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INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN A POSTMODERN CULTURE – THE CHALLENGES AND DEVELOPMENT OF INCLUSIVE RELIGIOUS PLURALISM VIS-À-VIS LEVINAS' PHILOSOPHY OF BEING

Introduction

The twist in history from Origen's universal salvation in Christ¹ to the popular belief, "*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*" (outside the church, there is no salvation) that held sway as a standard Catholic soteriological argument² for centuries, is perplexing. Origen arrived at the doctrine of universal salvation from his theology of the common origin of all people in God and the possibility of all people to attain salvation³ because God became human, thereby making it possible for all people to aspire toward God for eternal redemption. Origen is credited as the original proponent of the doctrine of *apokatastasis*, which teaches "the final restoration of all intelligent creatures to friendship with God."⁴ Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa are also known to have subscribed to similar views as Origen on this doctrine. All these patristic theologians applied 1 Cor 15:24-28⁵ scriptural text in support of their doctrine of universal salvation or *apokatastasis*. While Origen believed and taught that redemption is thanks to the redemptive work of Jesus, the Logos of God, he equally held and taught that this salvation in Christ is not restricted to certain people or people in a certain age. Therefore, he held firmly that the redemptive mission of Christ was active even in Moses and to people outside the reach of Christianity.⁶

The nineteenth century presents Christianity, especially the Catholic religion, as deeply challenged by theological, social, political, economic, and philosophical ideologies and upheavals. Those challenges shook the foundation of the Catholic Church's teaching of "*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*." The church initially responded with a strong exclusive theological position, which not only rejected the idea of religious freedom but also reaffirmed the church's

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age-long exclusivism and denial of the salvific merits of all non-Christian religious faith traditions. However, a relieving development has emerged from most mainline Christian churches today, including the Catholic Church, as they have become less exclusive in their interpretation of salvation. But many of them are still having issues with accepting religious pluralism as a *de jure* of God's relationship with all peoples.⁷

This article will extrapolate Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of being to construct an acceptable Christian theology of inclusive religious pluralism, providing an authentic platform for successful interreligious encounter between Christians and people of other faith traditions. Levinas (1998) basically identifies two broad categories of beings: the "living being" and the "thinking being." According to him, the "living being" conducts his or her affairs completely focused on his or herself with no recognition of the exterior, that is, others sharing the same space and domain with him or her. The "thinking being," on the other hand, carries on with full recognition of the exterior. Levinas (1998a, pp. 25f)⁸ goes on to argue that the "living being" has a tendency of totalizing life in his or herself. For the "thinking being," he writes, "In thinking, a being which situates itself in the totality is not absorbed into it. It exists in relationship with a totality, but remains here..." (Levinas, 1998a, 26). Down the stretch, this article will succinctly analyze the development of the theology of universal salvation, especially from the point of view of the Catholic Church, from the exclusivist position of the nineteenth century to the Second Vatican Council's inclusivist position. This analysis ultimately intends to articulate the growing call by theologians for the acceptance of inclusive religious pluralism as a valid theological assumption, especially in support of ongoing interreligious dialogue between Christians and people of other faith traditions.

It is certainly logical to conclude that the paradigm of theological exclusivism, especially of the Catholic Church from the nineteenth century until the dawn of Second Vatican Council,⁹ fits into the category of a "living being" in Levinas' philosophy of being. This conclusion is further amplified by the tendency of the church articulating herself as a totalizing institution, using terms like, the only ark of God, or subsistence of the one church of Christ in the Catholic Church, and "a single Catholic and apostolic church."¹⁰ The totalizing tendency of Christianity and the Catholic Church in particular, however, faced lots of test and challenges with developments in the twentieth century.

After the end of World War II, Christians began to make considerable adjustments in their approach and understanding of the human society. A number of ecclesial historians attribute these adjustments as necessitated by the events of the time, namely, the Jewish Holocaust, the horror and devastation of World Wars I and II, the emergence of new nations who secured political independence from their previous colonial masters (Weigel & Royal, 1993, 51f and Gonzalez, 1987, 428f), and continued appreciation of the religious and theological relevance of non-Christian religions. Therefore, Christians were compelled to consider a different approach to the question of religious differences, religious freedom, and the social and soteriological importance of non-Christian religions. In the light of the new openness among Christians to review issues on the above subjects, it is only fair to prognosticate that Christians began to assume a new category of being, namely the "thinking being" of Levinas.

