

Changing Roman Catholic Christologies: The Case of Hans Kung and Paul Knitter

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Abstract

The person of Jesus Christ does not only play a key role in the Christian dialogue with non-Christians, but it is also the central issue in the current debate on the Christian theology of religions. Within this context, after the 1970's, some individual theologians and thinkers have attempted to study the status of Jesus by questioning seriously the traditional Christian beliefs and doctrines that this study critically evaluates. A number of works which discuss the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the possibility of reinterpreting traditional doctrines in the light of new developments and the practical implications of dialogue with people of other faiths.

Introduction

In 1977 John Hick edited *The Myth of God Incarnate*¹ in order to illustrate that "... Jesus was (as he is presented in Acts 2.21) "a man approved by God" for a special role within the divine purpose, and that the later conception of him as God incarnate, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity living a human life, was a mythological or poetic way of expressing his significance for us. This recognition is called for in the interests of truth; but it also has increasingly practical implications for our relationship to other great world religions."² In 1986, a number of Catholic and Protestant theologians gathered at Claremont University in the United States to discuss the issue of understanding Jesus Christ within the context of world

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religions. The major papers of this gathering were edited by Paul Knitter and John Hick under the title *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*.³ The contributors to this work agreed that the myth of Christian uniqueness must be reconsidered, since it implies "the uniqueness, definitiveness, absoluteness, normativeness, superiority of Christianity in comparison with other religions of the world."⁴ They all rejected this dogmatism and argued for crossing over the shores of exclusivism and inclusivism to pluralism.

In 1991, the first director of the World Council of Churches' Sub-unit for Dialogue with People of Other Faiths, Stanley J. Samartha, published his *One Christ- Many Religions* in order to urge Christians to develop a revised christology within the context of their relationship with people of other faiths. For, according to him, such a christology "is biblically sound, spiritually satisfying, theologically credible, and pastorally helpful and both necessary and possible – without making exclusive claims for Christianity or passing negative judgements on the faiths of our neighbors."⁵ In 1993 Hick published another work, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*⁶, in order to show that "Jesus himself did not teach what was to become the orthodox Christian understanding of him; ... the dogma of Jesus' two natures, one human and the other divine, has proved to be incapable of being explicated in any satisfactory way; ... historically the traditional dogma has been used to justify great human evils; ... the idea of divine incarnation is better understood as metaphorical than as literal; ... we can rightly take Jesus ... as our Lord, the one who has made God real to us and whose life and teachings challenge us to live in God's presence; ... a non-traditional Christianity based upon this understanding of Jesus can see itself as one among a number of different human responses to the ultimate Reality that we call God..." In addition to these works, Paul Knitter, whose views will be considered below, developed five theses concerning the uniqueness of Jesus in order to argue that the Christian affirmation of the uniqueness of Jesus need not be abandoned, but can be reinterpreted in such a way that it has greater relevance to the contemporary world while deepening Christian devotion to Christ and strengthening the followers of Jesus in discipleship. In doing so, he concentrates mainly on the uniqueness and the significance of Christ without underestimating the uniqueness and significance of other religious figures in the process of interreligious dialogue. Recently too, J.S. O'Leary, in his *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth Claims* [1996], stresses that the more Christians listen to people of other faiths on

their own terms, "the more the claim that God is fully and definitively revealed only in Christ seems in need of revision".

As a critical response to these bold attempts, other theologians have produced works which argue for the universality of Jesus, contending that Jesus Christ is the unique, normative and definitive revelation of God for all people.¹¹ In this respect, the Catholic theologian J. Dupuis insists on the necessity of defending Christ in the process of interreligious dialogue by stressing that:

The uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ in the order of salvation represents the cardinal, key question of every Christian theology of religions. As old as christology itself, and reappearing in recent times, it is becoming more urgent and more radical in the current context of religious pluralism and the blending of the various traditions. The current literature testifies to the renewed importance of this question.¹²

Within the context of these developments, the views of two eminent Catholic Christian thinkers, namely Hans Kung and Paul F. Knitter, will be examined here in order to observe how those who are interested in interreligious dialogue actively consider the position of Jesus with regard to the religious figures of other religions. The reason why we chose only Catholic theologians, leaving aside the Protestant ones whose works are reviewed above, is that the first official attempt to enter into dialogue with people of other faiths came out from the Roman Catholic Church during the time of the Second Vatican Council. As is well known, in this council, for the first time in the history of the Catholic Church, the magisterium started to speak about non-Christian religions as entities which the Church should respect and with which Christians should enter into dialogue.¹³ In the conclusion of this essay we will also discuss to what extent Kung and Knitter's views can contribute to the development of interreligious dialogue in general and Christian-Muslim understanding in particular in our religiously pluralistic world.

Hans Kung

Hans Kung, as an Ecumenical Catholic theologian began his scholarly life by dealing with problematic issues within Christianity. But in the course of time he became interested in contemporary common issues not only for Christians but also for people of other faiths. According to W. G. Jeanron's classification of Kung's theological development, his reflection on

theological method and the dialogue between Christianity and world religions began in the early 1980's in order to promote interreligious dialogue.¹⁴ So, he began to evolve his dialogical approach towards other religions from 1983 onwards. For this reason, when dealing with his views on the person of Jesus, we will focus on his writings published during that period. But before doing so, it is necessary to recall his earlier understanding in order to observe the effect of his dialogical approach on his views about the person of Jesus.

Kung dealt with the issue of the status of Jesus with regard to the world religions for the first time in his *On Being Christian* [1977] under the title of "The Challenge of World Religions". Here, he emphasised the uniqueness of Jesus of Nazareth as the "distinctive" component of the Christian faith. He maintained that the question of the distinctiveness of Christianity, when viewed on the horizon of the world religions, could be answered only by reference to Jesus Christ, since he is the specific element of the Christian faith. He further stated that "the special feature, the most fundamental characteristic of Christianity is that it considers this Jesus as ultimately decisive, definitive, archetypal, for man's relations with God, with his fellow man, with society..."¹⁵ Kung stressed that Jesus is unique in the sense that his uniqueness surpasses all other religious figures by being absolutely and universally normative for others as well.¹⁶

In his essay "Belief in the Son of God" [1981],¹⁷ Kung continued to defend the absoluteness and normativeness of Jesus against the religious figures of other faiths. He examined the meaning of Jesus of Nazareth as the "Son of God" in the light of the biblical infancy narratives and argued that the virgin birth, angelic visitations, and temptations from the devil were not exclusive to Jesus. What Kung found unique and distinctively Christian with regard to Jesus was the cross. Hence, Kung highlighted the crucifixion event as the decisive aspect differentiating Jesus from Buddha, Confucius, Zarathustra, and Muhammad and claimed that the cross event was required in order to understand the infancy narratives and how Jesus came to be designated with the title "the Son of God". He stressed the fact that this and other similar titles only served to express the unique relationship that Jesus had with God and God, with Jesus, and not his divinity. He claimed that no other religious figure or teacher had this unique relationship before or after Jesus.¹⁸

In almost his every work, Kung ventured to compare Jesus with the other religious figures such as Moses, Buddha, Confucius, and Muhammad in order to show his uniqueness. In this comparison, he argued that Jesus

was unique with regard to his Jewish social context, his message, his personality, his relationship to God, and his death.¹⁹

In short, in these earlier writings Kung held Jesus as the unique and normative revelation of God not only for Christians but also for all humanity. He further declared that with regard to the relationship with God, Jesus had a superior position to other religious figures. In this sense, Kung implied that in one way or another all people should acknowledge Jesus as the unique and archetypal revelation of God. This would mean that there is no salvation apart from him.

After starting his dialogical journey towards world religions, he published his *Christianity and World Religions* [1984], which is regarded as his *magnum opus* in his dialogue with world religions.²⁰ Here, he exposes his position, in his relation with people of other faiths, between the extremes of absolutism and relativism, and prefers a model which depends on mutual understanding, respect, objective study and genuine conversation with the other.²¹

Kung criticises those who reject the finality and normativity of Christ in their theology of religions, by arguing that those theologians have lost the Christian criterion by saying that "a religion is true and good when and to the extent that it allows traces of Christ to be detached in its teaching and practice", by putting him on an equal level with religious figures such as Muhammad, Buddha and the others. In order to support his objection, he further stresses that a "theologian who is not prepared to give up the normativity and finality of Christ does so not because it is only through Christ as a critical catalyst that the other religions can "adapt themselves to our modern technology", but because otherwise he or she would be abandoning the central declaration of the Scriptures that go to make up the New Testament." Moreover, he upholds this view by arguing that it is in no way "identical with some theological "imperialism" and "neo-colonialism", which denies other religions their truth and rejects other prophets and seers". From these two arguments, Kung draws the conclusion that "there are different ways of salvation ... to the one goal, and these in part overlap and can in any case enrich each other. Yet dialogue between these religions by no means demands the giving up of the standpoint of faith."²²

After clarifying his position in this way, Kung attempts to do two things in his theology of religions. The first is to apply "Christian self-criticism in the light of other religions". The second is to apply "Christian criticism of the other religions in the light of the Gospel". Since this second one does

not directly concern our aim in this article, we will only observe the first one with regard to the person of Jesus. We will consider his views on the traditional Christian beliefs which are regarded by pluralist theologians whose views were reviewed at the beginning as obstacles and barriers for better relations and genuine dialogue with people of other faiths. In doing so, we will consider Kung's observation of those beliefs in the light of Islam and Judaism.

