

*Inauguration and Installation of the*  
**CORNELIUS CARDINAL SIM  
PROFESSORIAL CHAIR IN  
THEOLOGY AND DIALOGUE**

*September 16, 2021*

**CHRISTIAN INSTITUTE FOR**

**CHRISTE**

**THEOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT**

*In Memoriam*



Inaugural Ecclesiastical Patron

His Eminence

**CORNELIUS CARDINAL SIM**

(Sep 16, 1951 – May 29, 2021)

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The Christian Institute for Theological Engagement (CHRISTE) is a gathering of Christian scholars and specialised practitioners seeking to:

- 1) engage in ecumenical Christian thought with special focus on cross-disciplinary studies relevant to contextual issues impacting contemporary society; and
- 2) promote the study of Christian Theology and Interfaith Dialogue among the Christian populace in order to facilitate a germination of Christian theological reflection.

CHRISTE cultivates an ecumenical Christian orientation to promote a common witness. We embrace a generous theological stance that is guided by reverence for the Great Tradition of the Christian faith, that is, a faith shaped by the ecumenical creeds of the ancient undivided church.

CHRISTE bases its theological interactions on academic research and specialised professional practices. Our academic work and theological reflections are communicated through lectures, interviews, seminars, forums, and writings. These are published either in digital forms through social media or in print and made accessible to people globally.

CHRISTE interacts primarily but not exclusively with the following concerns:

- Ecumenical dialogue
- Interreligious dialogue
- Inculturation
- Women and children in society
- Ecological concerns
- Modernity
- Spirituality
- Morality and ethics
- Socio-economic matters
- Colonial history

## CHARTER AND AFFILIATION

CHRISTE is a non-profit academic institution and not an ecclesiastical one, although it is open to collaborate with and be of service to ecclesiastical institutions. It is chartered as a Research Institute under the prerogative of the United Nations Treaty Series 49006/49007. This means that CHRISTE comes under the legal governance of international law, which is consistent with the global character of the Institute.

By virtue of its charter, CHRISTE is also an affiliated Research Institute of the School of Theology and Interfaith Studies belonging to *Pôle Universitaire Euclide* (a specialised intergovernmental institution existing to provide postgraduate education for diplomats and senior civil servants of participating countries as well as employees of the United Nations).



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## ECCLESIASTICAL PATRON



**Most Reverend Dr James Thoppil, DD**  
STD Ecclesiology (Urbaniana, Rome)  
Roman Catholic Bishop of Kohima (Northeast India)

## ACADEMIC PATRONS



**Reverend Dr Simon Chan**  
PhD Historical Theology (Cambridge, UK)  
Former Professor of Systematic Theology,  
Trinity Theological College, Singapore  
Editor, Asia Journal of Theology



**Professor Dr Gavin D'Costa**  
PhD Theology of Religions (Cambridge, UK)  
Professor of Catholic Theology,  
University of Bristol, England

## WHAT IS AN ENDOWED PROFESSORIAL CHAIR?



An endowed professorial chair is a position that is privately funded through a sum of money donated by either an individual, a group, or an institution. The endowment is deployed for purposes assigned by its donors, usually in relation to work that is attributed to the professorial chair in question. Donors may choose to name a professorial chair after an individual or an institution of their choice as an enduring tribute to the person or institution after which it is named. The practice of the endowment of professorial chairs goes as far back as ancient Rome. Steeped in tradition and ceremony, endowed professorial chairs are considered to be the highest recognition that an academic institution can bestow upon a professor.

In the case of the Christian Institute for Theological Engagement (CHRISTE), the Cornelius Cardinal Sim Professorial Chair in Theology and Dialogue is established through an endowment from a community of benefactors in tribute to the life and ministry of the late Cornelius Cardinal Sim. It comes with a mandate to undertake ongoing theological reflection and dialogue through research, teaching, and publication. The funding that accompanies this Professorial Chair will be used for the undertaking of research and publication activities on issues of theology and dialogue that were close to heart of the late Cardinal, and in doing so, advancing the mandate of our Research Institute. The named Professor shall undertake – with the assistance of a panel of consultors – to receive, evaluate, and recommend research proposals from academic scholars who, if deemed to have met the set criteria, will be potential recipients of the annual Cornelius Cardinal Sim Professorial Chair Grants.

