UNIVERSALITY AND EXCLUSIVISM

A Comparison between Catholic Theology and Pure Land Buddhism on Religious Pluralism

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One of the seemingly intractable problems in interreligious dialogue arises from the claim that one’s religion is obligatory for all (“universality”) and the only true one (“exclusivism”). The problem inherent in this claim to universality and exclusivism can be put in a nutshell: If one’s religion is universally necessary and exclusively true, which logically entails that there is nothing of spiritual and religious value in other religions capable of improving one’s own, why then go to all the trouble of taking part in interreligious dialogue, except to teach others the truths of one’s religion and to convert them to it? On the other hand, should one participate in interreligious dialogue with such an agenda, the very nature and purpose of interreligious dialogue as dialogue would be perverted, and the charge of religious imperialism hard to rebut.

This dilemma is hardly mitigated by the milder form of exclusivism labelled “inclusivism,” a major proponent of which is the Roman Catholic and Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, and which maintains that one’s religion is universally valid (“absolute”) and possesses the fullness of truth (“eschatological”) while acknowledging the existence of some truths (“seeds of the Word”) in religions other than one’s own. It is indeed difficult to imagine how a believer with the inclusivistic conviction that one’s religion already possesses the fullness of truth and that the truths possessed by other religions are ultimately derived from and inferior to one’s own, can honestly come to an interreligious conversation with a deep and sincere desire to learn from other religions. Even though inclusivism, now the dominant theology of religions in Roman
Catholic theology, may be lauded for fostering an open-minded and generous attitude toward other religions, believers of these religions may be forgiven for regarding it as patronizing and condescending.

Finally, a popular version of the pluralist stance, which holds that all religions are equally valid ways of salvation, tends to ignore radically different, at times mutually contradictory, teachings and practices among religions. Of the three theologies, the “Pluralist Hypothesis,” to use a celebrated expression of John Hick’s, arguably the foremost philosophical proponent of the pluralistic stance, is the most hospitable to other religions. However, it has been subjected to a barrage of charges, chiefly relativism, crypto-inclusivism, and abstract ahistoricism. Hick himself, as well as a host of other proponents of the pluralistic theology of religions, have put up a philosophically and theologically sophisticated and robust rebuttal of those charges.

This essay does not intend to engage the by now tiresome debates in the--- mainly Christian---theology of religions with its several variations of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Of course, despite the recent avalanche of publications on religious pluralism, the issues implicated in the theology of religions are far from being settled, with the victory, or defeat, of any, or all, of the three positions mentioned above. Further discussion is certainly needed, as is intimated by the title of this part of the consultation, “Universality and Exclusivism.” While not calling for a moratorium on, much less an abandonment of, the theology of religions as such, it seems, in my view, theologically fruitful, in tandem with developing a theology of religions that is adequate to the contemporary phenomenon of religious pluralism, to undertake a detailed comparison between two religious traditions on a specific theme.

Thus, rather than discussing the theology of religions directly in terms of universality and exclusivism, I first trace the development of the Roman Catholic theology of Christ as the
universal and uniqueness Savior and the church as the universal and unique sacrament (that is, sign and instrument) of salvation. Next, I make a highly selective presentation of the Pure Land path, focusing on three areas in which a dialogue between Roman Catholic theology and Pure Land Buddhism can contribute to a better understanding of universality and exclusivism. Third, I offer a comparative theology between Catholic theology and Pure Land Buddhism on the three issues identified. I conclude with some suggestions as to how Roman Catholic theology and Pure Land Buddhism can learn from each other in matters of truth-claims in a religiously plural world.

A preliminary terminological clarification is in order. Here by “Roman Catholic tradition” is meant not only the official teaching of the Catholic Church, often referred to as the Magisterium, but also the thought of recent theologians. For “Pure Land Buddhism” I will refer mainly to the teachings of Shinran but will also mention in passing those of his master Hōnen.

JESUS AS THE UNIVERSAL AND UNIQUE SAVIOR: THE CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

If there is a central affirmation in the Christian belief about the person and work of Jesus, it is surely that Jesus is the unique, that is, numerically one, savior of each and every human being. Four realities are contained in this affirmation, namely, Jesus, salvation, universality, and uniqueness. In the traditional teaching of the Catholic Church these four elements are taken together, literally and exclusively, to mean that personal faith in Jesus, and in him alone, is an absolutely necessary requirement for all human beings, with no exception whatsoever, to be saved, that is, to be liberated from sin and obtain eternal happiness and union with God. The operative word in the above phrase, “in the traditional teaching of the Catholic Church.” is
traditional, in the sense that the doctrine is believed always, everywhere, and by everybody, to use Vincent of Lérins’s three celebrated expressions of (semper, unique, et ab omnibus).

Exclusivistic Theology of Religions

The biblical texts commonly cited in support of this exclusivist position include John 14:6 (“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”); 1 Timothy 2:5 (Jesus is “one mediator between God and humankind”); and Acts 4:12 (“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved”). This universal necessity of faith in Jesus and the numerical uniqueness (“unicity”) of Jesus as Savior were vigorously affirmed by the magisterium of the Catholic Church down the centuries, especially in Christianity’s successive encounters with ancient Greek and Roman religions, Judaism, Islam, and the religions of Latin America, Africa, and Asia. No wonder, the exclusivistic theology of religions, which has been the dominant Christian view throughout the centuries, has consistently condemned non-Christian religions as rank superstition if not as the work of the Devil himself.