With epochal documents like the “Declaration of Religious Liberty” (coming out of World Council of Churches’ (WCC) Assembly in August 1948), the United Nations Bill of Rights in the fall of 1948,¹¹ Pope John XXIII’s 1963 *Pacem in Terris* encyclical that endorsed universal freedom of religion, and Vatican II *Dignitatis Humanae* of 1965 on freedom of religion, the world witnessed a major paradigmatic shift in dialectic and theological assumption by Christians in favor of religious freedom as well as the eternal salvation of all God’s children

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It is certainly accurate to conclude that since the publishing of Paul VI’s Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* in 1964,¹² the Catholic Church has pursued matters of interreligious dialogue with a sense of mission, vocation, and commitment. Subsequently, a number of official publications came out to further address the question of interreligious dialogue. Three such documents are:¹³ “The Attitude of the Catholic Church towards the Followers of Other Religious Traditions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission” (1984), *Redemptoris Missio* of John Paul II (1990), and “Dialogue and Proclamation” (1991). These three documents were issued during the pontificate of John Paul II. They are not simply accidental publications that emerged with time, but strong testimonies of the significance and value John Paul II attached to the issue of interreligious dialogue. He advocated better harmony and cordial engagements among world religions in search of a more peaceable world and he firmly believed in advancing the propagation of the Gospel by engaging other religions of the world in healthy interreligious dialogue.

Postmodern Challenges and the Arguments for Inclusive Religious Pluralism in Christian Theology

The impacts of globalization, postmodernism, and immigration have unquestionably expanded human communities beyond the confines of their original territorial and ideological frameworks. The advocacy and drift toward effective interreligious dialogue going on across the globe between major religions have intensified. It has become somewhat anachronistic to validate mono-culturalism and exclusivism as the acceptable order in diverse societies today. It is also becoming increasingly unacceptable to ignore, deny, or demean the existence of the other in many postmodern societies today. It appears that global communities are shifting from “living beings” to “thinking beings,” hence minimizing exclusive and totalizing tendency toward a more inclusive mentality as well as deeper understanding of the existence of all in “relationship with a totality” (Levinas, 1998a, 27).¹⁴

As socially conscious and responsible beings, we humans have to consistently and consciously poke ourselves with the “unpleasant” presence of, interaction with, and knowledge of the other, as well as allow the other into our own worlds, with the hope that the more familiar we get with each other’s worldviews, idiosyncrasies, mannerisms, belief systems and cultural orientations, the less we feel unpleasant about each other and the better we get toward more harmony and collaboration in tackling common human

problems of hate, poverty, crime, war, racism, corruption, homelessness, ecological disasters, etc. Phan (2004, xx) asserts that effective dialogue is indispensable for attaining the kind of human knowledge of things that really matter for order, peace, and elimination of social evils in our current postmodern world. Such knowledge, according to him, is achieved “in a serious and thoughtful give-and-take of mutual learning and teaching, in a respectful and humble conversation with the tradition and the community of fellow seekers, in a word, in a genuine dialogue with the other, in which one’s own insights are humbly offered, the other’s wisdom gratefully appropriated, and the quest for truth is undertaken together in mutual respect and love.”

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According to *Ecclesiam Suam*, no. 78 (Paul VI, 1964), interreligious dialogue is justifiable in the contemporary age because “It is demanded by the pluralism of society, and by the maturity man [and woman] has reached in this day and age.” It is in the light of this reasoning that the call for the acceptance of *de jure* religious pluralism is relevant and necessary for continued success in interreligious dialogue between Christians and people of other faith traditions. Most importantly, the tone of *Ecclesiam Suam* in the quote above calls for continued incarnational theology - a dynamic theological reflection, which embodies the reality of our times and expounds on the long-standing theology of universal salvation in Christ. In the current world of diversity and religious plurality, Christian theology has to avoid anachronism or failure to make its theology alive and relevant to its world and time.

However, for effective dialogue between Christians and people of different faith traditions to occur, it is imperative that Christians adopt appropriate worldviews that will most accommodate and promote dialogue among religions. There are typically three different worldviews: *exclusivism*, *inclusivism*, and *pluralism*.¹⁵ The recommendation of this study is for Christians to adopt a worldview of inclusive pluralism as the most effective worldview for promoting and advancing interreligious dialogue. Inclusive pluralism seeks to blend the best of inclusivism and pluralism. It is recommended because it honors and highlights the commonalities of religions as well as appreciates their differences.¹⁶ Adopting inclusive pluralism as a religious worldview puts Christians in the best position to harness the benefits of both inclusivism and pluralism, hence minimizing the reasons people reject either of the two standing alone as a worldview. Typically, inclusivism is criticized for being imperialistic and condescending toward the other, while pluralism is often rejected because it is likely to promote relativism.