## TRIBUTE TO CORNELIUS CARDINAL SIM



Born in Brunei on September 16 in 1951 and given the name Cornelius Sim, he was the eldest of six children. Despite being raised as a Catholic, Cornelius often shared that he found himself distancing himself from the Catholic Church as a young man. As a young professional working in Brunei, he rediscovered his Catholic faith and returned to an active practice of the faith after a period of time spent overseas. It was then that his faith commitment began to escalate quite rapidly, culminating in his ordination as a deacon in May 1989, and priest in November the same year.

When the Bruneian ecclesiastical territory was split away from the Diocese of Miri-Brunei and established as the Apostolic Prefecture of Brunei in November 1997, Father Cornelius was appointed by Pope John Paul II as the apostolic prefect. Subsequently, when the Apostolic Prefecture of Brunei

became an Apostolic Vicariate, Pope John Paul II appointed him the Vicar Apostolic of Brunei in October 2004, and he was ordained bishop in January 2005.

Bishop Cornelius Sim was a man of great intellectual depth, having earned a bachelor's degree in Engineering from Scotland, a master's degree in Theology from America, and also a master's degree in Business Administration from Brunei. Coupled with his wide reading, he consistently reflected a great depth of analysis and understanding of life. And yet, his great intellect was by no means his most prominent quality. He was most loved for his deep humility, simplicity, joy, and his pastoral heart. Being a true shepherd in the image of Jesus Christ, he saw his vocation and ministry as a constant dialogue with the world. In fact, his entire life was a dialogue: with youth culture, communication technology, civil authorities, and people of various religions and cultures. The scholarly research that is embodied by CHRISTE is therefore a formalisation of the very dialogue that he lived.

Towards the end of 2019, Bishop Sim was diagnosed with melanoma (skin cancer) and soon began undergoing a series of treatments within and without Brunei. Although these treatments brought much suffering to him, the people around him were often amazed at his positive spirit and the faith that he expressed in the love and will of God for him as well as the Church. Although the treatments caused him to be debilitated on some days, he insisted to continue serving the People of God actively whenever he was able to do so. In a very much weakened state, His Lordship continued presiding over Eucharistic celebrations, preaching, and being with the people, truly offering himself as a living sacrifice.

In October 2020, an announcement was made from Rome that His Holiness, Pope Francis, was raising Bishop Sim to the rank of Cardinal at a consistory the following month. This was a surprising appointment and recognition which the new Cardinal graciously accepted on behalf of the people of Brunei. In December 2020, His Eminence Cornelius Cardinal Sim was named a member of the Congregation for the Clergy.



**Picture:** *Cardinal Sim wearing a Naga stole given to him in March 2020 by the Most Reverend Dr James Thoppil, Bishop of Kohima and CHRISTE's second Ecclesiastical Patron.*

In early May 2021, Cardinal Sim travelled to Taiwan to seek further treatment for the cancer that had afflicted him. He was accompanied by his loving brother, Mr Frederick Sim, and another companion. Despite the treatment that had been administered there, his condition continued to deteriorate and he passed away on the morning of May 29, 2021, in the hospital in Taiwan. His passing brought grief to a great many people within the Apostolic Vicariate of Brunei as well as the many close friends he had outside of the confines of the Vicariate.

On this day of the inauguration of the Cornelius Cardinal Sim Professorial Chair in Theology and Dialogue (September 16, 2021), the late Cardinal would have been 70 years old. He is no longer physically present with the pilgrim Church, but he has left behind a mission. This mission does not take on a particular form or institution, but in keeping with the personality of the late Cardinal, it is left to those who have been inspired

by his life and ministry to consider how they can be concrete continuations of his mission. This Professorial Chair endowed to CHRISTE by a community of benefactors is to bear the name of the late Cornelius Cardinal Sim, in tribute to him and his ministry. In carrying out the mandate of this Professorial Chair, CHRISTE seeks to embody the theological and dialogical disciplines of His Eminence at an academic level.

While the late Cardinal had never hovered around the academic arena in a sustained way in the course of his ministry, it does not mean that he had neither appreciation nor concern for the intellectual aspect of the faith. In fact, intellectual development in one's practice of the faith was of great importance to him. Every word that he spoke and every action that he performed as a priest was premised upon an astute theological understanding coupled with a depth of sustained theological reflection. The erudition of his theological reflections, which he would enunciate verbally every now and then, could have come only from a life characterised by profound encounters with God and regular discipline of study. The study of theology, for His Eminence, was inevitable for any disciple who intended to live the Gospel life.

