound to look different. For on the other side of this divide Christianity is seen in a pluralistic context as one of the great world faiths, one of the streams of religious life

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>23</sup> Hick, p. 21.

through which human beings can be savingly related to that ultimate Reality Christians know as the heavenly Father.<sup>24</sup>

For Hick, the Christian tradition is now seen as “one of a plurality of contexts of salvation—contexts, that is to say, within which the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to God—or Reality-centeredness is occurring.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the Christian claim—that Christ’s continuing agency on earth is superior to all other religions—must be shown by historical evidence.<sup>26</sup>

Inclusivism sounded very attractive to me because of its claim to compassion, acceptance, and universality. I began to see inclusivism from the point of view of my people. However, my exposure at VST challenged me to explore further. As a person coming from a country that still struggles out of its colonial past, I began to see that inclusivists do not clearly see their own imperialism that is being expressed in a very gentle way. It is a condescending echo of the old Christendom’s attitude against other faith traditions. The inclusivist position is a benevolent but revitalized expression of Eurocentric superiority and a quiet claim of having dominion over those who are in the “pagan” periphery.

*Beyond Exclusivism and Inclusivism.* Is there a way of viewing Christ beyond exclusivism or inclusivism? Pluralists<sup>27</sup> seek to move beyond the traditional exclusivist-inclusivist approaches. But in this paper, I would like to explore on a different approach called *kenotic christology*.

### 3. THE KENOTIC CHRIST AND THE RELIGIOUS OTHER

My new understanding of the kenotic Christ vis-à-vis the religious Other is based on David Jensen’s *dialogical christology*.<sup>28</sup> The sustained argument in his work is that, “the religious Other stands at the center of our most distinctive affirmations—proclaiming Jesus as the Christ—

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 23

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Towards a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995).

<sup>28</sup> David H. Jensen, *In the Company of Others: A Dialogical Christianity* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2001).

and that faithfulness to this confession turns our attention outward, allowing us to be captivated by the beauty and detail of *all* persons of difference."<sup>29</sup> Early in his work, Jensen strongly emphasizes that the Other is the one "to whom we are summoned in love."<sup>30</sup> Referring to key scriptural themes, he points out that the Other—the alien, the stranger, the vulnerable one—is intrinsically worthy from the perspective of a loving God. In these recurring biblical themes, the love of God and the love of others are closely bound together.

Jensen also surveys how Christians, based on their christological views, have responded to the religious Other: as a convert who stands in need (Justin), as an enemy (Luther), as anonymous Christian (Rahner), and as stranger (Lindbeck).<sup>31</sup> In all these responses to the Other, Jensen notes that the consistent and significant similarity is *the emphasis of the "I" at the expense of the Other*.<sup>32</sup> He then presents his alternative model—the Emptying Christ or the *Kenotic*<sup>33</sup> Christ (Phil. 2:5-11). His actual words are necessary to get a grasp of his *kenotic* model:

An exploration of kenotic themes with regard to incarnation and resurrection... results in the de-centering of the autonomous, imperial self that views otherness as a problem. The Emptying Christ becomes, then, not the One who is proclaimed at the expense of others, but the One who unveils the beauty, detail, and difference of each concrete Other. Such confession, I will argue, amounts to a more faithful witness to the One who proclaimed much on behalf of others and little on behalf of himself.

With this alternative is a warning from Jensen that the *Kenotic* Christ, traditionally, has been misused by oppressors to perpetuate an unjust system by hammering *humility* and *emptiness* to the oppressed. The oppressed people, fearing not to disobey what they thought were God's

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<sup>29</sup> Jensen, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-15.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> The term *kenosis* (Gk. root, *kenōw*, to empty) comes from the text of Philippians 2:7, which traditionally refers to the notion that the One eternally in the form of God (or equal with God) emptied himself to become a human being. Walter Bauer, *An Abridged Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* [computer file]: from Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, William Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (trans.); revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker from Walter Bauer's Fifth Edition, 1958. [Electronic Edition] Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, ©1958. (Logos Library System).

command to be humble and to empty themselves, kept their silence in the midst of exploitation and oppression.<sup>34</sup> The misuse of the notion of Christ-like emptying of one's self prohibits prophetic imagination and critique of an oppressive status quo.<sup>35</sup>

For Jensen, a kenotic christology provides a way to affirm Christianity's "shocking" affirmations—that Jesus Christ is the Incarnate and the Risen One—and still resist the "vaunting of the Christian self at the expense of the religious Other."<sup>36</sup>

Jensen then continues to deal with the methodological issues in traditional christology: Does Christian reflection begin with Jesus as God and move to think about him as man? Or does it begin with Jesus as man and consider what it means to call him God? Or expressed in other terms, is christology more responsibly done *from above* or *from below*? Jensen describes christology from above as "Christology of Descent and Ascent."<sup>37</sup> He affirms that this teaching had abundant evidence in the Christ hymn of self-emptying, and it probably appeared in the Jesus community as early as twenty years after Jesus' death; but he also points out that the christology from above is not the exhaustive teaching of the hymn and that it is not the only implication of self-emptying.<sup>38</sup> "Christology of the Suffering Servant" is what Jensen refers to as christology from below. He bases this view from the imagery in Second Isaiah (Isa. 53). From this point of view, the Christ-hymn can be interpreted as a liturgical expression of Christ's service, ministry, and ultimate humiliation in death upon a cross. So, how do we interpret this Christ-hymn? Is it by viewing Jesus Christ as a "divine redeemer" or as a "renewed man"? Jensen affirms that, "both are implied by its evocative poetry." But he insists that the issue is beyond "high" christology or "low" christology. For Jensen, the more significant and pressing

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<sup>34</sup> For a concrete historical study of the misuse of Christian humility and obedience by a Western colonial power, see John N. Schumacher, S.J., *Revolutionary Clergy: The Filipino Clergy and the Nationalist Movement, 1850-1903* (Manila, Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1981), esp. ch. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Jensen, pp. 20-21.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

issues in this hymn are the "Divine-Human and the Interhuman" relational issues inherent in the passage.<sup>39</sup> The *divine-human* relation addresses the possibility of incarnation and the divine wisdom; while the *interhuman* relation addresses the pattern of Jesus' life and ministry among us. The former underlines the theological aspects of christology, while the latter underlines the ethical. Both these aspects of the kenotic hymn are equally important in Christian discipleship; that is, we are called to subordinate our self-interest to the well-being of the wider community. The theological question, "Who is Christ?" and the ethical question "How are we to be disciples?" are then intertwined in the most profound way. The kenotic understanding of Christ, Jensen maintains, is also coherent with all the other New Testament portrayals of Christ.