Kung first of all applies the self-criticism of the doctrine of the Trinity in the light of Qur'anic accounts. He states that this doctrine has been a great obstacle for Christian-Muslim understanding from the advent of Islam. In order to rescue it from being a barrier, Kung concedes that Jesus never proclaimed that God is one nature but in three persons, or he is one person but in two natures. He did not put his own person, role, and dignity at the center of his teaching, but rather God's Kingdom, God's Name, and God's Will, which man is to fulfil through service to his fellow men and women. On this point, Kung asks how Christians look upon Jesus' relationship to God. In the answer to this question, he refers to the origin of Jesus. He notes that Jesus himself was a Jew and much closer to present-day Palestinian Arabs than to all western images of Jesus, and he tried to establish the belief in one God during his lifetime just as Muslims do in our present day.²³ Kung, also, admits that modern historico-critical studies on the New Testament have shown that Jesus did not use the title "Son of God" for himself, but after his death his followers began to use this title, basing it on their Easter experience. However, he puts forwards the idea that Jesus was more than a prophet, since he assumed God's authority especially with respect to the Law and the forgiveness of sins.

In light of these points, Kung concludes that the title "Son" was given to Jesus not in a sense of "a physical divine sonship, as Islam always assumed and rightly rejected (because it awakened associations of intercourse between a god and a mortal women), but God's choosing Jesus and granting him full authority."²⁴ To support this conclusion, he points out that from the perspective of Jewish monotheism there would not be a problem in this kind of belief concerning the status of Jesus, and "the primitive Christian community, made up entirely of Jews, would have no difficulty holding this view. Nor would Islam."²⁵

Kung suggests three ways of understanding the doctrine of the Trinity from the perspective of Christian-Muslim dialogue. Firstly, he notes that believing in God the Father in the New Testament means believing in the one God whom Judaism, Christianity and Islam all share. Kung indicates

that the "Father" in this expression should not be understood literally but symbolically. Secondly, the term "Son of God" should be understood in the revelation of the one God in the man Jesus of Nazareth. And also, Jesus Christ should not be recognised as an eternal and intrusive hypostasis but as a human and historical person concretely related to God. Thirdly, believing in the Holy Spirit should be understood as God's power and might which is working among human beings in this world. Further, Kung points out that the doctrine of the Trinity is not the criterion for being a Christian but belief in One God, the practical imitation of Christ and trust in the power of God's Spirit all work together in the life of a Christian.²⁶

Kung maintains that this redefining of the doctrine of the Trinity will really help in promoting dialogue between Muslims and Christians. He believes that if Christians try to understand the doctrine of the Trinity by going back to the New Testament, they may understand Muslims better. He advises both Muslims and Christians, if they want to understand each other better, to go back to their Holy Books and try to understand their doctrines in the light of these Holy Books. For instance, according to Kung, if Christians go back to the New Testament, they will discover what great differences there are between original expressions concerning the Father, Son, and Spirit, and the subsequent dogmatic teachings of the church on the doctrine of the Trinity.²⁷

In one of his recent essays, "Christian self-criticism in the Light of Judaism" [1993],²⁸ Kung criticises the title "Son of God", and the doctrine of the Incarnation in order to make them intelligible for better dialogue with people of other faiths. He states that in the dialogue process Christians do not any longer underestimate the objection of Jews and Muslims to the doctrine of the Trinity, which is unintelligible to them because, according to them, that doctrine destroys the belief in one God. Also, Kung notes that after the Enlightenment period more and more Christian intellectuals have raised similar objections to the doctrine as a consequence of historical-critical exegesis and the subsequent development of critical analysis of Christian dogma.²⁹ In the light of these objections, Kung tries to make "central Christian dogmas" intelligible to avoid false confrontations in the process of interreligious dialogue. To fulfil this objective he scrutinises the meaning for Jesus of being a "Son of God".

After pointing out the fact that before Jesus, the term "Son of God" had been used in the Old Testament for human beings in general and for the people of Israel specifically,³⁰ Kung underlines that Jesus himself did not use the term "Son of God" for himself, since his message was not to

present his own person, his role or status, but was to proclaim God and His Kingdom to people in a simple way by using short stories and parables from daily life.³¹ Then, he moves to explain the relation of Jesus to God within the context of the New Testament as follows: Firstly, according to Kung, it is a well known fact that "Jesus himself spoke, prayed, and struggled out of an ultimately inexplicable experience of God, a sense of God's presence, yes, even a sense of unity with God as his father". Secondly, he maintains that the historical-critical scholarship has proved that Jesus himself did not describe himself as "Son of God". Thirdly, he draws a conclusion from Jesus' authority against the teaching and practice of the religious establishment of his time that he was "more than Moses", and "more than the prophets".

Thus, it is obvious that only after the event of the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus, the title of "Son of God" was used to describe him. Kung argues that this attempt to designate Jesus as "Son of God" did not cause any problem among Jews until the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon, in which Jesus was described as "the same nature as the father" and the classical Trinitarian doctrine was developed as "one God in three persons". Up to that time this title was not formulated or understood as a dogmatic doctrine but as an exaltation of his status.³² In his *Credo* [1993], Kung maintains that if the sonship of Jesus is not understood as a physical divine Sonship but as an expression of election and empowerment of Jesus, "there would be few objections to it ... from Jewish and Islamic monotheism."³³

In short, according to Kung, Christians should take into account the Jewishness and Jewish environment of Jesus together with the New Testament, leaving aside the dogmatic developments which came out from the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon to make comprehensible the meaning of the title "Son of God" both for themselves and others. In this same sense, Kung recognises the Prophet Muhammad as a "prophetic corrective" and "prophetic warner" for Christians in order to inform them that "the one incomparable God has to stand in the absolute centre of faith; That associating with him any other gods or goddesses is out of the question; That faith and life, orthodoxy and orthopraxy, belong together everywhere, including politics."³⁴

Kung further points out that after the dogmatic formulation of the classical Trinitarian dogma in the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon, the more theologians have attempted to explain the relation between God, Son and the Holy Spirit by using Hellenistic arguments, the more problems have come out in "harmonizing faith in the one God with belief in the

divine Sonship. And the more problems they have had in distinguishing the Son of God from God while at the same time affirming the oneness of God". Therefore, argues Kung, it is very difficult for Christians to explain the relation between God and Jesus to the Jews and Muslims who believe in the same God. For that reason, Kung maintains that in the process of interreligious dialogue for Christians, the question should be to explain "the unity of God and Jesus, of Father and Son (and then also of the Spirit) ... in such a way that the unity and uniqueness of God are preserved, as well as the identity of the person Jesus Christ", instead of elucidating the question of "how are three persons in the Godhead related in the one divine nature? Or, how do the two natures in Christ function in one person?"³⁵

After this explanation, Kung urges Christians to understand the meaning of the incarnation by taking into account the life of Jesus, since he argues that if this is done correctly, then the concept of incarnation "refers to the total earthly life and death and new life of Jesus", not to the dogmatic statements of the Councils, such as that he has the same hypothesis or the same nature with the Father. Further, the above explanation of the meaning of the title "Son of God" and the doctrine of incarnation led Kung to re-articulate the Christian faith in Father, Son, and Spirit by taking into account other prophetic religions such as Judaism and Islam in the process of interreligious dialogue. He states, "To believe in God the father means, according to the New Testament, to believe in the one God. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have this belief in common. To believe in the Holy Spirit means to believe in God's effective power and strength in humankind and in the world. Again, Jews, Christians, and Muslims have this belief in common. To believe in the Son of God means to believe in God's revelation in the man Jesus of Nazareth. This is the area of decisive difference among the three prophetic religions."³⁶