Together with that, Cardinal Sim was also acutely aware of the contextual realities present in society which pose both prospects and challenges to the Gospel. He was consistently in dialogue, internally as well as externally, with these realities. His life reflected intense dialogue with traditional and modern cultures, youth culture, non-Catholic Christian traditions, as well as non-Christian religions. His dialogical approach could best be described through the axiom "seek first to understand before seeking to be understood". The platform for his constant dialogical interactions was friendship, for it was friendship (and not merely a propagation of ideas) that would transform hearts and lives. Unsurprisingly, upon news of his passing, the peoples around the world mourning his demise came from greatly diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.

**Picture:**  
*Cardinal Sim  
celebrating the  
Mass at the  
entrance of an  
Orthodox chapel  
in Greece*





## STATEMENT FROM THE BOARD OF GOVERNORS

On May 29, 2021, we were sadly informed of the demise of our inaugural Ecclesiastical Patron, Cornelius Cardinal Sim, who was the Vicar Apostolic of Brunei Darussalam. On September 5, 2021, the 100th day since the passing of His Eminence, we announced that CHRISTE had been endowed a Professorial Chair from a community of benefactors in tribute to the late Cardinal Sim's life and ministry to the People of God. This Professorial Chair carries the name of Cardinal Sim and comes with a mandate to undertake ongoing theological reflection and dialogue through research, teaching, and publication. The funding that accompanies the Professorial Chair will be used for the undertaking of research and publication activities on issues of theology and dialogue that were close to heart of the late Cardinal, and in doing so, advancing the mandate of our Research Institute. The named Professor shall undertake – with the assistance of a panel of consultors – to receive, evaluate, and recommend research proposals from academic scholars who, if deemed to have met the set criteria, will be potential recipients of the annual Cornelius Cardinal Sim Professorial Chair Grants.

This **Cornelius Cardinal Sim Professorial Chair in Theology and Dialogue** represents the desire of both the benefactors and our Research Institute to faithfully preserve and continue the legacy that the late Cardinal has left behind in his apostolic mission to the Church and the world.

The CHRISTE Board of Governors has appointed the Reverend Deacon Dr Sherman Kuek OFS (CHRISTE's current Leading Research Fellow in Catholic and Ecumenical Thought) to this Professorial Chair, who, upon this installation, is properly designated the *Cornelius Cardinal Sim Professor of Theology and Dialogue*. The members of the Board of Governors convey our best wishes to Deacon Dr Sherman Kuek on this appointment as he discharges the mandate of CHRISTE as well as that which comes with his appointment to this Professorial Chair.

## REVEREND DEACON DR SHERMAN KUEK OFS

### Cornelius Cardinal Sim Professor of Theology and Dialogue



The Rev. Deacon Dr Sherman Kuek OFS was born in Johor, Malaysia, in June 1976. As a young boy, he was brought up, and eventually baptised, in a Presbyterian community. He also spent several years in close fellowship with a Pentecostal community as a teenager.

He graduated from the University of Bradford, England, in 1998 with an honours degree in Business and Management Studies. After a year of exposure in full-time Christian ministry, he enrolled into Trinity Theological College, Singapore, in 1999 and graduated with a Master of Divinity degree (2002) and a Doctor of Theology degree (2008). All throughout his years as a seminarian, he also functioned in various pastoral roles in a Presbyterian community, and then in an Anglican community. While completing his doctoral thesis, he was also appointed as a lecturer at a Protestant seminary in Peninsular Malaysia, where he taught Systematic Theology and Contextual Theology for two years.

At the Easter Vigil of 2008, Deacon Sherman was received into full communion with the Catholic Church. Upon his reception into the Catholic Church, he served for almost two years as a parish pastoral assistant. In December 2008, he was professed into the Secular Franciscan Order (*Ordo Franciscanus Saecularis*). In August 2009, he was appointed by the Right Reverend Paul Tan SJ, then Bishop of Melaka Johor, as Director of the Melaka Johor Diocesan Pastoral Institute (until mid-2014). On his 34th birthday (June 16, 2010), he was ordained by Bishop Paul Tan as a permanent deacon and incardinated in the Diocese of Melaka Johor. Since then, Deacon Sherman has spent much of his time communicating the Christian faith through prolific speaking, writing, and media production. His work involves teaching at academic institutions and also in non-academic contexts. He is also the

Convenor of the Splendour Project ([www.splendourproject.com](http://www.splendourproject.com)), a Catholic apostolate for formation, evangelisation, and discipleship.