Jensen also makes a critical review of Thomasius' work in kenotic theology. He noted Thomasius' attempt to uphold Chalcedonian christology based on "an arcane and outmoded worldview"; but Jensen appreciates Thomasius' relational emphasis on his classical orthodox view of the kenotic Christ.<sup>40</sup> Jensen's critical review of Hegel's work on kenotic christology is interesting. He noted that Hegel's christological account "frees both God and humanity from somewhat static conceptions of 'being' or 'nature' and glimpses them more within relational categories of becoming."<sup>41</sup> Hegel's view of the Logos, according to Jensen, is not exclusively identified with the person of Jesus Christ; for Hegel, "the Logos names something wider: God's ever-present activity with and for an other, which can be glimpsed through creation."<sup>42</sup> The key term for Hegel's kenotic christology is *divestment* (Entäusserung)—that is, "God's drive to be-for-an-other, to reveal Godself... God wills to be with humanity, God does not remain enclosed upon Godself, but diverts or 'empties' Godself for others."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 29-37.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 38-45.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

Jensen affirms the Christian doctrinal claim that Jesus Christ is the Incarnate One and the Risen One. Usually, this claim is a "dead-end alley" for inter-religious dialogue. But in his kenotic christology, a constructive theology of Incarnation and Resurrection opens the way for a more embracing attitude towards the religious Other. For him, *incarnation* means "embodiment"—meaning, Jesus Christ embodies the love of God that includes all, especially the poor and the outcast, the rejected and the despised, and yet offers immense hope to those who suffer because his is an emphatic body.<sup>44</sup> Incarnation is also understood by Jensen as "kenotic relationality"—that is, Jesus is the personification, in flesh and blood, of what it means to identify with the human Other in the most possible way, but without surrendering his own identity.<sup>45</sup> This incarnation is seen by Jensen not merely as a "cosmic surd" but a continuity of God's one process of non-depleting, emptying of Godself in the world, and the "enflowerment of God's creative intent for the cosmos," which is characterized by divine love and presence.<sup>46</sup>

*Resurrection*, in Jensen's fresh interpretation, means the *absent-presence of Christ*. On one hand, the resurrection means *absence*. Based on an exegesis of the Markan story of the empty tomb, he pointed out that the resurrection is a statement of the absence of the Risen One, and that this absence emphasizes the fact that the Risen One cannot be enclosed doctrinally or spatially; this absence is also reflected in the Christian tradition called *via negativa*.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, resurrection also means *presence*. The Risen One is present. This presence is beyond the dictionary meaning of *presence*. That the Risen One is present is understood by Jensen in the following ways: (a) presence through mediation—expressed through the face of the Other; (b) presence that encompasses all aspects of time—establishes continuity in the past, being experienced in the present, and continues in the future; (c) presence that fervently resists

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 74-80.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 80-83.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 83-86.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 108-111.

enclosure—cannot be quantified or reified; (d) presence that is attested by love—abiding, sustaining divine love.<sup>48</sup>

The absent-presence of Christ embodies love and this love is expressed through the sacraments and through the "most basic of acts like eating, drinking, bathing, healing—the very practices that are most integral to the sustenance of human bodies."<sup>49</sup> This absent-presence of Christ calls us to discipleship and ethical actions in the context of religious pluralism.<sup>50</sup>

#### 4. KENOTIC GOD, DYNAMIC SUNYATA, AND BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN ENCOUNTER

Can this reconstructed christology be applied in my relationship with a specific religious Other in my life? I now focus with a Buddhist friend who is teaching me Zen meditation. Arai Emiko *San*,<sup>51</sup> is a faithful Zen Buddhist. (Every time I refer to her as a "faithful" Zen Buddhist, she insists that *faithful* does not mean *attachment*.) Early in our encounter, we found out that the topics about *God* and *Transformation* become problematic when we compare the truth claims between Buddhism and Christianity. There were times when we simply want to ignore these topics. But we both felt that they are part of our worldviews so we cannot ignore these key perspectives in our respective religious teachings. While preparing for this paper, I shared with her how I was coming to a new understanding of God and Transformation through the lens of the Kenotic Christ and how this new understanding was affecting my sisterly relationship with her. (She's now reading Jensen's book.)

As an attempt to understand Emiko's worldview better, I tried to compare the Buddhist and Christian perception of the category *God* and *Transformation*. (The emphasis is on "tried.")

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 111-115.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 115-130.

<sup>51</sup> Arai Emiko *San*, a retired JAL flight attendant, is like an older sister to me. My wife introduced me to her three years ago. Her deep knowledge and faithful practice of Japanese Buddhism inspired me to learn more about Zen. After our morning Tai Chi, we sometimes drive to UBC campus together where she reads *sutras* at the Asian Center while I read Hebrew Bible at Vancouver School of Theology.

*God*. Dr. Dharmasiri<sup>52</sup> delineated the conflicting truth-claims about the concept of *God* between Christianity and Buddhism. Whereas Christianity's basic presupposition is the existence of a Creator God as the eternal, personal, spiritual Being who created—separate from, but active in—the cosmos, the Buddha “did not accept the existence of God.”<sup>53</sup> Discussions about God have been a significant part of the dialogue between Buddhists and Christians in the past decades.<sup>54</sup> The Buddhist-Christian dialogue moved beyond promoting mutual understanding between the two religions. Through the leadership of Masao Abe, Buddhists and Christians entered a new stage in which the mutual transformation of Buddhism and Christianity is seriously explored.<sup>55</sup> Abe examines the Christian God—clearly understood as the Triune God of Christian experience rather than the “One” of the philosophers so roundly and correctly criticized by Pascal—and the Emptiness (Sunyata) of Mahayana Buddhism's understanding of Reality. In one of his essays<sup>56</sup> he suggested that, in Christianity, the notion of the *kenotic* God is essential as the root-source of the *kenotic* Christ, if God is truly God of love. Through his exegesis of Philippians 2:5-8, he suggested a reformulation of the doctrine of Christ's kenosis as follows:

The Son of God is not the Son of God (for he is essentially and fundamentally self-emptying): precisely because he is not the Son of God he is truly the Son of God (for he originally and always works as Christ, the Messiah, in his salvational function of self-emptying).<sup>57</sup>

This leads to the concept of a self-emptying God since the *kenotic* God is the ground of the *kenotic* Christ:

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<sup>52</sup> Gunapala Dharmasiri, *A Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God* (Colombo 2, Sri Lanka: Lake House Investments, Ltd., 1974).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xi-xii. Throughout his book, Dr. Dharmasiri presented a detailed and systematic critique of the concept of *God* in Christian theology from the point of view of early Buddhism.