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The question of whether religious pluralism should be considered only as *de facto* (a

fact of life) or also as *de jure* (in principle) reality has been central to the debate on religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue. Many pluralist theologians, like Jacques Dupuis and Gerard O'Collins, have strongly weighed in on the question of *de jure* religious pluralism. Being a theologically charged question, Dupuis responds to it with a thorough theological focus and insight. According to Dupuis (2001, 254), the primary theological point that argues in favor of a *de jure* religious pluralism is that "it is not human beings who have first set out in search of God through their history; rather God has set out first to approach them and to trace for them the 'ways' over which they may find him." A scriptural support for his argument comes from the text of the Letter to the Hebrews: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and varied ways" (Heb. 1:1). Using this text, Dupuis argues that the covenant in Jesus Christ is not the only means God has used to communicate with his people. He affirms what is a common truth in theological history, namely, "God has made various covenants with humankind in history, before making a 'new covenant' with them in Jesus Christ." Dupuis is of the opinion that the non-Christian religions are "gifts of God to the peoples of the world" (*ibid.*), since it was God who initiated those covenants in the first place. Therefore, Dupuis maintains that since these religions are products of God's covenant with people in different cultures and at various times, the proper way to respond to the reality of religious pluralism in the world is not to reject it or question if it is part of God's principle of communicating with his people, but to receive it

gratefully as a positive factor that at the same time attests to the sovereign generosity with which God has manifested himself in many ways to humankind and to the manifold response that human beings have made to God's self-revelation in different cultures."

O'Collins, on his part, firmly maintains that the church does not exhaust the Kingdom of God, since the Kingdom of God encompasses all and is open to all humanity, including those outside the boundaries of Christianity (2008, 249-250). He further argues that in the New Testament "the incarnate, exalted, and omnipresent Christ was more or less equated with the Kingdom of God," suggesting therefore, that Christ is as all-encompassing as the Kingdom of God. O'Collins, like Dupuis, is theologically convinced that Christ and his Spirit are intrinsically part of the lives of all people of faith, even if we cannot empirically substantiate it.

For any Christian who has come to appreciate the theological significance of *de jure* religious pluralism, it becomes theologically synchronic to contextualize the role of Christ and his divinity in the life and salvation of non-Christians. According to the Johannine account, Jesus said, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). How then is Christ to be conceived as being part of the religious fulfillment or eternal salvation of peoples of non-Christian faith traditions? It is normative in the Christian theological concept of most mainline Christianity that Christ is the savior of all humankind, not only of Christians. The Second Vatican Council by its inclusive soteriology has already addressed and affirmed that people of non-Christian faith traditions do and will make it to heaven if they live godly lives, hence are beneficiaries of the same salvation Christians benefit by their faith orientation (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 16).

Addressing the role of Christ in the salvation of non-Christians, religious pluralists, like Dupuis and O'Collins, arrived at the conclusion of the theological assumption of "Pluralistic Inclusivism" or "Inclusive Religious Pluralism." Dupuis assiduously held that Christians should approach *de jure* religious pluralism with the mindset of inclusivity. O'Collins, on his part, maintains that "innumerable people are drawn to God through Jesus, even though they may remain unaware of this role of Jesus" (2008, 259). Further on, O'Collins alludes to the impact of Christ and the Spirit in the lives of people of other faith traditions when he

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wrote of "the personal presence and power of Jesus and the Spirit, a presence and power that shapes the lives of millions of people who may never in their lifetime become aware of this invisible influence" (2008, p. 259). Suffice it to say, at this juncture, that Dupuis and O'Collins hinge their concept of inclusive religious pluralism primarily on the person and mystery of Christ. And their inclusive approach comes from their Christological theology which understands the Christic event as universally applicable, of cosmic dimensions, and absolutely divine (Dupuis, 1997, 18 and O'Collins 2008). This understanding and position is not meant to demean or minimize the importance of the prominent religious personality of other faith traditions. Rather it is a Christian way of affirming and validating the religious traditions of the other. It is similar to a Hindu's appreciation of the Christian doctrine of Jesus Christ as God incarnate by equiparating that doctrine to Hindu's understanding of the avatars of deities in the forms of Rama and Krishna. Hindus who reverence the importance of other faith traditions' revered personalities convince themselves of the significance of such personalities by associating them with parallel ideas and personalities in their faith traditions. Therefore, inclusive religious pluralism for a Christian is a self-prescribed medication for validating the importance and significance of the living traditions of people of other faith traditions, using a model or parallel totally comprehensible to a Christian. For the most part, inclusive pluralist theologians from the Christian tradition (especially those I have referenced in this article), are not stating their position as an arrogant or smug attitude against people of other faith traditions, but an honest demonstration of their appreciation and recognition of the value of people of other faith traditions.