Since the establishment of the Christian Institute for Theological Engagement (CHRISTE) in August 2020, Deacon Sherman has been the Leading Research Fellow in Catholic and Ecumenical Thought. With effect from September 16, 2021, Deacon Sherman is appointed by the CHRISTE Board of Governors as the Cornelius Cardinal Sim Professor of Theology and Dialogue. Because of his close friendship with the late Cardinal, he possesses competent understanding of the pastoral concerns of the late Cardinal which will characterise the research interests inherent to this Professorial Chair. Dovetailing with the late Cardinal's pastoral thrusts are Deacon Sherman's own primary areas of research interest: ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, modern Catholic thought, the interface of theology and social theory, and the New Evangelisation.



## INVESTITURE WITH THE ACADEMIC STOLE



*The Academic Stole of the  
Cornelius Cardinal Sim Professorial Chair in Theology and Dialogue*



This academic stole is instituted as a visible symbol of the Cornelius Cardinal Sim Professorial Chair in Theology and Dialogue. Tailored in Brunei Darussalam itself, where the late Cardinal was Vicar Apostolic until his demise, the design of the stole is particular to this professorial office. It contains silver embroideries of the heraldry of the named Professor as well as that of the late Cardinal in whose name this endowment is established. In the case of Cardinal Sim's heraldry, the external ornaments typically incorporated into heraldries of Church prelates have been omitted to avoid any semblance of ecclesiastical heraldry, retaining only that which is particular to the person it represents, including the motto of His Eminence, *DUC IN ALTUM* ("put out into the deep", from Luke 5:4). Directly beneath the coat of arms is the official emblem of CHRISTE on both sides of the stole. The stole is also embellished with time-honoured Christian designs revived by an ecclesiastical tailor from Malaysia.

The academic stole should not be confused with clerical stoles used in ecclesiastical settings. Like all academic dresses typically worn by academicians, the use of the academic stole began in Europe from medieval times. They were worn by academicians for different purposes. Some wore them to indicate their academic appointments such as chancellorships, while others wore them to represent their respective academic or professional institutions. There were also those who wore the academic stole to display the conferment of outstanding academic honours.

The academic stole of the Cornelius Cardinal Sim Professorial Chair in Theology and Dialogue may be donned by the named Professor together with an academic dress or other appropriate formal attires. It is to be used within academic settings from which the Professor operates in the name of the Chair. This includes public lectures and formal academic events such as awards ceremonies, among others.

# INAUGURAL PROFESSORIAL LECTURE

## Cornelius Cardinal Sim Professor of Theology and Dialogue



The inaugural professorial lecture delivered by the Reverend Deacon Professor Dr Sherman Kuek OFS is broadcasted on CHRISTE's YouTube channel.

**CLICK: <https://bit.ly/3itlyEL>**

The transcript of the lecture is found on pages 24 to 40 of this booklet.

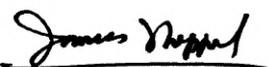


## FROM THE SECOND ECCLESIASTICAL PATRON Most Reverend Dr James Thoppil

It was with great sadness that I came to know of the demise of Cornelius Cardinal Sim. He was a great asset, blessing, and inspiration for many, and the pride of the Church in Southeast Asia. Truly, he was a man of head and heart, down to earth in his pastoral ministry, a shepherd “living with the smell of [his] sheep” (Pope Francis, 2013).

The close friendship between His Eminence and the Reverend Deacon Dr Sherman Kuek, and their commitment to a broader engagement with people of Christian faith in a genuinely ecumenical spirit to deal with the current issues impacting contemporary society, was what led to the establishment of the Christian Institute for Theological Engagement (CHRISTE). The endowment of this Professorial Chair for the purpose of continuing Cardinal Sim’s legacy is a great and lasting tribute to this eminent personality in the Church and in society.

It is also a matter of joy for me that Deacon Dr Sherman Kuek has been appointed to this Professorial Chair. Indeed, he is the most apt and right person to hold this important office. His initiative and sagacity, hard work and far-sightedness to found CHRISTE, thoroughly knowing its mission, will stand him in good stead to lead and guide CHRISTE as a worldwide Christian ecumenical movement. He will not only facilitate the germination of Christian theological reflection but also lead it by example and committed intellectual pursuit in a genuinely ecumenical spirit to further the cause of the Christian faith. I heartily congratulate Deacon Sherman for this appointment and wish God’s choicest blessings on him and his office!

✠ 

The Most Reverend Dr James Thoppil, DD, STD  
Bishop of Kohima, Nagaland (Northeast India)





University of  
**BRISTOL**

## FROM ACADEMIC PATRON Professor Gavin D'Costa

It is with great sadness to hear about the death of His Eminence Cornelius Sim. His ministry and service will be deeply missed.