<sup>54</sup> See Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel, eds., *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1993), pp.61-65.

<sup>55</sup> See John B. Cobb and Christopher Ives, eds., *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994).

<sup>56</sup> Masao Abe, “Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata,” *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, John B. Cobb and Christopher Ives, eds., (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), pp. 3-65.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

God is not God (for God is love and completely self-emptying); precisely because God is not a self-affirmative God, God is truly a God of love (for through complete self-abnegation God is totally identical with everything including sinful humans).<sup>58</sup>

Abe further explains that,

The notion of kenotic God opens up for Christianity a common ground with Buddhism by overcoming Christianity's monotheistic character, the absolute oneness of God, and by sharing with Buddhism the realization of absolute nothingness as the essential basis for the ultimate. This can be accomplished through the notion of the kenotic God—not through losing Christianity's self-identity, but rather through deepening its spirituality.<sup>59</sup>

Masao Abe also suggested that Sunyata—the ultimate reality for Buddhism—must be grasped dynamically, not statically, since Sunyata indicates not only wisdom but also compassion:

Sunyata is fundamentally non-Sunyata—that is... ~~Sunyata~~. That is the true and ultimate Sunyata. This means that true Sunyata empties not only everything else, but also empties itself. Through its self-emptying it makes everything exist as it is and work as it does. In other words, through its self-emptying the realization of Sunyata reestablishes a dualistic view and value judgment clearly, without being limited by them. Sunyata should not be understood in its noun form but in its verbal form, for it is a dynamic creative function of emptying everything and making alive everything.<sup>60</sup>

He then concludes that “when we clearly realize the notion of the *kenotic* God in Christianity and the notion of the dynamic Sunyata in Buddhism—without eliminating the distinctiveness of either religion but rather by deepening their respective uniqueness—we find a significant common basis at a more profound level.”<sup>61</sup>

*Transformation.* In 1985, Schubert M. Ogden and Masao Abe had a conversation on the subject of *transformation*.<sup>62</sup> Ogden defined transformation as “the transition from inauthentic to authentic existence,”<sup>63</sup> while Abe pointed out that “transformation in Buddhism centers around

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>62</sup> Schubert M. Ogden, “‘For Freedom Christ Has Set Us Free’: The Christian Understanding of Ultimate Transformation”; Masao Abe, “Transformation in Buddhism”. These were papers delivered at the Buddhist-Christian Theological Encounter at Vancouver School of Theology, March 22-25, 1985.

<sup>63</sup> Ogden, p. 3.

the realization of death”—that is, the realization of the beginningless and endless non-dualistic process of living-dying.<sup>64</sup> The Christian understanding of ultimate transformation, according to Ogden, starts with our understanding of *ultimate reality* through Jesus Christ:

The proper starting point for such a statement is the constitutive claim of the Christian witness that Jesus is the Christ, in the sense that through Jesus the meaning of ultimate reality for us is decisively re-presented... In this sense, the Christian witness is and must be “christocentric.” But there is a difference between thus claiming that the only meaning of ultimate reality for us is that which is decisively re-presented through Jesus and claiming that it is only in Jesus that the meaning of ultimate reality for us is constituted.<sup>65</sup>

Ogden proceeded that the ultimate reality that Jesus Christ re-presented is *the reality of God*. It is through God’s reality that our self-understanding can be authentic. He explains:

Its assertion about the meaning of ultimate reality for us is determined by the claim that the only strictly ultimate reality, which not only we but anything that is so much possible is somehow obliged to take account of, is the reality of God, which itself is understood to be the utterly boundless love both of itself and of everything else. Thus, according to this answer, the sole primal source both of ourselves and of any even merely possible world to other persons or things is the same unbounded love that is also the sole final end of all things. This means that our self-understanding can be authentic only insofar as it is appropriate to this love, and so authorized by it, whence the assertion that we are to understand ourselves through faith in God’s love.<sup>66</sup>

He pointed out that our self-understanding must be grounded on the reality of God and that God’s love alone must be the object of our trust and loyalty. Any other self-understanding that is also taken to be strictly ultimate is an inauthentic understanding of our existence. Traditional theology calls this inauthentic self-understanding as *sin*.<sup>67</sup> The rejection of God as Ultimate Reality, according to Ogden, may be described as *unfaith* or *idolatry*—that is, “trusting in and being loyal to something besides God’s love as the only reality that is strictly ultimate.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Abe, “Transformation in Buddhism,” pp. 1 & 4.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

He concluded that, in the Christian understanding, “ultimate transformation as either the process or an instance of change from an inauthentic to an authentic self-understanding is the change from sin to faith, from unfaith to idolatry to trust in God’s love and loyalty to it alone as strictly ultimate.” This understanding of ultimate transformation is also known as *salvation*, *redemption*, or *regeneration*. For Ogden, this ultimate transformation or salvation brings us freedom: “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1). He closed his paper with a call to pursue the logical and moral implications of the freedom we have in Christ:

So in the Christian understanding for which I have argued, the existence for freedom for which we are freed by God’s love involves our action not only for the freedom of faith of all our fellow human beings but also for their freedom from unjust social and cultural structures that oppress them and keep them in bondage. In this way, our ultimate transformation involves penultimate transformations in the social and cultural orders for which we are responsible as well as in our individual beliefs and actions. Even so, having also argued that our ultimate transformation is one thing, all other changes, something else, I must insist on this final point: as surely as ultimate transformation may indeed involve radical social and cultural change, even the most radical such change can never be more than penultimate in relation to the freedom of faith for which Christ has set us free.<sup>69</sup>

Implicit in Ogden’s view of transformation is its linear view of history in which the process of transformation moves from the past, to the present, then to the future. Transformation starts from creation to the *eschaton*.