As has been observed so far, although Kung's views on the status of Jesus have slightly changed in the process of his dialogical approach towards other religions, he has not moved in the direction of a non-absolutist christology by leaving aside the uniqueness and normativeness of Jesus. For, according to him, the move from the uniqueness and normativeness of Jesus to non-uniqueness and non-normativeness of Jesus "would alienate him from his faith community and it would tend to diminish the depth and firmness of his personal commitment to Jesus Christ."³⁷

However, in doing so, he limits the uniqueness and normativeness of Jesus to Christians by stressing that Jesus "... is for us [Christians] the way, the truth, and the life! ... Jesus Christ is for Christians the decisive

and regulative norm" as the Torah is for Jews and the Qur'an is for Muslims.³⁸ He repeats his firm and steadfast conviction about the uniqueness and normativity of Jesus in his "Foreword" to Knitter's work *One Earth Many Religions* [1995] as follows:

... a Christian theologian, even in dialogue with followers of other religions, must defend the normativity and finality of Jesus Christ as God's revelatory event for Christians without, however, making any arrogant claims of superiority over other religions ... Christians can accept the truth claims of other religions only 'conditionally' (that is, conditioned by the norm of Jesus Christ), just as followers of other religions can accept the truth-claims of Christianity only conditionally.³⁹

Here, although Kung still considers Jesus as the unique and normative revelation of God, he limits this to Christians by asking them not to use it as a tool to announce his superiority over other religious figures. In this sense, he gives the impression that he moves away from his previous view that Jesus is superior to other religious figures in terms of his birth, life, message and death. Also Kung's employment of three different criteria to evaluate truth in religions seems to support this conclusion. For he considers Jesus Christ as the specifically Christian criterion directly for Christians, not for people of other faiths, to determine "whether and to what extent the Christian religion is Christian at all."⁴⁰

Parallel to this relativistic understanding of the status of Jesus, Kung developed his views on the possibility of the salvific value of non-Christian religions in general and Islam in particular during this period. For instance in his *Christianity and World Religions* [1985] and *Global Responsibility* [1991], Kung considers world religions in general and Islam, in particular, as ways of salvation by arguing that just as the different rivers of the earth have similar profiles and patterns of flow, the world religions, too, have different systems but in many respects have "similar profiles, regularities and effects." Kung states that:

Confusingly different though all the religions are, they all respond to similar basic human questions. Where does the world and its order come from? Why are we born and why must we die? What determines the destiny of individual and humankind? What is the foundation for moral awareness and the presence of ethical form? And they all offer similar ways of salvation over and above their interpretation of

the world: ways out of the distress, suffering and guilt of existence—through meaningful and responsible action in this life to a permanent, abiding, eternal salvation.⁴¹

Here, Kung seems to take a further step towards acknowledging the world religions as independent ways of salvation apart from Jesus Christ. He explicitly states that all religions including Christianity offer their followers similar ways of salvation. He also acknowledges Islam as a way of salvation for Muslims in the same way that Christianity is for Christians by stressing that "... Muslims need no longer "be subject to the everlasting fire which has been prepared for the Devil and his angels"; they "can win eternal salvation". This means that Islam, too, can be a way of salvation; perhaps not the normal, the "ordinary" way, so to speak, but perhaps a historically "extraordinary" one."⁴²

In our opinion, by this conclusion Kung implies that Jesus Christ, as the unique and normative revelation of God, is directly the savior of Christians, not Muslims or others, since they attain salvation through their own religious figures independently from him.

Evaluation

As has been considered so far, Kung as one of the distinguished theologians of the twentieth century and a pioneer of interreligious dialogue has developed his theology of religions as a parallel to his dialogue with world religions. In so doing, unlike Knitter, he has avoided making such claims as would alienate him from his faith community and diminish his personal commitment to Jesus Christ. Now, we will turn to discuss Kung's views on the status of Jesus from the perspective of Christian-Muslim dialogue.

Kung reconsiders the traditional doctrines such as the Trinity and Incarnation in light of current Christian-Muslim dialogue and new scientific developments in order to make those doctrines acceptable to Muslims and comprehensible for Christians in our present day. This attempt of Kung seems to be helpful for the development of Christian-Muslim dialogue, since it urges dialogue partners to consider critically their own beliefs and doctrines which imply the superiority of one religious figure to another. As has been observed above, by following this approach Kung himself moved from holding Jesus as the normative and final Word of God not only for Christians but also others to recognising him as God's normative and final revelation only for Christians.⁴³ By this shift, Kung

seems to do justice to his own faith while recognising the normativeness of other religious figures for their followers. This approach of Kung's certainly contributes more to promoting Christian-Muslim dialogue than Knitter's approach which we will elaborate below because, of the following specifics.

Firstly, this approach allows the Christian dialogue partner to keep the particular element of his/her faith which separates it from others without rejecting the particularities of others. As is well known, one becomes a Christian by his/her belief in Jesus Christ through whom Christians know God. So, from the perspective of a committed Christian, this approach is more beneficial than other approaches.

Secondly, through this approach, dialogue will be rescued from being restricted to those who seem ready to abandon the particularity of their faith, and open to everyone. In terms of Christian-Muslim dialogue, this means that a genuine dialogue does not occur only between liberal-minded Christians and Muslims but between those Christians who hold Jesus to be the normative and final element for their beliefs and those Muslims who consider the Qur'an as the Word of God and the Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) as the seal of the prophets.

Thirdly, to adopt an approach in which, while retaining one's own particularity, one is also open to the particularities of other faiths, rescues one from being accused of being imperialistic. This approach "sees various traditions, their origins and their bearers of salvation in their context and according to the standing they enjoin". With regard to Christian-Muslim dialogue, while this approach provides Christians the opportunity to evaluate the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) in light of an Islamic context, it provides Muslims with the opportunity to understand the person of Jesus from a Christian perspective.

As has been shown so far, although Kung's understanding of the status of Jesus seems to contribute to the development of Christian-Muslim dialogue by doing justice to both the Christian and the Islamic faiths, he could not rescue himself from the criticism of some theologians. For example, while some of them are charging him not to cross the theological Rubicon⁴⁴, others criticise him for not taking the traditional Christian perception of Jesus seriously enough.⁴⁵ It seems that Kung does not deserve these criticisms. As a committed Christian who wants to create a suitable environment for better dialogue between people of different faiths in

general and Christians and Muslims in particular, he has tried very sincerely to be faithful to his own faith and open to the faiths of others.

We may conclude that Kung cannot be put in the same category as Knitter and other pluralists, since he does not ask Christians to give up the normativeness and uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Also, he cannot be regarded on the same level as those who acknowledge Jesus as the normative and unique revelation of God not only for Christians but for those who belong to other religions. But he can be considered "mid-way between the full pluralist theology and the inclusivism of the post-Vatican II Catholic approach exemplified by Rahner", as Alan Race correctly located him.⁴⁶

Paul Knitter

Paul Knitter was a member of the American Word Missionary Society. During his preparation as a missionary, an interest in questions relating to world religions and their followers began to arise in his mind. His main focus was on the kind of approach Christians needed to develop towards the followers of other religions in order to convert them. Thus, we may say that Knitter commenced his theological pilgrimage by adopting an exclusivist attitude to people of other faiths. He states that during his service in this Society, the religious other affected his theology. When he came across Rahner's theory of "anonymous Christians"⁴⁷ and the positive statements of the Second Vatican Council about non-Christians⁴⁸, during his study at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, the question of the religious other became a very important issue for his theology. Rahner's theory especially influenced him to move from exclusivism to inclusivism. During his doctoral studies in Germany, his meeting with a devout Muslim student led him to think about the theological and ethical meaning of Rahner's theory and in the end brought him to regard it not "as a new paradigm, but a bridge" for his later development. While he was teaching at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, he continued his interest in studying other religions and entering into dialogue with their followers. As a result, the focus of his theological journey shifted from inclusivism to pluralism with the publication of his *No Other Name?* [1985]⁴⁹, in which he made a critical survey of Christian attitudes towards those who belong to other religions.

His theological odyssey continued. During his work with refugee families in Cincinnati, the suffering other affected his theology as well. Liberation theology now became for him a new interest area and brought him to connect his pluralistic theology of religions with a theology of

liberation, and he published his essay "Towards a Liberation Theology of Religions" [1987].⁵⁰ Thus, he moved from theocentrism to soteriocentrism, and by continuing to progress in his theology of religions within this perspective, Knitter developed his "Correlational Globally Responsible Model" in *One Earth Many Religions* [1995]. He explained the theological meaning of this new model in his *Jesus and the other Names* [1996] in order to show Christians how "to live out traditional beliefs in the uniqueness of Jesus and the mission of his church and at the same time affirm the validity of other religious paths."⁵¹

So, within the context of a pluralist theology of religions, there are three significant stages, namely the theocentric, soteriocentric and the correlational globally responsible model. We will examine Knitter's views on the status of Jesus by following these three stages, since in all of them he explained the status of Jesus in slightly different ways. In doing so, we will focus on his understanding of the traditional Christian doctrine which announces Jesus as the Son of God and the universally normative and constitutive revelation of God.