It is with great joy to hear that his legacy will continue, at least in one form, through the establishment of a Professorial level chair in his name dedicated to Theology and Dialogue.

It is with equal joy to hear that this Chair will be occupied by Rev. Deacon Dr Sherman Kuek OFS and for two reasons. First, because of his own love and service to the Church especially in his commitment to learning, teaching, and pastoral service. Second, because of his tireless work in CHRISTE, the Christian Institute for Theological Engagement. This will mean that the Ecumenical work of CHRISTE will be enhanced so that the light and truth and healing balm of the Christian message might be shared, understood and practised more widely.

Dialogue today is vital to the future of the Church, not only because of its fundamental missionary mandate, but because of the joy of discovering how God has worked in all culture and creation. This precious task is required in every continent and Christians together giving witness to this task is admirable and prophetic.

The Church, the academy, and society are all beneficiaries of God's bountiful grace on this special occasion.

With prayers and solidarity,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gavin D'Costa'.

**Professor Gavin D'Costa, PhD**  
Professor of Catholic Theology  
University of Bristol, UK



## FROM THE CHAIRPERSON CHRISTE Board of Governors

The Board of Governors notes with profound appreciation that the endowment of this Cornelius Cardinal Sim Professorial Chair of Theology and Dialogue is both a loving tribute to the late Cardinal Sim and a mark of trust in CHRISTE to continue with the legacy that has been left behind by the late Cardinal. While the Board of Governors typically functions behind the scenes, we readily acknowledge that a number of our board members were close friends of the late Cardinal. Because of this, we are honoured that we have been appointed by the benefactors of this endowment to see to it that the memory of His Eminence is concretely preserved through the work of CHRISTE, and more particularly, through the stipulated mandate of this Professorial Chair.

It is our joy to appoint Deacon Sherman Kuek OFS as the incumbent of this Professorial Chair, knowing that he has a deep sense of the issues of faith and life that were dear to the Cardinal's pastoral heart. Just like the Cardinal himself, Deacon Sherman too has a distaste for speculative academic endeavours that do nothing for the development of the Christian faith or the betterment of society. I am certain that he will see to it that the pastoral concerns of the late Cardinal as a shepherd are faithfully preserved through the character of this Professorial Chair.

The Board of Governors is here to lovingly collaborate with and support Deacon Sherman as he discharges his appointment in the name of this Professorial Chair. While we dearly miss the presence of our dear Cardinal Sim, CHRISTE's inaugural Ecclesiastical Patron, we step into the future with faith, with the understanding that this is another new beginning. May the Lord lead us each step of the way.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jocelyn Yeo".

**Jocelyn Yeo**, on behalf of the  
CHRISTE Board of Governors



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## FROM CHAIRMAN OF THE EUCLID OVERSIGHT COUNCIL

The news of the passing of His Eminence Cornelius Cardinal Sim was received with deep sadness. It is fitting and right that the legacy he has left behind should be appreciated and his mission continued by those who have known His Eminence in a close way throughout his lifetime.

I particularly note that the late Cardinal was the inaugural Ecclesiastical Patron of CHRISTE, and that he was a mentor to the Rev. Deacon Dr Sherman Kuek OFS who established CHRISTE with the loving support of His Eminence. The CHRISTE Board of Governors' appointment of Deacon Sherman Kuek to this newly established Professorial Chair is therefore utterly fitting.

On behalf of EUCLID, the intergovernmental institution under whose charter the Christian Institute for Theological Engagement (CHRISTE) was established, I offer my sincere congratulations to Deacon Sherman Kuek on his appointment as the *Cornelius Cardinal Sim Professor of Theology and Dialogue!* To Deacon Sherman, may I say, "Do not tire of serving the Lord through the endeavors that you have started with the support of the late Cardinal Sim. Let the intercessions of all the saints be your strength and support when you feel like you may be alone and at times uncertain in your journey and mission."

It is my prayer that CHRISTE will continue to advance in its theological and dialogical mandate in the years to come under Deacon Sherman Kuek's capable leadership. I trust that all who are involved in the work of CHRISTE will uphold him with your support for the greater glory of God. May the Lord bless us all in the work to which He has called us!