In contrast to Ogden, Masao Abe explains that transformation centers around the realization of death. “Apart from the realization of death the Buddhist notion of transformation cannot be legitimately grasped.”<sup>70</sup>

Abe starts by clarifying the nature of life and death:

In our usual way of thinking, life and death are distinguished from one another and their relationship is taken as a *process* that moves from life to death... When we look upon the relation of life and death as a *process* moving from the former to the latter, our *existential* posture is *outside* of both. It is just like standing on an embankment and looking down the river of life flowing from its source to its lower reaches. Are we, however, not actually swimming right in the middle of this river? By taking our position outside of both life and death we objectify our life as something *present* and our death as something which will happen in the *future*.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>70</sup> Abe, “Transformation in Buddhism,” p. 1.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

Life and death are not two separate things but dynamically one. According to him, we are not moving from life to death. Instead, at "each and every moment, we are fully living and fully dying."<sup>72</sup> Hence, we should not speak of *life and death*, but instead, we must speak of *living-dying* as antithetical and yet inseparable aspects of one and the same reality.<sup>73</sup> If *living-dying* is viewed existentially from the inside, then a newborn baby can be seen as beginning to die; thus, the baby is *living-dying*. The same is true with an old person in his or her deathbed; such person is *living-dying*. In Buddhism, this beginningless and endless living-dying is called *samsara*. This is regarded as *death* in the true sense of the word. *Samsara* is what is problematic in Buddhism, according to Abe. Transformation in Buddhism "precisely indicates transformation from an existence bound by *samsara* to an existence liberated from *samsara*—that is, existence in *nirvana*."<sup>74</sup>

Living-dying must be realized as *karma*<sup>75</sup>—that is, act, deed, or retribution:

In Buddhism, our life and death struggle is grasped as *karma* because it is ultimately rooted in our blind craving to exist and our fundamental ignorance of the principle of dependent origination and non-substantiality of everything in the universe.<sup>76</sup>

Abe identified a three-pronged *karma*-realization to achieve transformation—that is, transformation from an existence involved in *samsara* to an existence living in *nirvana*: (1) the non-duality of life and death; (2) the beginninglessness and endlessness of our living-dying; (3) the total living-dying at this moment of the absolute present—that is, here, in this point, we can overcome *samsara* and realize *nirvana* right in the midst of *samsara*.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. Also, for a comparative analysis of Buddhist *nirvana* and Christian *salvation*, see Fumio Masutani, *A Comparative Study of Buddhism and Christianity* (Tokyo: Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, 1967), pp. 50-68.

<sup>75</sup> For a thorough discussion of *karma*, see Antony Fernando, *Buddhism and Christianity: Their Inner Affinity* (Sri Lanka: Empire Press, 1981), pp. 30-33.

<sup>76</sup> Abe, "Transformation in Buddhism," p. 10.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

Furthermore, Abe pointed out that "Buddhist transformation takes place not in nirvana apart from samsara, but at the intersection of samsara and nirvana."<sup>78</sup> This is important because even though one must overcome attachment to samsara and arrive at nirvana, one must not stay in nirvana. He explains:

But if one stays in nirvana, apart from samsara one is still selfish because abiding in nirvana one may enjoy one's own salvation while forgetting suffering of one's fellow beings who are still involved in samsara. To be completely unselfish one should not stay in nirvana but return to the realm of samsara to save suffering fellow beings. This is the reason Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes "Do not abide in samsara for the sake of wisdom; do not abide in nirvana for the sake of compassion." Not abiding either in samsara or nirvana and freely moving from samsara to nirvana, from nirvana to samsara without attaching to either, this dynamic movement is true nirvana in Mahayana Buddhism.<sup>79</sup>

For Abe, when transformation takes place at the intersection of samsara and nirvana, then one's transformation has reached "the dynamism of true nirvana."<sup>80</sup> This dynamism of true nirvana has both personal and social dimensions. Self-awakening in nirvana, however important it may be, is not sufficient. "Only when awakening others from samsara is achieved is self-awakening also achieved."<sup>81</sup> This is expressed in the Four Great Vows of Mahayana Buddhism:

However innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to save them;  
However inexhaustible the passions are, I vow to extinguish them;  
However immeasurable the Dharmas are, I vow to master them;  
However incomparable the Buddha-truth is, I vow to attain it.

These vows show that benefiting others comes before benefiting the self. Abe commented that this "signifies the spirit of Bodhisattva, the model of the Mahayana Buddhist who strives to save others before saving oneself."<sup>82</sup> This, according to him, is the basis for the social transformation in Buddhism. He further explains:

The vow of Bodhisattva to save all beings and to attain Buddhahood is a single process involving both self and others, and provides the basis for the transformation of society in Buddhism... Traditional Buddhism lacks a concrete program of social

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

transformation. This is partly because Buddhism is more concerned with the ground or religious basis for social transformation rather than a practical program, and partly because in Buddhism the ground or religious basis for social transformation is not limited to human beings but includes all beings, human and natural. It is an urgent task for Buddhism to actualize the Bodhisattva idea in a concrete plan for social transformation in the contemporary human predicament.<sup>83</sup>

Abe concludes by explaining the uniqueness of the Buddhist concept of time. He said that time is understood entirely without beginning and without end. Time is neither linear nor circular and therefore is completely reversible; and yet it moves from moment to moment, each moment embracing the whole process of time. Because of this notion of time he said that, "Buddhism is weak in its view of history."<sup>84</sup> However, he is optimistic that Buddhism can strengthen its own view of history:

Accordingly, one who has attained nirvana should not abide in nirvana but must return to the realm of samsara to help these people equally awoken to their original nature by themselves. This is the compassionate aspect of nirvana which can be actualized only by overcoming the attachment to one's own nirvana. This process of actualizing the compassionate aspect of nirvana is endless because people who do not awaken to their original nature are countless and appear to be endless. Here the progress of history toward the future is necessary and comes to have a positive significance... Unidirectional history toward the future becomes essential. Here, we do have a Buddhist view of history.<sup>85</sup>

Abe warns not to misinterpret this view of history. This is neither an eschatological nor a teleological view of history. In the light of wisdom everything and everyone without exception is realized in its original nature. In the light of compassion the process of awakening others in history is endless. Buddhist transformation in history takes place at the intersection of the wisdom aspect and the compassionate aspect of nirvana, which is essentially dynamic.<sup>86</sup>

My friend, Emiko, and I were excited to learn about the positive developments in the dialogue between Buddhists and Christians. As we both try to understand each other's view of *God* and *Transformation* and affirm our own respective traditions, we continue to grow like real

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

sister and brother in our relationship. We still debate a lot, conscious that we don't have to abnegate our religious identities. We have mutually realized that we will never resolve our doctrinal differences in our lifetime, and have covenanted that we will grow in our relationship as we struggle with the issue of truth. I am reminded that truth is more relational than propositional, and that I must learn to interact with Emiko, not with a view of my truth as superior to her truth, but a kind of truth that is self-emptying—that of Christ's truth.