Subsequently, what is professed about Jesus is predicated of the Catholic Church. In opposition to other religions, Christianity is said to be the only true religion and the universal and necessary sign and instrument (“sacrament”) of salvation. Hence, to be saved, a person must signify his or her faith in Jesus by undergoing the ritual of baptism by which one is made a member of the church. However, in lieu of water baptism, salvation is also made available by blood baptism, that is, by suffering martyrdom in defense of the Christian faith; by an explicit desire for baptism even though such desire may not be fulfilled due to circumstances beyond one’s control, as in the case of a catechumen who dies before being baptized; and by what is called an “implicit desire,” (votum implicitum), that is, by sincerely seeking the truth and the will
of God and living a holy life according to one’s conscience, in such way that such person may be thought of as ready to explicitly desire baptism were its necessity known. Thus, salvation is said to be mediated by the church for each and every person. This doctrine is tersely encapsulated in the centuries-old axiom, “Outside the Church there is no salvation” (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*).

**Inclusivist Theology of Religions and Vatican II**

Despite the ancient roots of the belief in Jesus as the necessary, universal, and unique Savior and the church equally as the necessary, universal, and unique instrument of salvation, there have recently been attempts by a number of Catholic theologians at reconsidering these two doctrines. While not rejecting the role of Jesus and the church in mediating God’s salvation to humankind, these theologians try to interpret the traditional teachings on Jesus and the church not in an exclusivist but inclusivist sense. In particular, they balance the three seemingly exclusivist biblical texts mentioned above against other more inclusivist passages of both the Old and New Testaments which affirm God’s saving action outside Jesus and the church. In addition, attempts are made to place the axiom “Outside the church there is no salvation” in the historical contexts that gave rise to it and to argue that it is illegitimate to universalize its applicability to other contexts such as contemporary religious pluralism. Finally, they retrieve and develop the universalistic, admittedly less numerous and prominent, impulses and affirmations, especially in patristic and medieval theologies, that acknowledge God’s gracious presence and saving action among all peoples and all religions.

These theologies of religions bore fruit at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), especially in the Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity of the Church (known by its Latin title *Ad Gentes*) and the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (known by its Latin title *Nostra Aetate*). Of the two, the latter is the shortest conciliar document,
its original Latin text being composed of only 1,141 words, in 41 sentences and five paragraphs, and yet one with an enormous and enduring impact on interreligious dialogue.

With regard to Asian religions, the text makes the following highly significant statement:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions [primal religions, Hinduism, and Buddhism]. It has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women.... The church, therefore, urges its sons and daughters to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, together with their social life and culture.¹

With regard to Muslims, the Declaration states:

The church as high regard for Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to humanity. They endeavor to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God’s plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own. Although not acknowledging as God, they venerate Jesus as a prophet; his virgin Mother they also honor, and even at times devoutly invoke. Further, they await the day of judgment and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead. For this reason they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, alms-giving and fasting.²

The Declaration devotes the longest of its five paragraphs to the relationship between Israel and the church. The reason for this is not simply that without Judaism Christianity would not have existed, and therefore the relationship between the two religions is unique and deserves special attention, but also because historically Nostra Aetate began its life as a document entitled Decretum de Iudaeis [Decree on the Jews]. Following his meeting in 1960 with the Jewish

¹ The English text of NA is taken from Vatican Council II: Constitutions Decrees Declarations, general editor Austin Flannery (Northport: Costello, 2007), 569-74.

² Nostra Aetate, no. 3.
French historian Jules Isaac (1877-1963), who pointed out to him the terrible impact of the Christian “teaching of contempt” toward Jews and Judaism, especially in the Holocaust, Pope John XXIII charged Cardinal Augustin Bea, head of the Secretariat for Christian Unity, to draft a document on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity for consideration by the council. Eventually, the Decree on the Jews was expanded to include the attitude of the church toward other religions.

What is of interest here is not the details of Vatican II’s teaching on non-Christian religions, but the sociopolitical, cultural, religious, and theological trends that have contributed to the radical change in the Catholic Church’s attitude toward other religions. To be sure, Vatican II has not rejected the traditional belief in the universality and uniqueness of both Christ and the church in God’s plan of salvation. However, it is indisputable that these doctrines are no longer interpreted in the exclusivistic sense. As can be seen in the above quotations, the council’s position may be described as inclusivistic as it exhorts Catholics to “acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, together with their social life and culture.”

Whether Vatican II’s adoption of an inclusivistic theology of religions, however momentous in the history of the Catholic Church, is fully adequate to the contemporary context of religious pluralism calls for a critical evaluation, and whether it can benefit from a dialogue with Pure Land Buddhism are the questions to be explored. To anticipate our comparison between the two religious traditions, I suggest three areas in which a fruitful conversation can be carried out: first, the sources and method of theological reflection; second, the role of the Spirit in the history of salvation; and third, the relation between church and the kingdom of God. Before undertaking this comparison a brief explanation of teaching of Pure Land Buddhism,
especially as formulated by Shinran, is in order.