Theocentric Model: Knitter's starting point in his theology of religions is that the new consciousness of religious pluralism is an ongoing fact of life, since there never has been, and probably never will be a time when there will be just one religion in the world. There will always be many religions because reality itself is pluriform. Knitter maintains that followers of different religions must come together "not in order to obliterate or absorb each other but to learn from and help each other"⁵², and then suggests a new concept called "unitive pluralism"⁵³ to facilitate this coming together and to encompass the ongoing situation of religious pluralism. However, he stresses that many Christians still have a serious hesitation and an unwillingness to enter into dialogue with others because of "the central Christian belief in the uniqueness of Christ", which holds Jesus as a normative and constitutive of any true encounter with God, not only for Christians but also for all people.⁵⁴

Knitter considers this sort of understanding of Jesus as an obstacle and an unnecessary barrier that stands in the way of authentic dialogue. Thus he proposes to abandon traditional conceptions about the uniqueness of Christ and develops a theology of religions which does not put Christ or the Church but God at the center. Then, he proposes a relational uniqueness for Jesus which:

... affirms that Jesus is unique, but with a uniqueness defined by its ability to relate – that is, to include and be included by – other unique religious figures. Such an understanding of Jesus views him not as exclusive or even as normative but as theocentric, as a universally relevant manifestation (sacrament, incarnation) of divine revelation and salvation.⁵⁵

He maintains that, contrary to what many Christians claim, his theocentric and non-normative understanding of Jesus does not stand in opposition to New Testament teaching about Jesus, since it stresses that Jesus himself made no claim to divinity and that the language of incarnation is only one of a number of models by which Christians could have conceptualised their experience and understanding of him. He argues that if the direction of Christian expansion had been eastward into India instead of Westward into the Graeco-Roman world, it is very unlikely that Jesus would have been interpreted in categories which would have led to the kind of claims to uniqueness and finality that have so long been predominant in Christian theology. He further underlines that the time has come to recognise that although such beliefs may have served a useful purpose in the past, they have now become a hindrance to the very faith. Therefore, they ought to be abandoned.

Knitter continues to maintain that what is basic to the Christian experience and understanding of Jesus is not the culturally conditioned doctrine that affirms his finality and his uniqueness, but what he terms the fact that through Jesus men and women have encountered God. It does not necessarily follow from this, however, that a total personal commitment of a Christian to Jesus depends on the assertion that God can only be encountered through Jesus. Of course, he says, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is unique, but also there are the revelations of God through Krishna and through the Buddha or through the Prophet Muhammad.⁵⁶ In this sense, what Knitter indicates is that in terms of transforming people to God not only Jesus but also all other religious figures are unique.

Knitter concludes that Jesus most likely experienced himself as the eschatological prophet who was anointed specially by God's Spirit, who was to complete the mission of the earlier prophets by announcing and enacting the good news of God's final rule. Knitter stresses that whenever Christians forget this role of Jesus and open their consciousness to a "myopic christocentrism", to a "jesusology", to a reductionism that absorbs God into Jesus, their understanding of Jesus easily becomes an idolatry that

violates not only Christians but the revelation found in other faiths.⁵⁷ By arguing this, it seems that Knitter puts Jesus on an equal level with other prophets and religious figures.

Finally, in light of this conclusion, Knitter proposes the following guidelines to understand the status of Jesus anew within the context of interreligious dialogue: (1) The titles of Jesus are not absolute expressions but only interpretations of who he was for his early followers. For that reason they should be understood by taking into account their "historical context and concerns, each makes use of mythic or symbolic images drawn from the Jewish and Hellenistic environment"⁵⁸; (2) All the different New Testament descriptions of Jesus should be preserved without absolutising one or rejecting the other, since there would be a time for every description in the course of time⁵⁹; (3) The plurality of the New Testament depiction of Jesus does not allow today's Christians to argue that everything about the person of Jesus - who he was and what he means for Christians and for the world - was said and set up by the first community. For that reason, Christians continue to develop new images "in continuity with what went before, preserving the past without embalming it, faithful to the past without being limited by it."⁶⁰ (4) This continuous and evolutionary character of the description of Jesus in the Christian tradition can lead today's theologians to develop "new images of Jesus that will make him more meaningful to them as well as to persons of other faiths" in the process of dialogue.⁶¹

As has been seen so far, in his theocentric model, leaving the traditional Christian understanding of Jesus as an absolute and normative revelation of God for all people, Knitter considers him as a God-conscious figure through whom men and women have encountered God and as an eschatological prophet who came to fulfil the mission of earlier prophets.

Soteriocentric Model: After shifting to this model, Knitter addressed the issue of the status of Jesus in a new way by indicating that:

The primary concern of a soteriocentric liberation theology of religions is not "right belief" about the uniqueness of Christ, but the "right practice", with other religions, of furthering the Kingdom and its Soteria. Clarity about whether and how Christ is one lord and savior, as well as clarity about any other doctrine, may be important, but it is subordinate to carrying out the preferential option for the poor and nonpersons.⁶²

Within this context, firstly Knitter calls Christians to evaluate the status of Jesus not in the light of their *a priori* knowledge, but as the centrality of praxis. He states that:

... the Christian conviction and proclamation that Jesus is God's final and normative word for all religions cannot rest only on traditional doctrine or on personal, individual experience. We cannot know that Jesus is God's last or normative statement only on the basis of being told so or on the basis of having experienced him to be such in our own lives. Rather, the uniqueness of Jesus can be known and then affirmed only 'in its concrete embodiment', only in the praxis of historical, social involvement.⁶³

And he continues that unless Christians enter into dialogue with people of other faiths by following Jesus and applying his message to their life, they cannot understand and experience what the uniqueness and normativity of Jesus means to them.

Secondly, he offers the preferential option for the poor and oppressed as a criterion through which one can evaluate and revise the traditional understanding of the uniqueness of Christ, as well as "grade" other salvific figures in the world's religions. In this approach all religious paths and their saviors are judged on the basis of how much or how little they contribute to promoting global justice. Within the context of this criterion, Knitter concludes "Jesus would ... be unique – together with other unique liberators. He would be universal savior – with other universal saviors. His universality and uniqueness would be not exclusive nor inclusive, but complementary."⁶⁴ By developing this argument, Knitter indicates that the claim to uniqueness of any religious figure or religious tradition can be settled only by asking how much they bring liberation to the poor and how much they contribute to God's kingdom of justice.

Thirdly, Knitter maintains, "right practice" in furthering the salvific message and deeds of Jesus takes precedence over "right belief" in light of the urgent needs of the world's poor and oppressed. He insists that by challenging the faithful to affirm the primacy of orthopraxis, this new view of Jesus' "complementary uniqueness" can enable Christians to deepen their Christian commitment. This is possible, he argues, because most Christians recognise that the essence of being a Christian is doing God's will rather than simply believing in Jesus as the definitive revelation of God.⁶⁵ He further argues that recognizing the primacy of orthopraxis over

public life, while maintaining an Islamic dress code that includes the covering of the head.

Wearing *hijab* can give a woman a sense of power and hence self-esteem. Zuhur noted that “denying men the ability to comment on their figures or silencing the “eyes of wolves” gave the younger respondents some satisfaction.”⁶⁷ Halah told Hoodfar that covering had helped her be more assertive in the office:

I used to dream of the day I would finish my studies and work to earn enough money to buy the nice clothes I never had because we were poor. When finally I had a good wardrobe and managed to look nice after years of waiting I had to take up the veil. I did it because in the office men teased us women and expected no answering back. If we answered they would start to think we were after an affair or something. That was difficult. All my life I always returned any remark a man made to me without being accused of immorality. In the office, whenever I would do that, my husband would get upset because he would hear what other men said amongst themselves [he was her colleague too]. But my veiled colleagues were always outspoken and joked with our male colleagues, and they were never taken wrong or treated disrespectfully. So I took up the veil. It has made my life easier and I feel freer to answer back, express my opinion, argue or even chit-chat with men. My husband is also much happier.⁶⁸

Givechian, looking at post-revolutionary Iran, concludes similarly that many working women are pleased with wearing *hijab* because not only has it saved them from the expenses and hassles of trying to dress fashionably, wearing *hijab* can also “materialize their abilities and potential, without too much worry about their clothing or appearance:”

The unveiling of women . . . imprisoned women in their look and clothing thus exaggerating their ascribed status as women, [while] the veiling of women has given rise to expectation of achievement and work. It has freed women from fascination of men with their look and also has forced them to compete if they are to enjoy their rights as human beings. The aggressiveness and professionalities of many of the new veiled women generation are a pleasant welcome to the passive and patronized unveiled women of modernized generation.⁶⁹

Western women often bridle at the suggestion that in order to counteract male harassment, women have to cover up. Certainly, it is unfair to have women cover while not tackling the issue of male harassment. Zuhur reports that leaders of the Islamic movement in Egypt, as well as many of

saving power of God is universally available in other religious figures. This sort of understanding of Jesus provides the following benefits for individual Christians as well as Churches in the process of dialogue. For example, it enables individuals to be committed totally to Jesus while being open to the religious figures of other religious traditions. And it means that the Churches have a universally meaningful message to proclaim to the whole world but are ready to hear other universally meaningful messages.