Emiko's Buddhist view of Reality as Dynamic Sunyata reminds me to affirm my theological or doctrinal propositions about God but I must not be attached to those propositions. Theological propositions can be religious idols too. Dynamic Sunyata, Emiko insists, must be respected as *Sunyata*, not a perception of God *via negativa* or the Kenotic God. For her, sunyata is *sunyata*; kenosis is kenosis. She also told me that the Christian view of transformation challenges her to rethink her view of history because it helps her to grow in her view of social change and justice that are so needed in the world today. Furthermore, her view of transformation helps me to be conscious of the "suchness" of daily life because I am a living-dead person. This insight gave me a fresh understanding of what it means to be dead in Christ and at the same time what it means to be alive in Christ.

There is something that is fresh and new in our relationship. I now see Emiko *San* from the perspective of the Kenotic Christ. In the presence of Emiko, I can affirm the Kenotic Christ as the Incarnate and Risen One with all conviction without pushing her away from the center of my Reality. This is possible precisely because she is the embodiment and mediatory presence of Christ—the Incarnate One—who is the center of my Reality. Hence, through the Kenotic Christ, Emiko is not seen from an exclusivist's point of view. She is not an enemy, a person that needs to be converted, or a stranger.

At the same time, she is not seen through the inclusivist's view either. She is not an anonymous Christian; not a person who has wisdom but incomplete without Christ. Emiko is affirmed, respected, and embraced as the Other who is in the center of this reality where I also am. Because the Risen One has become the center of my view of reality, the "I" of Dann

Pantoja, is de-centered, de-privileged, but not erased. The Risen One, who is in the center, is the Self-Emptying Christ whose presence is expressed through his absence. Hence, there is an empty space for Emiko as Arai Emiko *San*, at the very center of my Christian faith.

Kenotic or dialogical christology seems to open more opportunity to improve the relationship between Emiko and me.

## 5. IMPLICATION TO THEOLOGY, ETHICS, AND MINISTRY

In the process of evaluating my christological view, I realized that it necessarily affects my whole theological, ethical, and ministry constructs. Because there is no space in this paper to discuss the impact of this christology to my whole theological-ethical understanding, I will just focus on certain theological terms (methodological issues) that are very important to me: *truth*, *religion*, *doctrine*, and *theology*. I will also discuss very briefly the implications of this initial reconstruction of christology to my understanding of global ministry.

*Truth*. I understand truth (*alētheia*) generally as "reality, dependability, not presenting falsehood."<sup>87</sup> Because of this initial christological reconstruction, truth is now understood as *relational*—not the abstract truth that can be grasped absolutely and individually. Truth is a humble, critical cognition of reality, which is processed-in-dialogue within a community. Hence, truth is dialogical. David Jensen's *dialogical view of truth*<sup>88</sup>, especially as it applies to Christology, starts with a Christ-like emptying of one's view of truth as superior to the Other's view of truth. Instead of viewing truth solely from a competitive, propositional-cognitive approach, Jensen suggests that we view it also from a communal, aesthetic-ethical approach. It means looking at the Other as beautiful and good and thus listening to her or his view of reality.

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<sup>87</sup> Walter Bauer, *An Abridged Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* [computer file]: from Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, William Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (trans.); revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker from Walter Bauer's Fifth Edition, 1958. [Electronic Edition] Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, ©1958. (Logos Library System).

<sup>88</sup> Jensen, pp. 158-167.

Thus, truth is an admission that we are not alone, and that we need to compare notes with the Other on how reality is mutually perceived.<sup>89</sup>

Looking at the Other as beautiful and good is not to deny the reality of human being's addictive ability to deceive one's self—that is, one's ability to sin; precisely because of this human sinfulness that we must process our perception of reality in dialogue with our community. The communal, aesthetic-ethical approach to truth is the context of Christ's call to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to love even our enemies.

*Religion.* Many general theories of religions have been articulated in the field of Philosophy of Religion.<sup>90</sup> One of my favorites is the one by Aloysius Pieris, a Sri Lankan Jesuit. He pointed out that we must look at religion in three levels: *core-experience*, *collective memory*, and *interpretation*.<sup>91</sup> He explains:

The “core” of any religion is the *liberative* experience that gave birth to that religion and continues to be available to successive generations of humankind... The medium by which the core-experiences is made available to successive generations is precisely the “collective memory” of that experience... Integral to the functioning of the communication system of the collective memory is “interpretation.” In order to be remembered, an experience—in its symbols, beliefs, and rituals—has to be framed in terms of historical and cultural categories. Thus, the core-experience in all religions, insofar as it is remembered, tends also to be interpreted in such diverse ways as to form various philosophical, theological, and exegetical schools.<sup>92</sup>

Pieris provides an outsider's point of view to a phenomenon called religion. His tool for understanding is very helpful for a person who seeks to understand a particular religion as an “objective observer”.

I understand religion more from a *participant's point of view*. Although I have a high respect for the modern epistemological view of *objective knowledge*, I am beginning to question the Enlightenment assumption that knowledge is really objective and hence dispassionate. Can the observer really stand outside the historical process? Can the observer really look into a

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., pp. 167-174.

<sup>90</sup> See for example L. Pojman, *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1998).

<sup>91</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “The Buddha and the Christ: Mediators of Liberation,” *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Towards a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds. (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), pp. 162-177.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., pp. 162-163.

phenomenon outside the phenomenon? Can we really gain universal, culturally neutral understanding of religion as unconditioned students of theology? I am a participant in my historical and cultural context, and all my intellectual endeavors are unavoidably conditioned by that participation. My understanding of *religion* begins with my existential encounter with the person of Jesus of Nazareth. My view of Reality has been transformed because my experience of *the Christ* became my understanding of God's self-disclosure in the particularity of my historical context. I experienced transformation in the context of a community of faith called *the church*. The God that I encountered in the person of Jesus Christ is the trinitarian God. This particular experience became the point of reference for my growing understanding that God, whom I experienced in the particular person of Jesus Christ, is also the universal God.