**Pr Laurent CLEENERWERCK de KIEV, STL, MES, DSc**  
Professor of International Administration and Theology  
Archpriest, Orthodox Church of America



## FROM THE APOSTOLIC VICARIATE OF BRUNEI DARUSSALAM Vicariate Administrator

Heartiest congratulations to Deacon Sherman Kuek for being appointed as the Cornelius Cardinal Sim Professor of Theology and Dialogue! It is no surprise that the long-term relationship and partnership of the late Cardinal with Deacon Sherman has somehow matured into this natural appointment.

The Catholic faithful in the Apostolic Vicariate of Brunei Darussalam have always benefited from this relationship, with Deacon Sherman's annual trips to Brunei to deliver talks for the entire Vicariate. His mastery and broad knowledge of the faith, generously shared, has helped build up the faithful here. As a priest, I am very thankful and treasure the gift of someone like Deacon Sherman who is able to convey the truth, beauty, and goodness of the faith so well. It is never easy to hold the attention of the faithful and he seems to have mastered it beautifully. Also, our lay faithful in Brunei who have joined Deacon Sherman's many pilgrimage trips to various shrines in Europe and Asia have often returned speaking of their wonderful and enlightening experiences. The daily faith formation that Deacon Sherman provides on these pilgrimages has converted and strengthened many. Because of various circumstances, I have not been able to participate in these trips, but I hope to have an opportunity to do so in the not-too-distant future.

I wish Deacon Sherman all the best on his new professorial assignment. May this assignment generate many more conversions and vocations for the Lord as more seeds of faith and relationships are planted in every place he travels to. May the Lord who has begun the good work in him, help him also to persevere to the end.

**Reverend Fr Robert Leong**

Administrator, Apostolic Vicariate of Brunei Darussalam



## FROM THE FRANSCAN ORDER OF FRIARS MINOR (OFM) Definitor General for Asia-Oceania

Dear Reverend Deacon Dr Sherman,

May the Lord give you Peace. My warmest congratulations and heartfelt prayers on the occasion of your installation as the Cornelius Cardinal Sim Professor of Theology and Dialogue.

As CHRISTE's Founding and Leading Research Fellow in Catholic and Ecumenical Thought, you have been both evangelising and innovative in proclaiming the splendour of the Good News of God's grace (Acts 20:24), that is at the core of your Christian faith and of your Franciscan ideals. Through your own life, ministries, and relationships, you have intentionally sought to build faith and hope through community of respect and love.

I know how much the late Cardinal Sim meant to you as a mentor, pastor, brother, and friend, and I have no doubt that you will continue to share his spirit of generosity of service and fidelity of witness to the Gospel. As you continue to put out into the deep (Luke 5:4) through ecumenical and interfaith thought, may you be guided by grace and bring much meaning to dialogue in ways that lead to Life.

Peace and all Good,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Wong', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Friar John Wong, OFM**

Definitor General for the Franciscan Conferences of Asia-Oceania  
Rome



## FROM THE FAMILY OF THE LATE CORNELIUS CARDINAL SIM Represented by Mr Frederick Sim

Let me take this opportunity to say how grateful we are for the energy that CHRISTE is expending to continue the work of our late brother, Cornelius Cardinal Sim, especially with the appointment of Rev. Deacon Dr Sherman Kuek OFS to the Professorial Chair as the Cornelius Cardinal Sim Professor of Theology and Dialogue.

I would like to congratulate Rev. Deacon Sherman on this assignment. He is an obvious choice of a candidate, one that I am sure Cornelius would wholeheartedly support. I pray that he will continue to be guided by the Holy Spirit as he carries out his new additional role.

“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” (John 14:3)

In spite of our late brother’s elevated status in the Church, his erudite standing and his immense spiritual depth, his knowledge and experience gained from having been an accomplished professional in industry, his global exposure as a student, professional and cleric of high order, I would say it was the simple things that made Cornelius the person so loved by the people who knew him. He has touched many lives throughout his life and ministry. Even those who have not met him, have heard of his love and contributions to his people. I think if I have to summarise who he was, I would say this: He was a servant first, putting others above himself.

Being members of his family as well as his community made for a rather unique relationship. I recall a moment when he was sharing with our late mother during her own battle with cancer in 2010, our dear mother said to

him, "You are my son and you are the Bishop, I will listen to you". Such was the son and the brother he was, the cleric part of him was just part of the package, never overbearing, yet quietly imposing.

He was quietly strong, embracing and bearing his sufferings and hardship as his own cross. He made prayer and staunch faith his foundation in facing his life challenges with courage and poise. He was gracious unto all always. He lived with humility, awareness and compassion for all.