After explaining the nature of the Correlational Globally Responsible model in this way, Knitter attempts to explain how Christians should understand the exclusive statements of the New Testament concerning the status of Jesus. Firstly, he maintains the titles "Son of God", "Savior", "Word of God" were not used by Jesus himself but given to him by the early Christian community and used to make him superior to all other religious founders and leaders. Secondly, he argues that the language which is used in the following exclusive statements of the New Testament-Mt. 11:27; 1Cor. 8:6; Jn. 1:14, 18; 1Tim. 2:5; Heb. 9:12; Acts. 4:12⁶⁹ – can be described as "love language". By using this language, he maintains, the followers of Jesus wanted to share the message of Jesus with others. For that reason it must be understood metaphorically, not literally. He stresses that if these expressions are transformed by Christians into purely doctrinal or theological assertions, and if they are used to exclude others rather than to proclaim the saving power of Jesus, then they will be definitely abused. For, "when the early Christians gave Jesus such lofty titles ... they were not out primarily to present the world with a philosophical or dogmatic definition; rather they were declaring themselves, and inviting all others, to be disciples of this Jesus, to follow him in loving God and neighbor and working for what Jesus called the "Reign of God."⁷⁰ Thirdly, he applies the above guidelines to a specific text, Act 4:12, which is used by conservative Christians to support their argument that there is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ. Knitter argues that in this verse the question was "not one of comparative religions but of faith-healing; that is, in whose power had Peter and John just healed the crippled man". It expresses a clear answer to this question by saying that Peter and John healed that man not by their own power, but the power contained in the name and reality of Jesus. Therefore, the intent of this title is not philosophically or theologically to define Jesus in relation to other religious figures but to call others to recognise and acknowledge the power that is available to them in Jesus. It is performative and action language which expresses the belief that all people must listen

to this Jesus without indicating that no one else should be listened to. So, Knitter stresses that in this verse "the stress is on the saving power mediated by the name of Jesus, not on the exclusivity of the name."⁷¹

Finally, in light of the above explanations, Knitter develops the following argument, that although Christians cannot regard Jesus as full, definitive and unsurpassable, they do acknowledge that he brought a universal, decisive, and indispensable message. Now, we will turn to explain what Knitter means by this argument.

God's revelation in Jesus is not "full, definitive and unsurpassable". By arguing this Knitter indicates three things. Firstly, Christians cannot claim that they possess the fullness of the totality of divine revelation in Jesus as if he exhausted all the truth that God has to reveal, since theologically no finite medium can exhaust the fullness of the Infinite. In this sense, Knitter argues that to identify the Infinite God with the finite Jesus becomes idolatry. In order to avoid this, he proposes to understand the doctrine of incarnation to mean "that Divinity has assumed the fullness of humanity, not humanity has taken on the fullness of Divinity". This means that the Divine was truly incarnated in Jesus not fully and there is the possibility that the Divine can be incarnated in other religious figures.

Secondly, Christians cannot consider Jesus as the "definitive Word of God as if there could not be other norms for divine truth outside of him". This means that Jesus is *a* Word of God, not *the* Word of God, in the sense that there are no other Words of God which hold essentially new and different things. On this point, in a response to objections that this kind of explanation of the definitiveness of Jesus can be a threat to the central Christian belief in the Trinity,⁷² Knitter points out that on the contrary, it expands it by continuing to affirm the authenticity and reliability of the Divine Word's powerful presence in Jesus.

Thirdly, Christians cannot consider God's saving word in Jesus as unsurpassable in the sense that God could not reveal more of his fullness in other ways apart from Jesus at other times. On this point Knitter stresses that if Christians believe that God's revelation to them in Jesus contains the whole truth of God without allowing other revelations, this would contradict the Christian belief that God is an unsurpassable Mystery, "one which can never totally be comprehended or contained in human thought ...", and would dismiss the role of the Holy Spirit which is testified to by Jesus himself in Jn. 16:12-13.⁷³

Jesus' message is universal, decisive, and indispensable. By maintaining this Knitter proposes to do three things to proclaim Jesus as God's saving presence in history. Firstly, Christians should announce Jesus as a universal revelation and experience him as a call not just for them but for all people of all time. For, according to Knitter, if Jesus represents the saving presence of God for Christians by showing them how to live their lives, this knowledge cannot be limited to Christians but should be made available for all people. This thesis of Knitter indicates that God's work through Jesus is relevant to everyone without restriction and this is also true for other religious figures and divine revelations.

Secondly, Christians should regard the revelation granted in Jesus as decisive because when people follow this revelation, it makes a difference in their life by transforming them from self-centeredness to God-centeredness or Kingdom-centeredness. Knitter further holds that If Jesus' message is universal and decisive, it should also be normative not only for Christians but also for others. On this point, in order not to contradict his pluralistic view, Knitter clarifies that "if the norm I have embraced is decisive and calls me... to a clear decision and way of acting, it does not at all rule out the possibility that I can also come to other insights and other decisions which, although they do not contradict my original decision, are very different from it. A decisive norm, in other words, may rule out some other norms, but it need not exclude all other norms. It is decisive, but not final or unsurpassable."⁷⁴

Thirdly, Christians need to continue to announce the revelation in Jesus as indispensable in the sense that just as the truth represented by Jesus has enriched and transformed the lives of Christians, it should also do the same for others.

By arguing this last point, Knitter appears to tend towards the inclusivism which holds Jesus Christ to be a necessary element not only for Christians but also for people of other faiths. For, he claims that "... to know Jesus Christ is to feel that Buddhists and Hindus and Muslims need to know him too; this means they need to recognize and accept the truth he reveals (even through this does not necessarily mean that they will become members of the Christian community)."⁷⁵ Hick rightly objected to this argument by asking in what way Jesus is indispensable. Is it the way penicillin is necessary for the dying person or the way vitamins are necessary for better health?⁷⁶ Knitter answers this question by stressing that the indispensability of Jesus lies somewhere between being penicillin and

vitamin. "Maybe it is something like the illiterate person who is living a happy, satisfying life; when he learns to read, something is added to his life that was not there ..."77 Further, he adds that this is also the same for other religious figures. By making this point, it seems that Knitter points to a very significant principle, that in the process of dialogue participants can benefit from each other's faiths in order to enrich their own spirituality. Since, as Hick truly points out, "we have no reason to restrict ourselves to the spiritual resources of our own tradition."78

As has been observed so far, in his reinterpretation of the status of Jesus Knitter encourages Christians to see Jesus as a universally relevant, decisive and indispensable revelation of God not only for themselves but for all people without insisting that it is full, definitive and unsurpassable; there are also other universally relevant, decisive and indispensable revelations of God.

Parallel to his views of the status of Jesus, Knitter, like Hick79 whose views are given very briefly at the beginning of this paper, adopts a pluralistic view of salvation. In this respect, he points out that God's plan of salvation is available in all religions through the particularities of those religions. For instance, in Christianity God saves people not through general principles but through Jesus Christ.80 This argument implies that, according to Knitter, people of other faiths attain salvation through their own religious traditions. For example, Muslims can be saved through the Qur'an or Buddhists can be saved through Buddha. Knitter develops this argument by arguing that the particularity of Christianity [Jesus Christ] teaches Christians the universality of God's love and presence. But he says this does not mean that God's love and presence are limited to Jesus, since other particularities, too, can teach the same thing. He states this as follows: "While Christians must insist that God has acted in Jesus and that this action is universally meaningful for all people, they must do this in such a way that the universality of God's saving power for all people is not jeopardised."81 In this way Knitter implies that in the dialogue process Christians should accept the possibility that there may be other saviors apart from Christ and these are as important as Christ or the Christian faith in God's plan of salvation.