Christoph Schwöbel's comment on this point is significant in my journey:

The offensive universality of the truth claims of Christian faith is grounded in the particular self-disclosure of this particular God, Father, Son, and Spirit in the spatio-temporal particularity of the Christ event in which God is disclosed as the universal source of creation, reconciliation, and fulfillment for creation. This gives the understanding of the universality of God a particular content. Christian theology has expressed this particular understanding of the universality of God by interpreting love as the complete summary of the Christian understanding of God, which expresses the unity of God's will, action, and being. The attributes in which the universality of God is expressed in Christian theology are therefore to be interpreted from the perspective of this understanding of God as creative, reconciling, and saving love.<sup>93</sup>

Schwöbel further wrote that "the basis for a theological understanding of the religions is therefore the universality of God's action and presence in the world."<sup>94</sup> His understanding of religion is noteworthy: "The religions therefore have to be seen as human responses to God's all-encompassing presence and activity in which God is active as in all forms of created being as the ground of being and meaning and as the source and end of its fulfillment."<sup>95</sup>

In the current stage of my journey, I understand and articulate *religion* best as expressed by John Milbank: "Religion is the basic organizing category for an entire culture: the images, word-

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<sup>93</sup> Schwöbel, p. 38.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

forms, and practices which specify 'what there is' for a particular society."<sup>96</sup> My religion is also my worldview—my *Weltanschauung*. This understanding of religion, however, must pass through a process of *kenosis*—self-emptying.<sup>97</sup> Because there is a strong tendency for individuals like me and for communities like the Christian religion to absolutize, and thus idolize, their particular worldview or religion, I need to be conscious of the need to pass through a religious self-emptying process. (Personally, this is done through the practice of Zen meditation.)

*Doctrine.* During the last five years of my theological journey, Paul Griffiths helped me think clearly on the nature of religious doctrine. He delineated what he meant by the term *doctrine*:

The term *doctrine* in English, as also *doctrina* in Latin, means both "the act of teaching" and "the content of what is taught," and hence overlaps significantly with the terms *catechesis* and *catechism*. *Doctrina* was used in the Vulgate to translate the Greek words *didaskalia* and *didache*, entirely typical is the use of *didaskalia* and cognate terms in 1 Timothy 4.<sup>98</sup>

Griffiths offered five important dimensions of religious doctrine using some Buddhist and Christian perspectives: First, "religious doctrines function as rules governing the life of the communities that profess them."<sup>99</sup> Griffiths pointed out that in both Buddhism and Christianity, there are doctrine-expressing sentences that regulate what is possible for the community to say about *salvation*. In very clear terms, both religions reject the application of the category "salvation" to those outside their respective communities; in so doing they both tell their respective communities that the category "salvation" can be applied only to those inside.<sup>100</sup> Second, he suggested that religious doctrines could be viewed as community boundaries. Many of the religious doctrines "exclude what is unacceptable to the community, reject heresy, and so

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<sup>96</sup> John Milbank, "The End of Dialogue," *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Gavin D'Costa, ed. (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), p. 177.

<sup>97</sup> Jensen, pp. 152-157.

<sup>98</sup> Paul J. Griffiths, "The Uniqueness of Christian Doctrines Defended," *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Gavin D'Costa, ed. (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), pp. 165-166.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

define, conceptually and practically, the bounds of the community."<sup>101</sup> Griffiths observed that for most religious communities, including Christianity and Buddhism, "doctrine-expressing sentences have taken form precisely as the result of the desire of those communities to exclude what they came to feel to be untrue, inadequate, or misleading."<sup>102</sup> Third, he said that, "religious doctrines are both shaped by and formative of the spiritual experience of the communities that process them."<sup>103</sup> Griffiths' examples from each religion showed that there is a complex symbiosis between their doctrines and their spirituality. Fourth, he regards religious doctrines "as instruments for the making of members of religious communities."<sup>104</sup> Griffiths observed that both Buddhism and Christianity desire to convert outsiders into their respective communities. This missionary desire is an essential part of their self-definition. When conversion occurs, it is assumed that the former outsider has come to realize that "certain heretofore unknown or rejected items of doctrine are in fact both true and desirable. When evangelism has had its effect, catechesis can begin. And doctrine is integral to both processes."<sup>105</sup> Fifth, he believes that religious doctrines express salvific truths: "Almost all religious communities take most of their doctrines—at least those that make prima facie claims about the nature of human persons and the world in which they live, as well as those that make recommendations about what kinds of action are desirable—to have cognitive content and to be expressive of salvifically significant truths."<sup>106</sup>

Griffiths argued that the five dimensions of religious doctrines are crucial in interreligious understanding. He also emphasized that, in our interreligious encounters, these criteria would

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

help us do justice to the integrity of the religions. He cited an example from the Buddhist doctrinal system:

For Buddhists, to let go of the idea that the *buddhadharma* is the supreme expression of truth, that the Buddha is superior to men and gods, and that all other religious communities (when they are not simply abominations) are partial reflections of and preparations for the real truth (which is Buddhism), means much more than simply tinkering with the system. It means an abandonment of almost everything that has been of key importance for Buddhist spirituality, intellectual life, ritual and ethical practice, and the rest.<sup>107</sup>

Griffiths insists that we take the uniqueness of doctrines seriously if we want to show respect to the world's religion. To minimize the importance of doctrines and replace them with a "well-intentioned pragmatism" is as imperialistic as the Christendom.

This view of doctrine is stretched further, and thus enriched, by kenotic view. For Jensen, doctrines are the *teachings* of the church that briefly expresses the "cluster of beliefs" that form the church's distinctive identity.<sup>108</sup> Instead of regarding doctrines as exhaustive and essential constitution of the Christian faith, Jensen sees it as teachings that provide continuity overtime as the church responds to the grace of new life in Christ; however, doctrine "demands further interpretation."<sup>109</sup> Jensen agrees with Griffiths that even in the midst of the urgent issues, like the planet's collective survival, "doctrine is not peripheral—for Christians—in an age of religious pluralism."<sup>110</sup> The big difference between Griffiths' and Jensen's views of *doctrine* is that Griffiths' approach is too *propositional*,<sup>111</sup> while Jensen's approach is more of a *kenotic* dialogue—that is, learning from the Other when "I empty myself of my own customary practice and am drawn by another's text and ritual."<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, Jensen agrees with George

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>108</sup> Jensen, pp. 174-186.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