SHINRAN AND THE PATH TO THE PURE LAND

My intention here is not to give an overview of the teachings of Shinran, much less of Hōnen and Jōdo Shinshū, of which excellent studies, both scholarly and popular, are readily available. Rather I will only highlight three areas in which a comparative theology between Catholic theology and Shinran can, I believe, open up fruitful avenues in approaching the issues of universality and exclusivism. I first show how a re-interpretation---and even a reversal---of certain traditional teachings of Pure Land Buddhism were made by Shinran himself in response to events and contexts in which these teachings were to be put into practice. Second, I will examine Shinran’s teaching on the path to the Pure Land, especially the nature of Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow and the nembutsu. Third, I discuss Shinran’s view of the community constituted by the practitioners of the nembutsu. In the next section I reprise these three themes in dialogue with Catholic theology in terms of theological method, pneumatology, and ecclesiology respectively in a move from exclusivistic universalism to inclusivistic pluralism.

Innovative Interpretation of Tradition

Except for his banishment to Echigo (1207-1211) and his activities of teaching and establishing meeting places (jodos) in the Kantō region until his return to Kyoto in 1234, Shinran (1173-1263) led the quiet and secluded life of a scholar and did not attempt to play a public role in the turbulent society of his times. There are however a number of significant events, both personal and public, that decisively shape his mode of thinking and, as a consequence, his own
re-interpretation of the teachings of Pure Land Buddhism. As we will see below, this mode of thinking, which correlates context and method, is an effective way to move away from an exclusivistic theology of religions to one that is appropriate and adequate to our religiously plural context.

An essential element of this scholarly method is an explicit acknowledgement that religious beliefs, and the doctrines that explicate them, do not as it were were drop down directly from heaven but arise from, in, and for specific sociopolitical, cultural, and religious contexts. Contexts are not merely the spatial and temporal circumstances in which religious beliefs and doctrines are formulated; on the contrary, they constitute the very sources and resources, modes of thought and patterns of reasoning, and categories and language, for (re)interpreting the foundational texts of one’s religion. Thus, the truth of the texts upon which one’s religion is based is not static and unchanging, however orthodox, canonical, and sacred these texts are judged to be. On the contrary, their truth can only shine forth (Wahrheit as Erscheinung), and their applicability transparent, when the texts are (re)interpreted anew for each generation. This hermeneutical act requires on the part of the interpreter both a deep knowledge of one’s own religious tradition and an intimate familiarity with the contemporary contexts.

This requirement is amply fulfilled by Shinran, who is both steeped in Pure Land Buddhism, by virtue of personal training as well as scholarly study, and conversant with the challenges of the sociopolitical and religious situation of his times. In 1181, at the age of nine, he entered monastic life at the Tendai monastery of Enryakuji on Mount Hiei. Of Shinran’s life on Mount Hiei little is known, except that most probably as a “monk of the practice hall” (dōsō), he regularly performed the Tendai practice of “thinking on Amida Buddha” and chanting the nembutsu (Namu Amida Butsu). Besides devotional practices, Shinran, as is abundantly
demonstrated in his own writings, also possesses an extensive and profound knowledge of the teachings of Pure Land Buddhism, as they are mediated by the seven Pure Land patriarchs, the two Indians Nāgārjuna (ca 150-250) and Vasubhandu (4th century), the three Chinese T’an-luan (476-542?), Tao-ch’o (562-645), and Shan-tao (613-684), and the two Japanese Genshin (942-107) and Hōnen (1133-1212).

At the age of twenty-nine, with his long-standing religious practice and brilliant scholarly achievements, Shinran could legitimately expect to enjoy a brilliant career at Mount Hiei. However, several dramatic, and traumatic, events and turning-points compelled him to reevaluate even the most basic teachings of Pure Land Buddhism. Here, clearly, contexts, both personal and sociopolitical, serve as the source and resource for a radical re-interpretation, and even rejection, of hallowed beliefs and practices.

After two decades of monastic life, Shinran came to a painful realization of his total inability to achieve the goal of Pure Land Buddhism on his own efforts. Furthermore, he was disillusioned by the moral laxity and worldly corruption within the monasteries themselves. In search of a future course for his life Shinran left Mount Hiei in 1201 and undertook a hundred-day retreat at the temple dedicated to Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva (Kannon) in Rokkakudō. On the ninety-fifth day, Prince Shōtoku (574-621), the alleged founder of the temple, is reported to appear to Shinran in a dream, and Shinran took this as an encouragement for him to look for a way to achieve the goal of Pure Land Buddhism not on his own efforts but on the merits and compassion of the Buddha.

It is at this critical juncture of his spiritual development that Shinran became a disciple of Hōnen, his senior by forty years. Like Shinran, Hōnen had studied and practiced Tendai Pure Land teachings in Enryakuji. In 1175, however, he descended Mount Hiei and moved to
Yoshimizu in the eastern hills of Kyoto, where he began teaching the sole practice of chanting the *nembutsu* to people of all walks of life. Shinran studied with Hōnen for six years (1201-1207), whose *Senjakushū* (“Singled-Out Collection”) he was permitted to copy, and eventually his life and thought were deeply interwoven with his master’s. Shinran fully subscribes to Hōnen’s teaching that the recitation of the *nembutsu* is all that is required for rebirth into the Pure Land and that all are capable of this rebirth, not because of their merits, but because of Amida Buddha’s fulfillment of his Primal Vow to save all who say his Name. Accepting this new teaching brought Shinran to a complete reversal of the traditional teaching on the way to enter the Pure Land, as he explains it in his magnum opus *Kyōgyōshinchō* [*A Collection of Passages Revealing the True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way*].