Conclusion

The old empires and absolute institutions either have disappeared or are merely shadows of their old selves. The philosophical underpinnings of freedom of religion and advocacy for dialogue in societies are among other things predicated on the understanding of free speech and honest articulation of one's beliefs and religious practices. In the light of these, it is imperative for the existence of common forums, where different faith traditions are able to proudly and with integrity share the phenomenological foundations and principles of their religions.

The postmodern world challenges every religious philosophy to see itself no longer as a superior exclusive self, but a self that is more holistic in the summation of all. The

other becomes relevant not as an opponent to be defeated but as a collaborator toward the common good. The other gets meaning no longer as the undesirable enemy that must be eliminated but as an indispensable companion on life's challenging journey, with whom to walk to find the best path to world peace. The new ethos is for every religious institution to work toward solidarity with the other in the interest of the society and to promote the good and beauty of the world of the Creator, to whom we are all accountable. In the spirit of the new ethos and vocation of all human societies, foundational philosophies of different religions of the world need to be re-drafted or modified with an inclusive pluralistic mindset. Philosophical ideologies need to reflect the other as deserving of dignity and respect that are intrinsically theirs by nature.

The postmodern world normatively challenges religions to be more pluralistically inclusive and yet authentic to the tenets of their faith. It is a development that requires profound, thorough, and ingenious theological and phenomenological development in the religions, such that religion continues to be a social asset for human nature rather than a weapon for human annihilation. In a reflection on postmodernism, Peter Phan (2004, xviii) summarizes its epistemology as: "respect for and celebration of particularity and "otherness" in all dimensions of human life, from race and ethnicity to gender to religion to culture." He goes on to say that

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Diversity and plurality, which otherness implies, are seen not as curses to human flourishing to be exorcised or as threats to human unity to be suppressed. Rather, they are to be vigorously promoted and joyously celebrated as natural endowments necessary for genuine peace and justice (ibid.).

Indeed any religious identity that is oriented toward rejection of the other and is disrespectful of the Creator's given right for everyone to choose her or his religious faith sets itself against the ethos of a postmodern society.

Dialogue among faith traditions is one of the major effective and meaningful ways of breaking the doldrums of hate and heinous acts promoted by exclusivism and rejection of the other so prevalent historically between many dominant religions of the world. A common forum of such dialogue is necessary so people of diverse religious traditions can in one forum hear or read the authentic voices of the others, with whom they live side by side in communities and societies. A dialogue pursued from the point of view of inclusive religious pluralism further elevates the "thinking being" in each of us. This is because an inclusive pluralist mentality enables us to identify our commonalities, our complementarities as well as appreciate and respect uniqueness or differences of the other.

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Endnotes

¹ Origen (185- c. 254) is one of the respected pre-Nicene Church Fathers. Besides running the catechetical School of Alexandria from age eighteen, Origen's teachings and writings have contributed significantly to the dogmatic teachings of the church. Origen was such a leading authority that during the Nicaean Christological debates, he was quoted by both pro-Nicaea and Arius groups. See Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1993, 108. He was the first to use the term "Θεάνθρωπος" (theandric/human-divine) as well as coining the Nicaea term "ὁμοούσιος" (of same substance) in reference to the divine and human natures of Christ (See Henrich Kraft, *Early Christian Thinkers*. London: Lutterworth Press, 1964, 74, and Baus, *History of the Church*. Vol. 1, 1986, 239). Baus, 234 described Origen as, "the greatest of the Alexandrian teachers and the most important theologian of Eastern Christianity."

² This doctrine originated from Cyprian of Carthage as a response to heretics, schismatics, and others perceived within the church as the enemies of the church. These heretics and schismatics had threatened the unity of Christians and challenged the authority of the church's hierarchy. Therefore, it was the position of Cyprian of Carthage, which became an official position of the church by the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215.

³ Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Eusebius, and all others who held on to the doctrine of universal salvation (*apokatastasis*) maintained that God's chastisement is meant to correct creatures not to punish them. Therefore, God's chastisement is remedial, not destructive. See Ilaria Ramelli, "Origen, Eusebius, the Doctrine of Apokatastasis, and Its Relation to Christology" in *Center For Hellenic Studies*. <https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/5881.15-origen-eusebius-the-doctrine-of-apokatastasis-and-its-relation-to-christology-ilaria-ramelli>. Retrieved on September 11, 2018.

⁴ See "Apokatastasis" in *New Advent – Catholic Encyclopedia*. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01599a.htm>. Par. 3. Retrieved September 11, 2018.

⁵ The text of that scriptural citation according to the English Standard Version is as follows: "Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "all things are put in subjection," it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all."

⁶ "By the words of Christ we do not mean only those which formed his teaching when he was made man and dwelt in the flesh, since even before that Christ the Word of God was in Moses and the prophets. For without the Word of God how could they have prophesied about Christ?" See Origen, *On First Principles*, Book 1, Preface. Translated by G. W. Butterworth. Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1973, 1.

⁷ Religious pluralism is by general definition an understanding that all religions are authentic. However, from the point of view of Christian theology, religious pluralism presupposes that all religions originate from the one God, hence that every religion has divine origin, period.

⁸ Levinas (1998b) extensively discusses the value of the other and the indispensability of critically appreciating the other in his work: *On Thinking-of-the-Other, Entre Nous*.

⁹ In some cases, the same idea is reflected in post-Second Vatican Council documents, like *Dominus Iesus*, a document produced by then Cardinal Ratzinger, the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

¹⁰ See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Declaration “*Dominus Iesus*.” On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Christ and the Church. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html. Accessed 1/2/2018.

¹¹ While this document is not exclusively a Christian document, it is a product of largely a Western-influenced ideology, which has had significant Christian orientation. The League of Nations which gave birth to United Nations, was largely a collection of North American and European countries, who are *de facto* Christian countries.

¹² This encyclical, which was published just as the Second Vatican Council was underway, focused significantly on the need for Christians and particularly Catholics to seriously engage in interreligious dialogue with people of all faith or even of no faith traditions. See Paul VI (August 6, 1964). “*Ecclesiam Suam* – Encyclical of Pope Paul VI on the Church” in *Encyclicals*. http://w2.vatican.va/content/paulvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_pvi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html. Retrieved September 13, 2018.

¹³ These three documents are particularly relevant to moving forward the question of inter-religious dialogue, which had been initiated and encouraged by both *Ecclesiam Suam* and the documents of the Vatican II (*Gaudium et Spes*, *Dignitatis Humanae*, *Ad Gentes*, *Lumen Gentium*, and *Nostra Aetate*). Other post-Vatican Council documents hinted at and referred to the need for ongoing interreligious dialogue, but did not focus on stating the *modus operandi* and techniques of engaging in successful interreligious dialogue. Conversely, these three documents have significantly been appreciated as setting the blueprint for active and empirical development of dialogue between Christians or the Catholic Church and other religious traditions.

¹⁴ It is therefore of interest to note that there is a strong concern that the current growing political rhetoric of “America First,” “America Only,” “Make America Great Again,” “Build that wall,” “Brexit,” and the alt right wing agenda in the United States and Europe are attempts to push back the progress made by globalization and ending with mono-culturalism and imperialism. In his 2018 New Year message, the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, warned against the growing “nationalism and xenophobia” as dangers to the unity of peoples of the world as he calls the nations to “red alert” against threats to human unity across the globe. See Video Highlights. “2018 New Year Message.” *United Nations Secretary-General* (home page). <https://www.un.org/sg/en>. Retrieved 1/2/2018.

¹⁵ For more details about the three worldviews see Marinus Iwuchukwu. *Media Ecology and Religious Pluralism: Engaging Walter Ong and Jacques Dupuis Toward Effective Interreligious Dialogue*. Germany: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing AG & Co., 2010, 83-86.

¹⁶ For more information about inclusive pluralism see Marinus Iwuchukwu. *Muslim-Christian Dialogue in Postcolonial Northern Nigeria: The Challenges of Inclusive Cultural and Religious Pluralism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 161-166.

¹⁷Dupuis, 2001, 255. In addition to Jacques Dupuis' significant advocacy for inclusive religious pluralism, Marinus Iwuchukwu, in his seminal work focuses extensively on advancing this theological assumption and argues strongly for Christians to adopt inclusive pluralist mentality in dialogic encounters with non-Christian religions. See Iwuchukwu. *Media Ecology and Religious Pluralism*, 2010.