Lindbeck that doctrines have regulative function<sup>113</sup> within the Christian community; but at the same time, he critiques Lindbeck's tendency to confine Christian doctrines within the Christian community. For Jensen, Lindbeck's view yields little fruit "in terms of the Christian community's engagement with a wider, religiously pluralistic world."<sup>114</sup>

*Theology.* My earliest understanding of theology was the definition from a book by A. H. Strong, which I inherited from my father: "Theology is the ascertainment of the facts respecting God and the relationship between God and the universe, and the exhibition of these facts in their rational unity, as connected parts of a formulated and organic system of truth."<sup>115</sup> Soon I learned that this understanding of theology was responsible for the "Teutonic" or "Latin captivity"<sup>116</sup> of theology in the younger churches in the Philippines. This early understanding of theology was increasingly becoming irrelevant in the context of the unjust realities in the Philippines under President Marcos' military rule. I then embraced Liberation Theology, an understanding of God's relational involvement in human affairs which endeavors to end all forms of oppression—social, political, and economic—emphasizing God's concern for the oppressed and seeks to work for their liberation.<sup>117</sup>

When I started working with an organization involved in global ministries, my understanding of theology became a little bit wider. I redefined my understanding of theology as a second-order, contextual discipline about God, human beings, and creation in their relationship,<sup>118</sup> using

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<sup>113</sup> George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-Liberal Age* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1984), p. 18; cited in Jensen, pp. 180-182.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>115</sup> A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1907), p. 2.

<sup>116</sup> See Choan-Seng Song, "The New China and Salvation History: A Methodological Enquiry," *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 15, 2 (1974), pp. 55-56; and R.H.S. Boyd, *India and the Latin Captivity of the Churches* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974), for a discussion of this problem.

<sup>117</sup> See Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973); and Jose Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

<sup>118</sup> See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Toward a Theology of Nature: Essays on Science and Faith* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993); and, Ulrich Duchrow and Gerhard Liedke, *Shalom: Biblical Perspectives on Creation, Justice, and Peace* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987).

a mix of *cognitive-propositional*, *experiential-expressive*, and *linguistic-cultural* approaches to truth<sup>119</sup> and referring to *scripture* as the highest authoritative source of my faith and practice.

During the course of my participation in Dr. Sallie McFague's *Constructive Theology* class at the Vancouver School of Theology, I became aware that I actually refer to a wider set of sources for doing theology, and that my authoritarian approach to theology needs rethinking. Her definition and understanding of theology is relevant here:

Theology is reflection on experiences of God's liberating love from various contexts and within the Christian community. Our experiences of God's love takes place within complex and overlapping interpretive contexts (worldviews; familial, cultural and ecclesiastical circles; economic and political frameworks; gender, racial, sexual differences; physical and mental capabilities, and so on). There is no such thing as raw experiences; there is no innocent eye; nothing is seen nakedly... In our definition, then, *reflection* or interpretation is the primary focus of the theologian's critical attention. While theology is "about *God*," it is the "about," the various contexts of interpretation that constitute the minefield of theology.<sup>120</sup> (*Italics hers*)

For McFague, theology has its Context (reflection or interpretation), Content (experiences of God's love), and Criteria (Scripture and tradition).<sup>121</sup>

Then according to Jensen, theology is "the *interpretation* of the church's decisive and distinctive teachings, in constantly shifting contexts" and such interpretation is done in the changing contexts of each generation and each cultural-historical milieu.<sup>122</sup> Jensen's definition of theology underlines the *dynamic* aspect of doctrinal interpretation.

For now, my own definition and understanding of theology goes like this: Theology is an on-going, second-order, contextual reflection about God, human beings, and creation in their whole relationship, using a mix of cognitive-propositional, experiential-expressive, and linguistic-cultural approaches to truth, referring to *scripture*, *tradition*, *experience*, and *reason* as the sources of my faith and practice.

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<sup>119</sup> See Lindbeck, chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>120</sup> Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 40.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40-67.

<sup>122</sup> Jensen, pp. 175-176.

*Ethics.* A kenotic christology also necessitates an adjustment in my ethical perspective. My earliest understanding of ethics was too generic and yet too narrow: "the study of right and wrong to determine what ought to do or what is good for the human."<sup>123</sup> Hans Küng reinforced this anthropocentric view of ethics when he emphasized that, in our pluralistic and global context, we need to reflect further on "the basic moral attitudes of human beings," and that "we need an ethical system, a philosophical or theological theory of values and norms, to direct our decisions and actions."<sup>124</sup> For Küng, the promotion of true humanity (*humanitas*) is a crucial criterion for ethical truth.<sup>125</sup>

In kenotic christology, the Other is understood not only as the anthropocentric Other but also as biocentric Other. Because God emptied, but not depleted, the Godself to the whole creation, my proper response to the self-emptying God is a kenotic relationship with all of God's creation, and this calls for "an emptying of our pride in relation to our work, our achievements, and the fellows humans we encounter in our lives."<sup>126</sup> This expanded view of ethics is coherent with Dr. McFague's ethical view as well. Through her Constructive Theology class, my understanding of the meaning of ethics went beyond *what is good for the humans* but also extended to embrace *what is good for the whole creation*. In the context of our current ecological crises, we cannot compartmentalize what is good for humans and what is good for planet earth. According to Dr. McFague, the good life for Planet Earth is interdependent with the good life for human beings.<sup>127</sup> She further writes:

Just as the good life for human beings rests on distributive justice—all must have the basics—so also the planet must have the basics. The earth itself must have

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<sup>123</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1986), p. 51.

<sup>124</sup> Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of A New World Ethic* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), p. 25.

<sup>125</sup> Hans Küng, "Towards a World Ethic of World Religions," *The Ethics of World Religions and Human Rights*, eds. Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann (London: SCM Press, 1990), pp. 102-119.

<sup>126</sup> Nancey Murphy and George F.R. Ellis, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology, and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 196; quoted in Jensen, p. 136.