Furthermore, Shinran’s personal life was turned topsy-turvy by his association with Hōnen, whose teaching was accused, especially by the older Buddhist institutions in Nara and on Mount Hiei, of fomenting antinomian and immoral behavior. In 1207, at the request of the authorities of the Kōfuku-ji temple in Nara, Hōnen’s teaching on the *nembutsu* was banned by order of the emperor, and Hōnen and seven others, including Shinran, were exiled from the capital city Kyoto, Hōren to the island of Shikoku, and Shinran to Echigo. Furthermore, both Hōren and Shinran were stripped of their Tendai ordinations and were laicized. For the latter, this marked a complete break with Mount Hiei. In 1211, both master and disciple were pardoned, and while Hōran immediately returned to Kyoto and died a year later, Shinran and his wife Eshinni, whom he had married in 1210, remained in Echigo until 1214 and then moved to Hitachi (present-day Ibaraki).

One incident at this time illustrates well how Shinran had radically changed his understanding of Pure Land teaching and practice. On the way to Hitachi, Shinran resolved to
chant the three Pure Land sutras one thousand times for the benefit of all beings. However, part way through, he gave up the recitation, realizing that this recitation represented a residue attachment to the old teaching that something is required for salvation beyond reciting the nembutsu and entrusting to the Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow. He also continued Hōnan’s practice of teaching the path to the Pure Land through the sole recitation of the nembutsu to people of all walks of life, especially the peasants and the illiterates.

The only purpose of the preceding highly selected biographical reflections is to show how contexts, both personal and public, have forced Shinran to reinterpret, and even reject, certain fundamental beliefs and practices of Pure Land Buddhism. Such revisionist hermeneutics, far from betraying the Tradition, renders it intelligible, credible, and practicable for people who are not the immediate targeted readers of the sacred books of Pure Land Buddhism. It will be argued that in a similar manner Catholic theologians who attempt to move beyond the exclusivistic theology of religions are challenged to do so by the different contexts which the older exclusivistic theology of religions could neither anticipate nor accommodate. Let’s now see how Shinran re-interprets the key teachings of Pure land Buddhism.

**True Entrusting (Shinjin) in Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow and the Nembutsu Leading to Enlightenment**

Without undue oversimplification it may be said that the heart of Shinran’s teaching on the possibility of salvation for all sentient beings in the form of birth in the Pure Land is encapsulated in four deeply intertwined realities: Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow (the Eighteenth Vow) is the sole agent of salvation; the nembutsu, (Namu Amida Butsu) its sole means, shinjin (faith or true entrusting) its sole mode; and enlightenment its sole goal. This is Shinran’s deepest
and unshakeable conviction, epitomized in the four-word abbreviation of the title of his magnum opus Kyōgyōshinshō, a belief that he himself reached after a three-stage conversion.

The kyō (teaching), which Shinran expounds in the first chapter of his work, is the “true teaching” that Amida, the Buddha of Immeasurable Light and Immeasurable Life, has made the Primal Vow, the Eighteenth, as reported in the Larger Pure Land Sutra, in which he, out of compassion and love, promised to save all sentient beings before reaching Buddhahood.

The gyō (“true” or “great practice”), which is explained in the second chapter, refers to the recitation of the name of the Tathāgata Buddha, the nembutsu, which is said to be the one true religious practice and sole means to achieve birth in the Pure Land.

The shin or shinji or shingyō (faith or true entrusting) describes the requisite attitude in reciting the nembutsu. Here it is most important to understand Shinran’s teaching on faith correctly, which he presents in chapter three of his book. Shinran distinguishes three stages of his own conversion to true faith, which he describes by means of an idiosyncratic interpretation of the nineteenth, twentieth, and eighteenth vows respectively. In the first stage of the ethical life, represented by the eighteenth vow, a person tries to achieve birth in the Pure Land by “performing virtuous deeds,” such as good conduct, moral rectitude, religious piety, and fulfillment of all moral duties. Because this practice, good though it is, still remains tainted by egoistic concerns, Shinran tells us, it leads to birth not in Amida Buddha’s true Pure Land but in what he calls “the forest of twin śāla trees,” located at the fringes of the Pure Land.

In the second stage, represented by the twentieth vow, a person abandons doing the “virtuous deeds” and good works and only recites the nembutsu, the “cultivation of the basis of all virtue,” as the means to enter the Pure Land. This stage is higher than the first, and in this
sense Shinran calls it the “true path.” However, Shinran tells us, it is not effective in producing birth in the true Pure Land but only in what Shinran calls the “jeweled prison” or the “womb palace” of the Pure Land. The basic reason for this deficiency is that the practitioner of the nembutsu at this stage fails to realize that salvation does not and cannot come from one’s merits in reciting the nembutsu as such (“self-power”) but only from the power of Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow, his fulfillment of this vow, and his transference of his merits to the person reciting the nembutsu (“other-power”). At this second stage the person reciting the nembutsu is still caught in the trap of merit accumulation and self-reliance, a form of ego-assertion blocking the working of other-power.