In short, according to Knitter, Jesus is a unique revelation of God but not in a sense that is absolute and final but in a sense that God's Word in Jesus is universal and indispensable for all peoples. This means that "the Christian Word is vitally meaningful for all peoples of all times, and

not to have heard this Word is to have missed a 'saving' vision of truth; but it does not mean that this Word is the normative fulfilment of all other Words."⁸²

Evaluation

As has been observed, as a result of his dialogue with people of other faiths, Knitter saw the traditional Christian beliefs which hold Jesus as uniquely divine, the absolute and final Word of God in history, as roadblocks to genuine dialogue. For that reason, he attempted to remove these roadblocks by reconstructing the status of Jesus in the light of current developments in Christian theology and his own interreligious dialogue. In the end, he concluded that in our religiously pluralistic age Christians cannot consider the status of Jesus as the "full, definitive and unsurpassable" revelation of God, but as a universal, decisive and indispensable message of God. We will discuss whether Knitter's reconstruction of the status of Jesus can contribute to the development of Christian-Muslim understanding. While doing this, we need to take into account the fact that although Knitter as a theologian seems to observe the New Testament accounts concerning the status of Jesus even more closely than some pluralists such as Hick, his views too are not accepted by the majority of Christians today. A number of theologians have objected to Knitter's views by saying they are not Christian and have criticized him for selling out the Christian faith.⁸³

As has been pointed out above, Knitter's starting point is that coming to know the religious other and observing his religious life can affect one's own beliefs. This point led him to rethink his own beliefs and doctrines which put Jesus in a superior position to other religious figures by announcing him as the absolute and final revelation of God. According to him, this sort of understanding prevents Christians from establishing a genuine and fruitful dialogue with people of other faiths. For that reason, by reinterpreting these beliefs and doctrines, Knitter develops a theology of religions which does not put Jesus but God at the center. Through this understanding of Jesus the Christian partner in dialogue can rescue himself/herself from exclusivism by putting himself/herself on an equal footing with others. In other words, to put God, not one's own religion or religious figure, at the center in the dialogue process can create an equal opportunity for all dialogue partners.

Secondly, Knitter urges Christian participants of dialogue not to enter into dialogue by holding Jesus as "the final word", "definitive revelation",

"absolute truth" and "absolute savior", arguing that there is no place at the dialogue table for these sorts of beliefs. He further generalizes this demand by saying that, "It would seem ...that the revision of traditional understandings of 'the uniqueness of Christ and Christianity' (together with similar understandings of the uniqueness of the Qur'an or of Krishna or of Buddha) is a condition for the possibility of fruitful dialogue."⁸⁴ Although this demand would contribute to the development of Christian-Muslim dialogue, it seems that it is rather problematic, since Knitter considers it as a necessary condition, not a possible outcome of a genuine dialogue. When we take this demand as a necessary condition of dialogue, we mean that we do not want to enter into dialogue with those who believe the uniqueness of the Qur'an or the uniqueness of Jesus. In today's world in which the majority of Muslims and Christians are holding the Qur'an and Jesus as the unique revelation of God, this means that dialogue is confined to those who have already abandoned these beliefs. For that reason, it would seem to be better to consider this demand not as a necessary condition but a possible outcome of dialogue.⁸⁵ Because of this demand, Knitter cannot escape being accused of being, in D'Costa's word, imperialistic.⁸⁶

Thirdly, Knitter emphasises that the significant point of the Christ event is not his finality or uniqueness but his consciousness of God. For, according to him, those who follow his message encounter God not through his finality or uniqueness but through his consciousness of Him. It seems that the application of this point to religious figures can contribute to the understanding of those religious figures by others much more positively than before. For example in this case, if a Christian witnesses to his/her dialogue partner how they encountered God through Jesus rather than emphasizing his finality and uniqueness, his partner will understand the significance of Jesus more readily, since he may have had the same encounter with God through the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad.⁸⁷

Fourthly, Knitter emphasises that whether Jesus is unique and absolute and the normative revelation of God cannot be known without living his message while engaging in dialogue with other believers. By following this argument, Knitter concluded that the uniqueness of Jesus depends on how much or how little his message contributes to promoting global justice. This argument would seem to contribute to the development of Christian-Muslim understanding. This conclusion of Knitter has correctly been criticised by Kung. He states that "practice should not be made the norm of theory undialectically and social questions be expounded as the basis and center of the theology of religions."⁸⁸ However, positively it

means that both Christians and Muslims need to put aside the claim that Jesus or the Qur'an is the unique revelation of God as an *a priori* principle. Instead, according to Knitter, they need to show the uniqueness of Jesus and the Qur'an by applying their message to their lives and then sharing them with people of other faiths in the dialogue process. This further means that what is important is not Jesus as a person or the Qur'an as a text but their message. Briefly, what this argument of Knitter stresses is that in the dialogue process we need to practise what our religious figures have brought us rather than to absolutise that religious figure.

Fifthly, Knitter reconstructed the status of Jesus without underestimating the New Testament accounts. As has been seen above, he considered those accounts seriously without sharing their tight or literal interpretation. Instead, by using a hermeneutic of discipleship, he considered those accounts as religious confessions of the disciples of Jesus. Although this sort of understanding seems to reduce the value of the Bible in the eyes of not only non-Christians but also Christians, in reality it may encourage them to reread the Bible in order to understand the significance of Jesus. Also the non-absolutist interpretation of sacred scriptures can urge people of other faiths to evaluate those scripture more positively.

In short, although Knitter's views do not represent the mainstream Christian perception of the person of Jesus, and for that reason do not seem very beneficial for Christian-Muslim dialogue at this stage, they deserve to be taken into account seriously by the Christian dialogue partner. For in developing those views, Knitter, both as a committed Christian and dialogue activist, tries to seek a way through which Christians can establish a genuine dialogue with people of other faiths.

Conclusion

Our examination of the views of two renowned Catholic Christian scholars on the status of Jesus has shown that the influence of current interreligious dialogue is encouraging Christians to develop a new Christian theology of religions by reconsidering the status of Jesus. Generally speaking, we may say that both Kung and Knitter have agreed on abandoning the exclusivistic understanding of the status of Jesus which holds him as the absolute savior apart from whom there is simply no salvation. But they disagreed on how his new status should be understood. Concerning this point, while Kung prefers to do self-criticism of the traditional Christian beliefs about the person of Jesus by holding him unique and normative for Christians, Knitter argues for the reconsideration and revision of the traditional

Christian perception of Jesus for the sake of better relations with people of other faiths.

As we pointed out, Knitter encourages Christians to revise and reinterpret their traditional beliefs and doctrines concerning the status of Jesus. In doing so, he attempts to understand Jesus as an eschatological and spirit-filled prophet with a unique God-consciousness through whom Christians could experience God. He also feels that this idea of Jesus might facilitate dialogue between Christians and non-Christians. It seems that by doing this he underestimates the faith of those who observe their prayers and worship of God through the uniqueness and normativity of the Christ-event for them. In the same way, Knitter also encourages Muslims to underestimate their own distinctive beliefs such as the finality of the Prophet Muhammad and the uniqueness of the Qur'an, for a genuine dialogue with non-Muslims. As D'Costa remarks, Knitter's position logically is a form of exclusivism⁸⁹ in the sense that for the sake of better dialogue both Christian and Muslim partner should put aside the particularities of their faiths. This sort of demand can rule out one of the most important rules of interreligious dialogue, that no one partner can or should step outside of his or her religion and suspend his or her own religious experience and beliefs.⁹⁰

Kung's self-criticism of the Christian faith in light of other faiths by holding Jesus as the unique and normative revelation of God seems to represent the mediating position. It neither absolutises nor abandons the uniqueness of the Christ event but it relativises it by restricting it to Christians. It seems that this position would help dialogue more than others, since it urges Christians to consider Jesus as God's normative revelation and savior for them and also to be open to acknowledge other religions and their religious figures as real mediations of God's grace. By doing this, it stimulates Christians to approach non-Christians religions with "openness and eagerness to learn more of God's ways in the world."⁹¹

As has been seen so far, Kung's views on the status of Jesus seems to contribute to promoting Christians' relation with people of other faiths in general and Muslims in particular. This approach certainly retains the balance which is necessary between positive Christian appreciation of non-Christian religions and Christian commitment which comes to a focus in Jesus.