<sup>127</sup> See Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), pp. 117-123.

the conditions necessary to support us, and increasingly, this means we must live so that these conditions are possible. In other words, the good life for all human beings and for the planet is a whole—it is one good thing. It is intertwined (like the recycle symbol): the well-being of humans is dependent on the health of the earth's ecosystems, but these ecosystems depend on us preserving them.<sup>128</sup>

A new inclusive and holistic ethical vision "recognizes that environmental protection, human rights, equitable human development, and peace are interdependent and indivisible."<sup>129</sup>

Although I have adapted a holistic view of ethical vision, I recognize the on-going debate between the "anthropocentric" view and the "biocentric" views of ethics.<sup>130</sup>

*Ministry.* Ministry is also affected by the kenotic view of christology. My understanding of ministry was mostly influenced by Jose Comblin's<sup>131</sup> view of the mission and ministry of Jesus. He based his ideas on various exegetical studies that stressed on the themes of "coming," "going," and "sending." From the themes of Christ's mission, he presented the essential aspects of the Gospel mission viewed intrinsically as a movement, obedience, salvation, service, strength in weakness, and witness. He does not believe that the Gospel mission should continue to envision the expansion or the extension of Christianity as it is today. Rather, he believes that the goal of the Gospel mission is "the establishment of new churches and the revitalization of older churches by them."<sup>132</sup> Because of this understanding of *mission*, I have dedicated my life in the past ten years to innovative church planting and contextual community development ministries; five years of which were spent in leading in the opening of new mission fields in Central Asia and India.

In dialogical christology, the motivations for mission and ministry are examined through kenotic lenses. It is good to pay attention to Jensen's words:

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., pp. 117-118.

<sup>129</sup> *The Earth Charter: Values and Principles for a Sustainable Future* (San Jose, Costa Rica: Earth Council); also visit their website: [www.earthcharter.org](http://www.earthcharter.org).

<sup>130</sup> For example, in dealing with environmental issues Thomas Sieger Derr maintains the "anthropocentric" ethical view while James A. Nash argues for the "biocentric" ethical view. See Thomas Sieger Derr, James A. Nash, and Richard John Neuhaus, *Environmental Ethics and Christian Humanism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

<sup>131</sup> See Jose Comblin, *The Meaning of Mission*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1977.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

If the Christian, motivated by conviction, tells others the "good news" in an atmosphere in which those others' convictions and personhood are honored, then she or he is treating them as ends, as others valuable and beautiful in themselves. This example of respectful sharing may take multiple forms: conversation, assisting those in need, and working with others in ways that benefit the common good (building agricultural infrastructure, safe housing, and other facilities that better enable the flourishing of human life). Whatever form this conviction takes, however, what is paramount is that the Other remain at the center of the Christian's lens as unique, indispensable human being. When the Other becomes simply as object to be converted, the Christian has violated the Other's beauty and truth.

This careful, self-emptying, self-examination of motivation for mission and global ministry is a good starting point to revisit the many policies and programs operative in many Christian global ministry agencies or Christian-operated non-government agencies.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The kenotic christology presented here goes beyond the exclusivist-inclusivist polemics wherein, on one hand, the religious Other is treated as an enemy, a person to be converted, or a stranger; and on the other hand, an anonymous Christian, or as one who may have wisdom but still incomplete without the full knowledge of Christ.

Based on David Jensen's *dialogical christology*, it is possible to both affirm the Christian claim that Jesus Christ is the Incarnate and the Risen One, and at the same time, be dialogically open to, and genuinely embracing of, the Other in the context of religious pluralism in a global era. The Kenotic Christ is the Incarnate and Risen One who relinquished his own self-privileges to identify, as closely as possible, with the radically different, or rejected, or oppressed Other. But the relinquishment of his self-privileges does not necessarily mean self-abnegation. The Incarnate One and Risen One is present in his absence. The challenge of Jensen's *dialogical christology* is that, the Kenotic Christ calls us to an active experience of self-emptying discipleship in a face-to-face encounter with the Other.

As demonstrated here, a reconstructed christology may be applied in an experiential dialogue with a specific religious Other—in my case, a Buddhist friend who is teaching me Zen meditation. Although doctrines, such as *God* and *Transformation*, cannot be resolved between

us as propositional statements of particular truth-claims, a kenotic or self-emptying view of truth can open doors for a more embracing relationship with the religious Other while affirming valued Christian claims such *Christ as the Incarnate and Risen One* on my side, and *Dynamic Sunyata and Nirvana* on my Buddhist friend's side. A kenotic christology is not a hindrance to a genuine relationship with the religious Other; a kenotic christology opens the very center of the Christian faith to embrace the Other *qua* Other.

In the process of evaluating my christological view, I discovered that it is also necessary to adjust my whole theological, ethical, and ministry constructs, particularly my understanding of *truth, religion, doctrine, and theology* so that they are coherent with kenotic christology. This kenotic christology also have significant implications toward my understanding of ethics and ministry in a pluralistic world; it demands a careful, self-emptying, self-examination of one's ethical motive for mission and global ministry in the context of a face-to-face encounter with the religious Other.

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END OF PAPER

Our friends at The Remnant Radio released an interview with Todd White about his view on the kenotic Christ. While I am thankful that they are trying to develop a relationship with Todd, I think they failed to challenge him using his own words. This video will show you that Todd's critics weren't taking him out of context (he has used careless, confusing, and contradictory language in regards to Jesus person & work). Kenosis is not only a Christological issue in Orthodox theology, it has moreover to do with Pneumatology, namely to do with the Holy Spirit. Kenosis, relative to the human nature, denotes the continual epiklesis and self-denial of one's own human will and desire. Kenosis - Christ "Emptied Himself" - essays from Dan Musick. Retrieved from "<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Kenosis&oldid=994900995>". Categories The name "kenotic" comes from the Greek word *keno*, used by Paul in Philippians 2:7 to describe the action by which Christ "emptied" himself, taking the form of a servant, when he came incarnate into the world. In order to understand the tremendous importance of this theory and its widespread influence even today, it will be necessary to survey briefly the historical background and then concentrate upon a biblical exposition of those passages which have been crucial in the discussion of kenosis. View Kenotic Christology Research Papers on Academia.edu for free. Recent papers in Kenotic Christology. Papers. People. Place et fonction de l'hymne Philippiens: approches historique, théologique et anthropologique. Save to Library. Download. by Elian Cuvillier. Question: "What is kenoticism / kenotic theology?". Answer: Kenoticism, also known as kenotic theology or kenotic Christology, is an unbiblical view of Christ's nature. Kenoticism teaches that the divinity of the Son of God was somehow lost or lessened when the Lord took on human flesh and entered our world. The word kenoticism comes from the Greek word *keno*<sup>3</sup>, a form of which is translated "emptied" in some translations of Philippians 2:7. Writing about Christ, Paul says, "Who