The third and final stage occurs in the eighteenth vow, when the person recites the nembutsu with shin or shinjin (faith). Recognizing the bankruptcy of the first two ways of self-reliance (“self-power”), the person acknowledges the total rule of deep-rooted and ineradicable “blind passion” over one’s thought, speech, and action, and through a “deep hearing” of the Dharma, is “grasped never to be abandoned” by the power and compassion of Amida Buddha’s Name, which is invoked in the nembutsu. In this “one-thought moment practice” the person is awakened to the working of Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow, since the recitation of the nembutsu is not initiated by the devotee but is first and foremost the beckoning call from Amida Buddha who manifests himself in his Name. It is the “other-power” of the Name that brings about the supreme enlightenment for the “foolish being,” bound by the “karmic evil” of radical ignorance and blind passion. In this transformation by the power the Amida Buddha’s compassion, the person is “made to become so by itself” (jinen), that is, enabled to achieve one’s fullest potential, a life of spontaneity, naturalness, and gratitude to the Name. Reciting the nembutsu in faith requires of course, an enormous inner struggle, as Shinran himself experienced at the age of twenty-nine,
but it is an effortless practice since it is not based on the calculating “self-power” but relies entirely on the Primal Vow of the Buddha of Immeasurable Light (wisdom) and Immeasurable Life (compassion).

Lastly, *shō* (enlightenment or “true confirmation”), which Shinran discusses in the fourth chapter of his book, constitutes the ultimate reality to which *kyō*, *gyō*, and *shin* lead all sentient beings. This goal is described in a variety of expressions: Nirvāṇa, eternal bliss, utmost quiescence, unconditioned Dharma-body, Dharma-nature, thusness, emptiness, and Buddhahood. Four important aspects of enlightenment must be kept in mind. First, as with *shin*, *shō* is not the outcome of the devotee’s recitation of the *nembutsu* but is purely a blessing bestowed on the devotee by the Amida Buddha’s infinite compassion. Secondly, enlightenment can occur here and now through faith; contrary to the long-standing Pure Land belief and practice of deathbed *nembutsu* ceremonies, Shinran holds that believers need not wait for the moment of dying to experience enlightenment and assurance of salvation. Death is not the moment confirming one’s salvation; rather, the first instant of faith is. Thirdly, enlightenment establishes the person in a state of “non-retrogression” (*futaiten* or *ayuiotchi*), that is, there is no danger of falling back from faith into samsaric existence. The person endowed with faith is equal to the Tathāgatas and is the same as Maitreya. Fourthly, in accord with the Boddhisattva tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Shinran believes the selfless and compassionate enlightenment is not for the benefit of oneself alone but also for the benefit of all. But contrary to earlier Pure Land thinkers, Shinran considers the return to the world of samsara to save others to be the working of Amida who is the sole author of both the enlightenment and the return from it to the world.

**The World of the Saved**
The last aspect of Shinran’s teaching that will be of great relevance for our study of universality and exclusivism in the theology of religions is the kind of people favored by the Primal Vow of the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life. Of course, the Primal Vow promises to “embrace all and forsake none,” excluding no one from the gift of salvation. In practice, however, because the efficacy of the *nembutsu* requires giving up self-reliance and “self-power,” those in position of authority, both religious and political, are unlikely to practice it. On the contrary, the powerless and the lowly, the ignorant and the poor, are naturally disposed to rely on the “other-power” of the Name. They possess little or no resources to fulfill the practices enjoined by the Eightfold Path of morality (*śīla*), mental concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*prajñā*).

As mentioned above, both Hōnen and Shenran addressed their teachings to the lower class of their days. The “world of the saved” is made up of “bits of tiles and pebbles transmuted into gold.” These “bits of tiles and pebbles” in medieval Japan include people who had to make a living by killing such as hunters and fisher-folk; the uneducated such as laborers and peasants; people who took advantage of others such as merchants and peddlers; monks and nuns who violated the precepts (Shinran himself included since he broke the vow of celibacy and got married); and women of all classes.

Shinran’s “option for the poor”---to use a well-known expression of Christian liberation theology---is also motivated by his belief in the age of *mappō*, which he explains in the last chapter of his book, and according to which history is divided into three ages: (1) the age of the true Dharma (*shōbō*), corresponding to the first five hundred years after Śakyamuni Buddha’s death; (2) the age of imitated Dharma (*zōhō*), lasting for the next thousand years; and (3) the period of the decline of the Dharma (*mappō*), extending another ten thousand years. In the first age, people could achieve enlightenment by following the teaching of Śakyamuni; in the second
age, by practicing the Eightfold Path. But in the current age of the Dharma’s decline, in which evils flourish and the world is afflicted by five corruptions, which are caused by the events of the age, heretical views, evil inclinations, weakened capacities of sentient beings, and shortened life span, the only way to enlightenment and birth in the Pure Land left is the nembutsu, which relies exclusively on the “other-power” of the Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow.” Going against the traditional teaching of Buddhist orthodoxy of his age, Shinran insists that the evil person is the primary object of Amida’s Primal Vow. He tells at length the story of King Ajātaśatru who was saved by the compassion of the Buddha even if he had murdered his own father to ascend the throne. Perhaps it is more accurate to say: because of his murderous, since the king had no spiritual resource for salvation except the compassion of Amida’s Primal Vow. Hence, Shinran’s paradoxical claim: “Even the good person is saved, how much more so the evildoer.”