From the point of view of Christian-Muslim dialogue, this approach can be regarded as a very significant development, since it provides a great

opportunity for a theological dialogue. For, a more positive Christian theological evaluation of the status of the Qur'an and the prophethood of Muhammad is closely related to the status of Jesus and the question of salvation. In this respect, in the process of dialogue, as long as Christians consider Jesus as decisive and normative for those who have chosen to follow him, and not in any universal sense for others, Christians can acknowledge that Muslims can obtain salvation by following the Qur'an and their own prophet. It seems that such an understanding does not underestimate the centrality of Jesus for Christians, but it relativises it in relation to religious figures of other religions. This means that Christians can still retain the absoluteness of Christ for themselves, but they do not assert it in relation to people of other faiths.⁹² Or, as A. Race remarks, "Jesus is 'decisive' not because he is the focus for the light everywhere in the world, but for the vision he has brought in one cultural setting ... Jesus would still remain central for the Christian faith."⁹³ Also, as Swidler emphasises, if this line of thought continues to develop, "then many of the disagreements between Christians, Jews, Muslims and others in this area will disappear. Jews and Muslims, and other religious persons will not thereby become Christians, of course, for Yeshua [Jesus] for them is not the door to the divine that he is for Christians, but perhaps their charges of blasphemy and idolatry against Christians will thereby be dissipated. But most important, the Christian tradition will thereby much more likely make sense to many contemporary Christians."⁹⁴ In the light of the findings of this chapter, we may conclude that in the dialogue process what we need is a full commitment to our own faith and its mediator, and yet at the same time an openness toward other faiths and their mediators, in the sense of acknowledging that God has made himself known and has made salvation available through those mediators also.⁹⁵ In this sense, we may conclude that openness to dialogue cannot be used as a reason for abandoning the normativity of Jesus for Christians, since to demand this is against the nature of dialogue itself.

Notes

1. John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1977).
2. Hick, "Preface", in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, p. ix.
3. Paul Knitter & John Hick, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (London: SCM Press, 1987).
4. Paul Knitter, "Preface", in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, p. vii.

5. Stanley J. Samartha, *One Christ-Many Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), p. ix; Samartha "In Search of a Revised Christology: A Response to Knitter", *Current Dialogue*, 21 (1991), pp. 30-37; For similar views see Leonard Swidler, *After the Absolute: The Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), pp. 73-113.
6. Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1993).
7. Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, p.ix.
8. This is published together with the responses of nineteen theologians in L. Swidler & P. Mojzes, eds., *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul Knitter* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997).
9. J. Stephen O'Leary, *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996).
10. O'Leary, *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth*, p. 205.
11. See Gavin D'Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990); Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); Joseph DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1992); John Sanders, *No Other Name: Can Only Christians Be Saved?* (London: SPCK, 1992); S. Mark Heim, *Salvations; Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995); Daniel B. Clendenin, *Many Gods- Many Religions; Christianity Encounters World Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995).
12. Jacques Dupuis, *Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 191.
13. Especially see, "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions", in A. Flennerly, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Dublin: Dominican Publication, 1975), ss. 738-742.
14. See Werner G. Jeanrond, "The Rationality of Faith: On Theological Methodology", Karl-Josef Kuschel & Hermann Haring, eds., *Hans Kung: New Horizons for faith and Thought* (London: SCM Press, 1993), p. 105.
15. Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian* (London: Collins, 1977), p.123.
16. Knitter stressed that this sort of understanding of the status of Jesus is not helpful for a genuine dialogue with people of other faiths (Knitter, "World Religions and the Finality of Christ: A Critique of Hans Kung's 'On Being A Christian'", in R.W. Rousseau, ed., *Christianity and Islam: The Struggling Dialogue* (Scranton: Ridge Row Press, 1985), pp.202-221.
17. Kung, "Belief in a Son of God?", in Paul Burns & John Cumming, eds., *The Bible Now: Its Nature, Meaning and Use Today* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1981),

18. Kung, "Belief in a Son of God?", pp. 143-151.
19. See Kung, *On Being a Christian; Kng, Credo: The Apostles' Creed Explained For Today; Christianity: The Religious Situation of Our Time* (London: SCM Press, 1993). When we deeply examined Kung's comparison of Jesus with the other religious figures in terms of his death in his young age, his suffering on the Cross, being an unmarried person and being as non-victorian as the Prophet Muhammad, we can easily conclude that this comparison is rather unfair. Because as a Muslim I can compare the Prophet Muhammad with Jesus in terms of his victory over his opponents, and his other specialities, and conclude that he is superior to Jesus or Jesus was a poor man. For this reason we need to abstain from making this kind of comparisons in order to show the superiority of our religious figures.
20. See John Cobb, "Inter-religious Dialogue, World Ethics and the Problem of the Humanum", in K.J. Kuschel & H. Haring, eds., *Hans Kung, New Horizons for Faith and Thought* (London: SCM Press, 1993), pp. 283-293.
21. Kung maintains that while as a "narrow-minded" and "conceited" position the absolutist regards his own truth as correct and all other claims to truth as simply wrong and leads to contempt and proselytising of other religions, the relativist considers all religions and their truth as relative or equally true, and "leads only to cheap tolerance, to 'any thing goes', to a falsely understood liberalism in which one trivialises the question of truth or no longer even dares to ask it" (Kung, *Christianity and World Religions*, pp. xviii-xix; Kung, "Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Religions: Some Theses for Clarification", in Kung & Moltmann, eds., *Christianity Among World Religions* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), pp. 120-121).
22. Kung, "Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Religions", p. 122.
23. Kung, *Christianity and World Religions*, p. 117.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 121; Kung, *Christianity*, pp. 28ff.
27. In this point, Kung refers to the Finnish New Testament scholar H. Raisanen's view concerning the significance of going back to the New Testament to re-express the doctrine of Trinity to promote Christian-Muslim understanding. Raisanen argues that "today, it is clear for the New Testament scholarship that there is hardly anything in the New Testament that resembles even remotely the doctrine of the Trinity. This insight might in itself provide a fresh starting-point for dialogue. But perhaps even more interesting is the fact that some layers of the New Testament bear a striking resemblance to the Qur'anic portrait of Jesus." (Raisanen, "The Portrait of Jesus in the Qur'an: Reflection of A Biblical Scholar", *The Muslim World*, 70 (1980), pp. 122-133.
28. Kung, "Christian self-criticism in the Light of Judaism", in R.F. Berkey & S.A. Edwards, eds., *Christology in Dialogue*, (Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1993), pp. 229-247.

29. Kung, *Ibid.*, p. 230.
30. See, Exod. 4:22f; Hos. 11:1; Jer. 31:9; Deut. 14:1; Hos. 1:10.
31. Kung, "Christian Self-Criticism in the Light of Judaism", pp. 232-233;
32. Kung, *Ibid.*, pp. 234-235.
33. Kung, *Credo: The Apostles' Creed Explained for Today* (London: SCM Press, 1993), p.59.
34. Kung, *Christianity and World Religions*, p. 129.
35. Kung, "Christian Self-Criticism in the Light of Judaism", p. 238.
36. Kung, *Ibid.*, p. 238.
37. Knitter, "Towards a Liberation Theology of Religions", in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, pp. 194-195. These comments were made by Kung personally to Knitter.
38. Kung, "What is true Religion? Toward an Ecumenical Christology", in L. Swidler, ed., *Towards the Universal Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987), p. 247; Kung, "Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Religions", 119-125; Kung, *Global Responsibility*, pp. 98-99. In these works, Kung always qualifies his defending the uniqueness and normativity of Jesus with the phrase "for us" or "for Christians".
39. Kung, "Foreword", in Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), p. ix.
40. Kung, *Global Responsibility: In Search of A New World Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1991), pp. 97-98; Kung spells out three different criteria to evaluate truth in religions. His first criterion is the humanum. According to this criterion, "a religion is true and good if and insofar as it is human, does not suppress and destroy humanity, but protects and furthers it. His second criterion is the general religious criterion. According to this criterion, "a religion is true and good if and insofar as it remains true to its own origin or canon, to its authentic 'nature', its normative scripture or figure, and constantly refers to it". His third criterion is the specifically Christian criterion. According to this criterion, "a religion is true and good if and insofar as it shows the spirit of Jesus Christ in its theory and praxis". Then he clarifies that this last criterion can only be applied directly to Christianity, not other religions: "on the basis of the self-critical question whether and to what extent the Christian religion is Christian at all" (Kung, *Global Responsibility*, pp. 97-98; Kung, "What is true Religion", pp. 244-245).
41. Kung, *Global Responsibility*, pp. 128-129
42. Kung, *Christianity and the World Religions*, pp. 23-24.
43. This shift occurred in three stages. Firstly, he moves away from his consideration of Jesus as the norma normans for not only Christians but also for those who belong to other religions, to the assertion that although he is directly the norma normans for

Christians, he is only indirectly the norma normans for non-Christians. Secondly, in his most recent essay, too, Kung seems to give up the indirect normativity of Christ for non-Christians by arguing that Christians must regard Jesus as God's normative and final revelation for themselves without "making any arrogant claims of superiority over other religions"(See Scott Cowdell, "Hans Kung and World Religions: Emergence of a Pluralist Theology", *Theology* 92 (1989), pp. 85-92; Kenneth W. Brewer, "The Uniqueness of Christ and the Challenge of the Pluralist Theology of Religions", in Kuschel & Haring, eds., *Hans Kung: New Horizons for Faith and Thought*, pp. 198-215).