He built on his vision of the future of the Church, nurturing the young in his truly fatherly way. He was unwavering in his devotion to the Eucharist as his source of strength, and above all else, he was the very living example of the Love of Christ in thoughts, words and especially in deeds, in times of joy but also adversity. These and many more personal memories of him when he stood among us, are fondly and permanently etched into our hearts.

I quote the Cardinal when he said, "We become fully alive as Christians through the generous giving of ourselves". Words that he himself had lived by.

Once again, on behalf of the Sim Family, my sincere gratitude and heartiest congratulations to CHRISTE on the launching of this Cornelius Cardinal Sim Professorial Chair in Theology and Dialogue. We feel nothing less than great pride to know that Cornelius' efforts have not only sown seeds but now bear fruits that will continue to bring benefits to many in the years to come, through your continued efforts and nurturing.

May the Grace and Peace of Our Lord be with us always.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fred Sim".

Fred Sim (brother)  
On behalf of the Sim Family

# TRANSCRIPT OF THE INAUGURAL LECTURE

## Why Interfaith Dialogue is Necessary but Dangerous: Using Raimon Panikkar's Cosmotheandric Pluralism as a Case in Point

*by Rev. Deacon Prof. Dr Sherman Kuek OFS*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The author of this paper writes from the position of a Roman Catholic Christian, and therefore thinks with the Catholic Church (*sentire cum ecclesia*), with the hope that the same generosity that he accords to others would be granted him. This paper proposes to explain compelling reasons for interfaith engagement being an imperative in this day and age. The concern for interfaith dialogue has resulted in the emergence of three general views of religions which will be briefly explained together with an identification of some of their respective key proponents. The discussion is then brought to a deeper level of intensity as Raimon Panikkar's particular pluralistic position as a unique model of interfaith dialogue is explained and briefly assessed from a viewpoint that is hopefully consistent with the faith of the Roman Catholic Church. Panikkar's model of dialogue serves as a case in point for this author's claim that interfaith engagement can be a dangerous enterprise.

### 2. THE NECESSITY OF INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENT

Acutely aware of the compulsory encounters between the Christian and the religious "other", Karl Rahner opined that non-Christian religions could no longer be perceived from a distance, for they had now come to make themselves present in the midst of modern humanity and had been integrated into the lives of people.<sup>1</sup> Societies used to function in homogenous fashion in terms of language, race, and religion, even if they were somewhat conscious

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Rahner, "Church, Churches and Religions" in *Theological Investigations X*, various translators (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961-84), 30.

that there were other religious communities in existence alongside them.<sup>2</sup> In fact, interreligious encounters resulting from geographical proximity, military invasion, and other similar causes, could be more or less ignored. Even in Asia, the coexistence of populations comprising different forms of traditional life was a given which seldom required for these religious traditions to mutually interact with one another.<sup>3</sup> Evidently, interfaith relations was a very peripheral issue at most, or at least, a non-issue.

### **Modern Imperialism and Consequential Reactions**

Since activities of imperialism brought about encounters with other cultures and religions, it had become impossible to ignore the presence of religious cultures and traditions different from one's own. Furthermore, one also cannot neglect to make mention of the shockwaves that were sent to both the religious and the non-religious circles of the world population with the terrorist attacks of September 11 in 2001, which was largely to be understood as a confrontation between those perpetrators and the Western civilisation in the name of Islam.

Among the many outcomes of this fatal historical event was the emergence of a very vocal intellectual movement, whose key proponents were identified by Alister McGrath as "Anglo-Saxon Protestant males from remarkably similar backgrounds of privilege and power", called the New Atheism.<sup>4</sup> Its advocates were decidedly insistent that mankind's erroneous belief in God was the reason for such atrocities as the 9/11. In evangelising its case against belief for God, this tenacious anti-religious movement arguably exhibits characteristics of being yet another religious confession that exalts its doctrines birthed from its tightly held humanistic ideologies.

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<sup>2</sup> Harry Oldmeadow, ed., *Crossing Religious Frontiers: Studies in Comparative Religion* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2010), vii; José Maria Vigil, *Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Zurich & Munster: Lit Verlag, 2008), 27.

<sup>3</sup> Harry Oldmeadow, ed., *Crossing Religious Frontiers: Studies in Comparative Religion* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2010), 3.

<sup>4</sup> McGrath, Alister, *Why God Won't Go Away: Engaging with the New Atheism* (London: SPCK, 2011), 24, 25.