Needless to say, much more can be said about Shinran’s and Jōdo Shinshū’s revisionist re-interpretation of Mahāyāna Buddhism to suit the needs of the mappō age and their teachings on Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow, the nembutsu, faith, and enlightenment, and the kinds of people favored by the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life. But enough has been said, I trust, to establish a launching-pad for a dialogue with Catholic theology about universality and exclusivism in a theology of religions appropriate for our age of religious pluralism. I will carry out this dialogue in three areas: theological hermeneutics, pneumatology, and ecclesiology.
CATHOLIC THEOLOGY AND SHINRAN IN DIALOGUE ON UNIVERSALITY AND EXCLUSIVISM

In this final section I will revisit Shinran’s three teachings expounded above and explore whether there are functional homologies—neither identical nor parallel teachings—between them and Catholic theologies of religion, with the hope that a comparative theology of religions will emerge, at least in outline.

New Contexts, New Interpretations

One obvious common feature between Shinran and his followers on the one hand and Catholic theologians of religions on the other is that both groups recognize the need of a revisionist hermeneutics of the Tradition. This hermeneutical approach is instigated by new, not rarely disorienting, personal and societal/ecclesial contexts and has led to an extensive modification, and even a rejection, of the traditional claim of universality and exclusivism for one’s founder and one’s religious community. In the case of Shinran, we have noted his spiritual crisis at the age of twenty-nine sparked by his realization of the insufficiency of the Old Buddhism with its emphasis on “self-power,” his discipleship to Honan, his reduction to the lay state, his exile, his teaching activities among the “bad” people, his own three-stage conversion, and his discovery of the “other-power” of Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow and the absolute and sole sufficiency of the nembutsu.

Roman Catholic theologians working shortly before Vatican II and in the fifty years since its conclusion have encountered new contexts that demanded new interpretations of the traditional teaching on the universality and unicity of Jesus as the Savior and of the church as the sacrament of salvation. Their revisionist interpretation of these two teachings have led most of
them to abandon the exclusivistic theology of religions, with most of them adopting, in the wake of the council, an inclusivistic theology of religions, while not a few moving toward a pluralistic version of it, so much so that the exclusivistic theology of religion can no longer be regarded as the “traditional” teaching of the Catholic Church in the sense of being accepted “always, everywhere, and by all.” Its dominance has been taken over by the inclusivistic stance.

The reaction of the episcopal magisterium, especially the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), has been extremely cautious, veering between exclusivism and inclusivism, but condemning pluralism for its alleged relativism. In some cases the CDF has condemned the writings of theologians it considers dangerous for the faith. In fact, its disciplinary measures are not different from those of the authorities of the Buddhist monasteries in Nara and on Mount Hiei against Hōnen and Shinran.

Space does not allow a full description of the new contexts that provided the sources and resources, modes of thought and patterns of reasoning, and categories and language for a re-interpretation/rejection of the Catholic older exclusivistic theology of religions. Suffice to mention the following. First and foremost, the rise of modernity with the domination of technical rationality and of Enlightenment philosophy with its relentless rejection of religious authority and wholesale adoption of pure reason as a way of knowing, and lately, the spread of postmodern thought with its suspicion of meta-narratives and celebration of differences and particularities, all these cultural forces have shaken to the core the church’s claims to universality and exclusivism for Jesus and itself.

Second, within Catholic theology itself, there was a ressourcement (literally “return to the sources”) movement that promotes a retrieval of ancient sources, especially patristic and medieval, that are imbued with a more positive attitude toward other religions. Concomitant with
ressourcement is the aggiornamento (literally “updating”) movement that encourages a reformulation of Christian doctrines in light of the signs of the time. With regard to non-Christian religions themselves, a more profound and accurate study of their teachings and practices has brought to light points of contact and deep similarities as well as real differences between these religions and Christianity that invite a sympathetic comparison and eschew blanket judgments and unjust condemnations. Furthermore, there has been a radical change in the understanding and practice of the Christian mission from proselytism and conversion to a humble dialogue in which there is a sincere desire to be enriched by other religions. Above all, the widespread practice of interreligious dialogue, supported by official institutions and organizations at the Vatican, international, national, and local levels, has generated a veritable avalanche of practical activities and scholarly studies and conferences that highlight the irreplaceable role of religions in building interreligious harmony, justice, peace, and ecological integrity. Last but not least, deep friendships among people of different faiths and even double religious belonging offer unparalleled opportunities for life-transforming interreligious experiences.

It would be impossible to understand the changes in the Catholic theology of religions, especially as enshrined in Vatican II’s documents such as Nostra Aetate and Ad Gentes, without taking into account the new cultural, ecclesiastical, and religious contexts that emerged since the second half of the twentieth century. These new contexts, as mentioned above, are not simply the spatial venues and temporal specificities for theological reflection, but constitute the mode of thinking and theoretical frameworks for a new and never-ending re-interpretation of ancient doctrines. Thus, the hermeneutical task that Hōnen and Shinran carried out with respect to Tendai Buddhism in thirteenth-century Japan, rejuvenating and emending its doctrines and
practice in response to the demands and challenges of the mappō age is now reprised by Catholic theologians with regard to the church’s teaching on the universality and exclusivity of Jesus and the church as Savior and sacrament of salvation respectively, with no less innovative and radical transformations.