44. Knitter asserts that although there are significant changes in Kung's thoughts concerning the normativity and uniqueness of Jesus Christ, he has not crossed the theological Rubicon yet. For according to Knitter, "To cross it means to recognize clearly, unambiguously, the possibility that other religions exercise a role in salvation history that is not only valuable and salvific but perhaps equal to that of Christianity; it is to affirm that there may be other saviors and revealers besides Jesus Christ and equal to Jesus Christ. It is to admit that if other religions must be fulfilled in Christianity, Christianity must, just as well, find fulfilment in them". Knitter, Hans Kung's Theological Rubicon", in Swidler, ed., *Towards a Universal Theology of Religions*, pp. 224-230. But it seems to me that Kung no longer stands on the theological Rubicon as Knitter has argued. Because according to Knitter to cross the theological Rubicon means to acknowledge the salvific value of other religious traditions without any reservations. So, in the light of the above views of Kung, we can easily conclude that he has already passed the theological Rubicon.
45. Brewer, "The Uniqueness of Christ and the Challenge of the Pluralist Theology of Religions", in *Hans Kung: New Horizons for Faith and Thought*, p. 198.
46. Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1983), p. 67; Brewer, "The Uniqueness of Christ and the Challenge of Pluralistic Theology of Religions", p. 206.
47. See, Karl Rahner, "Christianity and Non-Christian Religions", in *Theological Investigation*, vol 5 (London: Longman Todd, 1966), ss. 115-134.
48. Concerning the teaching of the Second Vatican Council see, "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions", ss. 738-742; For the examination of the Counciliar theaching of the Roman Catholic Church see also, Mahmut Aydin, *Modern Western Christian Theological Understandings of Muslims*, ss.26ff.
49. Concerning the theological development of Knitter, see Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, pp. 2-8 ; Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, pp. 3-9; also see Paul R. Eddy, "Paul Knitter's Theology of Religions: A Survey and Evangelical Response", *EQ*, 63/3, 1993, pp. 225-245.

50. Knitter, "Towards a Liberation Theology of Religions", Knitter & Hick, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, pp. 178-200; Also see Knitter "Dialogue and Liberation: Foundation for a Pluralist Theology of Religions", *The Drew Gateway*, 58/1 (1988), pp. 53.
51. Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, p. xvii.
52. Knitter, *No Other Name?: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1985), p. 6.
53. This concept is defined by Knitter as follows: "Unitive pluralism is a unity in which each religion, although losing some of its individualism (its separate age) will intensify its personality (its self-awareness through relationship). Each religion will retain its own uniqueness, but this uniqueness will develop and take on new depths by relating to other religions in mutual dependence." Knitter, *No Other Name?*, p. 9.
54. Knitter, *No Other Name?*, p. 17.
55. *Ibid.*, pp. 171-172.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
57. *Ibid.*, pp. 174-175.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 180.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 181.
60. On the contrary, Knitter maintains that: "The evolutionary process of interpretation that makes up the New Testament must continue today in the same manner in which it took place then: in continuity with what went before, preserving the past without embalming it, faithful to the past without being limited by it. Christians will be faithful to the New Testament images of Jesus, they will truly believe in these images, by allowing them to give birth to new symbols and models of who this Jesus is and how he saves. Knitter, *No Other Name?*, p. 181.
61. Knitter, *No Other Name?*, p. 181.
62. Knitter, *Towards a Liberation Theology of Religions*, p. 192.
63. *Ibid.*, pp. 191-192.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 194.
65. *Ibid.*, pp. 195-196.
66. Knitter, *Towards a Liberation Theology of Religions*, p. 196; Also see Knitter, *Interreligious Dialogue; What? Why? How?*, in L. Swidler et al, eds., *Death or Dialogue: From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue* (London: SCM Press, 1990), p. 40.
67. Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, pp. 29-30.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
69. This verse number is referred in *Jesus and the Other Names* mistakenly as Acts. 12:4.

70. Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, p. 68; in a similar vein Cracknell and Ariarajah maintain that these kinds of exclusive verses can be understood within the development of Christian thought and historical context (see Cracknell, *Towards a New Relationship*, pp. 69-109 and Ariarajah, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths* (Geneva: WCC, 1985), pp. 19-28).
71. Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, pp. 69-70.
72. See Karl Braaten, "Interreligious Dialogue in the Pluralistic Situation", *Dialogue*, 33 (1994), pp.294-298.
73. Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, pp. 73-75; Knitter, "Five Theses on the Uniqueness of Jesus", pp. 7-8.
74. Knitter, *Jesus and Other Names*, pp. 76-77; "Five Theses on the Uniqueness of Jesus", pp. 10-11.
75. Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, p. 78.
76. Hick, "Five Misgivings", in Swidler & Mojez, eds., *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul Knitter*, pp. 79-84.
77. Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, p. 79.
78. Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths* (London: SCM Press, 1995), s. 139.
79. For Hick's views on the status of Jesus Christ see, Aydin, *Modern Western Christian Theological Understandings of Muslims*, ss. 266-279.
80. Knitter, "Christian Salvation: Its Nature and Uniqueness- Interreligious Proposal", *New Theology Review*, 7/4 (1994), p. 40.
81. Knitter, "Christian Salvation", p. 41.
82. Knitter, "Response II", in Swidler, et al., eds., *Death or Dialogue*, pp. 124-133.
83. For these critics see Mark Heim, *Is Christ the Only Way? Christian Faith in a Pluralistic World*, (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1985); Heim, "Thinking about Theocentric Christology", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 24(1987), pp. 1-16; Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), pp. 71-98; J.Moltmann, "Is 'Pluralistic Theology' Useful for the Dialogue of World Religions", in Gavin D'Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), pp. 149-156; Griffiths, "The Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended" in D'Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, pp. 157- 173; Pannenberg, "Religious Pluralism and Conflicting Truth Claims", in D'Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, pp. 96-106; D'Costa, "Christian Theology and Other Religions: An Evaluation of John Hick and Paul Knitter", *Studi Missionalia*, 42(1993), pp. 168ff; for further criticism of Knitter views Michael Amaladoss, "A Simple Solution", in Swidler & Mojez, ed., *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul F. Knitter*, pp.25-28; Denise and John Carmody, "Do Knitter's Theses Take Christ's Divinity Seriously?", in Swidler & Mojez, eds., *The Uniqueness of Jesus*, pp.

- 44-49; Karl- Josef Kuschel, "'Faithful' to the New Testament", in Swidler & Mojez., eds., *The Uniqueness of Jesus*, pp. 85-93; Clark H. Pinnock, "An Evangelical Response to Knitter's Five Theses", in Swidler & Mojez., eds., *The Uniqueness of Jesus*, pp. 116-120; J. Sanders, "Idolater Indeed!", in Swidler & Mojez, eds., *The Uniqueness of Jesus*, pp. 121-125.
84. Knitter, *Interreligious Dialogue*, p. 32.
85. See Cobb, "Response I" in Swidler, et al., eds., *Death or Dialogue*, pp. 79-84.
86. D'Costa, *Christian Theology and Other Religions: An Evaluation of John Hick and Paul Knitter*, pp. 168-178.
87. Contemporary Christian views on the status of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad see, Aydin, *Modern Western Christian Theological Understandings of Muslims*, chapters 4 and 5.
88. Kung, *Towards Ecumenical Theology of Religions*, p. 123.
89. D'Costa, "The Impossibility of A Pluralist View of Religions", *Religious Studies*, 32 (1996), pp. 223-232.
90. See Swidler, "The Dialogue Decalogue: Ground Rules for Interreligious, Interideological Dialogue", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 20/1 (1983), pp. 1-4.
91. Haight, "Jesus and World Religions", *Modern Theology*, 12/3 (1996), p. 337.
92. See Mary A. Stenger, "The Understanding of Christ as Final Revelation", in Phan, ed., *Christianity and the Wider Ecumenism* (New York: Paragon House, 1990). pp. 191-205.
93. *Race, Christians and Religious Pluralism*, pp. 135-136.
94. Swidler, *After the Absolute*, p. 113.
95. See Macquarrie, "Revisiting the Christological Dimensions of Uniqueness", in Swidler & Mojez, eds., *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul Knitter*, pp. 94-99.