**Shinran’s Primal Vow and the Holy Spirit**

Similarities between the teachings of Shinran, and more broadly, Jōdo Shinshū, and Christianity have long been noticed, especially by Protestant theologians. The great theological luminary Karl Barth himself has singled out at least six teachings that invite comparison: the centrality of grace, original sin, vicarious satisfaction, justification by faith alone, gift of the Holy Spirit, and thankful attitude.

One area calling for deeper reflection is what Barth terms the gift of the Holy Spirit, and I will do so, but without Barth’s Christocentric and exclusivistic theology of religions. My basic thesis is that first, there is a functional homology between Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow and the Holy Spirit of the Christian faith and secondly, a universalistic and pluralistic theology of religions can be articulated on the basis of the universal saving action of the Primal Vow/the Holy Spirit, always, everywhere, and for all.

As mentioned above, it is the Primal Vow that is the sole cause and agent of salvation in the form of birth in the Pure Land. The *nembutsu* is first and foremost the beckoning call from Amida Buddha who manifests himself in his Name to which the devotee responds in faith, and in that thought-moment (*ichinen*), thanks solely to this “other-power,” reaches enlightenment. Often in comparative theology the stress has been placed on the similarity between the “other-power” which is the working of Amida Buddha in the devotee and the wholly gratuitous action
of God in justifying the sinner by faith alone. That there is such similarity is beyond doubt. But there is, I submit, a deeper similarity that goes beyond the action of Amida Buddha and the Christian God and touches on who/what Amida Buddha and the Holy Spirit are.

Mahāyāna Buddhism speaks of three Buddha-bodies. Through their practice bodhisattvas realize “dharma-body,” which is reality itself and completely transcends any spatial and temporal conceptualizations. They can then manifest their dharma-body in two other kinds of body: the “fulfilled” or “enjoyment body,” which is the form with which they appear to their devotees in their lands, and the “transformed” or “accommodated body,” which is the Buddha’s temporary appearances as living beings in the historical time of samsaric existence, such as the individual man of the Śākya clan named Gautama who lived in India about 2500 years ago. The three kinds of bodies do not refer to three different Buddhas; every Buddha possesses all three bodies, though the fulfilled/enjoyment body and the transformed/accommodated body find their foundation in the dharma-body.

Within this three-body scheme, Amida Buddha is the fulfilled/enjoyment body in which the formless dharma-body manifests itself. Like the dharma-body, of which Amida Buddha is the fulfilled/enjoyment body appearing to his devotees, he stands beyond human perception and conceptualization and is visible only to those who have achieved wisdom. What distinguishes Amida Buddha from other bodhisattvas and their fulfilled/enjoyment bodies, is his ability to be present to all living beings, always and everywhere, no matter their capacities for spiritual practice, and having taken the Primal Vow to save all sentient beings, without any exception, he brings them all to enlightenment or birth in the Pure Land by himself acting in them through their recitation of his Name. Thus Amida Buddha is known as Infinite Light, Infinite Life, and name. Before proceeding to explore the similarities between Amida Buddha and the Primal Vow
with the Holy Spirit of the Christian faith, it would helpful to give a very brief summary of the doctrine of the Trinity.

In Christian theology, “spirit” refers both to God and to the Third Person in the Trinity (the Holy Spirit). First, “spirit” can refer to God as spirit (with the lower-case s). John 4:24 says: “God is spirit (pneuma to theos).” Note that in the original Greek, there is no article before pneuma [spirit]. (King James Version translates the phrase as: “God is a spirit,” adding the indefinite article a.) Second, there is no verb is; it is implied. Third, pneuma stands at the beginning of the sentence, putting emphasis on the immaterial nature of God as spirit. What is meant by “God is spirit” is not spelled out but must be determined by examining the biblical usage of the term pneuma. At a minimum, if by “spirit” (note the lower-case of s) is meant “non-material,” then many religions, if they are theistic, can agree with John 4:24 that “God is spirit.”

Secondly, in Christian theology, it is believed that there is only one God (one “substance” or “essence” or “nature”) but that this one God is Father, Son, and Spirit (three “persons”). The terms “substance,” “essence” and “nature” on the one hand and the term “person” on the other are not used in the Bible to distinguish between God’s substance or nature and the three divine persons. Later, bishops and theologians, especially at the ecumenical council at Chalcedon (451), took over profane Greek terms such as ousia [being], physis [nature] to refer to God’s essence (what God is) and prosopon [mask] and hypostasis [substance] to refer to the three “persons” in God (who God is).

Using these terms early Christian theologians want to express the fact that Christians experience the one divine “being” acting in the world in three distinct “persons”: as Father (whose children they are), as Son incarnated in Jesus (whose brothers and sisters they are), and as Spirit (by whose grace and power they are made children of the Father and brothers and sisters
of Jesus). Christians are convinced that “Father,” “Son,” and “Spirit” are not merely impersonal “ways” or “modes” of God’s self-expression and activities in the world, as if they were interchangeable “masks” (like the actor’s) worn by the one and same God. Rather they are experienced as distinct “realities” of the one God.

Thus, Christians relate to the Father as his sons and daughters, not as his brothers and sisters; similarly, they relate to the Son Jesus as his brothers and sisters, and not his sons and daughters; and they relate to the Spirit not as “his” sons and daughters, nor as “his” brothers and sisters, but as the power enabling them to be what they are in relation to the Father and the Son. (I put “his” in quotation marks when referring to the Spirit because whereas “Father” and “Son” are masculine in Greek, and therefore “his” is grammatically appropriate, in Greek Spirit (pneuma) is neuter and therefore, grammatically speaking, the impersonal “it” would be more appropriate. It was not until the council of Constantinople in 381 that the “personality” of the Spirit was officially affirmed.) Greek theologians use the terms hypostasis or prosopon, whereas Latin theologians use the term persona, to refer to the Father, the Son and the Spirit, even though their secular usage may be misleading if applied to the Trinity without careful modifications.

When we move to consider what Christian faith says about the presence and activities of the Holy Spirit in human history, in each human being, and indeed in the cosmos as a whole, similarities between Amida Buddha and his Primal Vow and the Holy Spirit come to plain view. From the Hebrew Bible, Christian faith inherits the notion of Spirit as wind (ruah), that is, a force of immense power, invisible, irresistible, unpredictable, and uncontrollable, yet also a quiet, gentle and refreshing breeze. Ruah also means breath, and as such Spirit imparts life and vitality into every living creature. Ruah also means air in motion, and as such Spirit is in perpetual movement and action, energy at work, present always and everywhere to create and recreate, to
sustain, to order, to renew, and to revive all things. Finally, as *pneuma*, Spirit is the living God, who infuses new life into his people, filling them with wisdom, courage, and power to enhance their natural abilities.

In the New Testament, Spirit is given the title of “Holy Spirit,” a rather rare title in the Hebrew Scripture, but abundant in the New Testament. The reason for this radical alteration in terminology is because the New Testament wants to testify to the overwhelming experience that God as Spirit imparts holiness to the people of God, transforming them from sinners to a holy people as God himself is holy. In particular, the Holy Spirit is seen acting in Jesus’ entire life, from conception to ministry to death and resurrection, empowering him to perform his mission effectively.

The Holy Spirit is also present in the church, from its very beginning at Pentecost to its expansion throughout the world through the mission of the church. For individual persons, the Holy Spirit functions as the inner force, infinite light and infinite life, who acts in them and with them, equipping them with all kinds of spiritual gifts or “charisms,” so that they can achieve wisdom and knowledge and come to eternal life.

Of special interest here is the emphasis in later Christian theology on the justifying, sanctifying, and saving work of the Holy Spirit as a gracious, gratuitous, and free gift. Humans cannot do anything to deserve it, not simply because they are sinners, and therefore radically incapable of doing anything meritorious, but also because the gift of eternal life itself transcends all human nature and capability, since it is divine life itself. Like birth in the Pure Land, participation in divine life cannot be earned; grace is said to be “prevenient grace,” coming before and sustaining the human will in its move to God. Indeed, it is taught by the council of Trent (1547) that justification is wholly and totally gratuitous, because “nothing that precedes
justification, neither nor works, merit the grace of justification.”

Finally, the Holy Spirit is confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed to be the “Giver of Life.” As Giver of Life, the Holy Spirit is not just something created in us called “grace”; he is Uncreated Grace Itself. In a similar way, Amida Buddha is not just a finite, albeit powerful force dwelling and working in the believers. He is the Buddha of Infinite Light and Infinite Life. Only as such can Amida give wisdom and compassion to all. The Primal Vow is not something he has done on behalf of sinners; The Primal Vow constitutes Amida and Amida is the Primal Vow, just as grace is created by the Holy Spirit because as Uncreated Grace he is the Giver of Gift.

The “Preferential Option for the Poor”

One of the most influential and widespread theological movement in recent decades is the theology of liberation. Though God’s love is bestowed upon all without distinction, and God’s will to save is universal, Jesus’s ministry makes it abundantly clear that God has a “preferential,” not exclusive, “love for the poor.” By “poor” is meant of course the economically poor, but the category includes any person marginalized or oppressed for whatever reason, be it race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, profession, sinfulness, religion, etc. Like Hōnan and Shinran, Jesus was persecuted and finally killed by political and religious authorities, precisely because of his message of God’s preferential option for the poor and of universal inclusiveness.

Shinran’s special love for “bits of tiles and pebbles” of his times strikes a sympathetic chord in contemporary Christian theology. And his reason for thinking why the “poor” are naturally inclined to accept the “other-power” of the Primal Vow is the same as that of Jesus, that is, the poor do not have anything to rely on for their well-being, material and spiritual, except
God’s all-powerful promise of salvation directed preferentially to them. It is not their moral
goodness that can lay claim on God’s compassionate love. It is their “poverty,” because of which
they have no “self-power” and must rely on the “other-power” of a being of infinite light and life.
It is an accident that many contemporary Catholic theologians have proposed a pluralistic
theology of religions taking as point of departure God’s preferential option for the poor.

By way of conclusion, it seems that a dialogue between Shinran (and by extension, Jōdo
Sinhū) and Catholic theology in terms of theological hermeneutics, universalistic pneumatology,
and liberationist ecclesiology can provide useful insights into how to construct a theology of
religions that is appropriate to our age of religious pluralism.