The Christian scholars of the West are now battling to defend the faith of their religious remnant through publications and live debates in opposition to the tenets and arguments of the New Atheism. In fact, “inter-traditional cooperation” is now taking place because of the common sense of religions or traditions being under threat. This is perhaps particularly felt by those Abrahamic religions, which once perceived themselves as being proponents of the sole truth, and this does not preclude Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

### **Modern Globalisation**

And then, there is the whole arena of globalisation that has intensified in the past couple of decades. As technology has enhanced economies, transportation, communications, and even politics, the shared space of humanity has become more accessible to a much bigger proportion of society compared to a century ago. This means that societies are encountering one another in an unprecedented manner, such that those which did not overlap in times past have now “become members of one larger social entity, a single world that includes them as sub-societies”.<sup>6</sup> One would not be going too far in postulating that if there was one historic phenomenon characteristic of the twentieth century, it would be globalisation. That it has impacted the volume of emigrations worldwide, the religions and cultures of partners that people choose to bind themselves to in marriage, and daily habits of media consumption of the world population, among other effects of globalisation, makes it an epochal reality. This is perhaps what led to Samuel Huntington’s thesis that the main conflict experienced by humanity today is a cultural one, and that this conflict pertains to the great civilisations.<sup>7</sup> The 9/11 event only serves to validate Huntington’s argument.

To further expound a host of other compelling reasons for the Church’s need to be awakened to the presence of other religions might be unnecessarily going beyond the scope of this writing. But all these cases in point are meant

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<sup>5</sup> Marco Pallis, “On Crossing Religious Frontiers” in Oldmeadow, ed., *Crossing Religious Frontiers*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> José Maria Vigil, *Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Zurich & Munster: Lit Verlag, 2008), 27.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

merely to give credence to Rahner's explicit warning that the times now call for a greater consideration of how both deliberate as well as accidental encounters be addressed constructively, for these signs were and continue to be a clarion call for the Christian world to heed the new state of cultural and religious civilisation.

### **Increasing Global Religiosity**

Despite the intensity of globalisation as a result of modernity, it does not at all mean that religion has been on a trajectory towards perpetual demise. The ostensible corrosive effect of modernity upon religion has been a long-debated subject. If it used to be taken for granted that as societies progress, they would increasingly become secular, it has now been empirically proven otherwise.

Secularism has taken on a variety of meanings in both the philosophical and social-scientific dimensions.<sup>8</sup> It has generally been understood as a state of being centred on worldly affairs instead of being religion-centred.<sup>9</sup> Visible expressions of secularism would be typified through a preoccupation with "scientific knowledge and human self-regulation", through which God is rendered redundant.<sup>10</sup> The foremost train of thought of the secularisation theory (which arose in the 1950s and the 1960s) was that the onset of modernity inevitably led to the decline and eventual demise of religion in society and among individuals.

A prominent proponent of this *disappearance thesis* was Peter L. Berger, who then suggested that Western modernity was characterised by the onset of "religious interpretations" being discarded from the worldview of individuals.<sup>11</sup> In relation to this thesis, he defined secularisation as the

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<sup>8</sup> It derives from the Latin word *saeculum*, which means "century", "world-age", or "temporality".

<sup>9</sup> This definition is adapted from that of Fred Dallmayr, "Rethinking Secularism (with Raimon Panikkar)" in *The Review of Politics*, Volume 61: Fall (1999), 715.

<sup>10</sup> Fred Dallmayr, "Rethinking Secularism (with Raimon Panikkar)," *The Review of Politics* 61 (Fall 1999): 715.

<sup>11</sup> Berger, Peter L., *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 108.

“process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols”.<sup>12</sup> In accordance with this line of thought, religion is destined to dissolve at the onset of the scientific era; it is held to be, simply, “institutionalised ignorance and superstition”.<sup>13</sup> A less intense interpretation of secularism is to be found in the *differentiation thesis*, which holds that whilst the religious dimension is increasingly marginalised from the social arena, it sustains a level of significance in the individual’s private life. This theory is advanced by Bryan Wilson who denies the cessation of religiosity and expounds the possibility of religion being rendered insignificant only insofar as the social arena is concerned.<sup>14</sup>

Berger, some three decades later since his contribution to the secularisation thesis in the 1970s, admits that the wrongness of the secularisation thesis has been made apparent through the intensifying religiosity of the global society.<sup>15</sup> Fred R. von Mehden observes that modernisation has not obliterated the importance of the supernatural to adherents of Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism.<sup>16</sup> Whilst Berger acknowledges the reality of modernisation having propelled some secularising effects, he asserts that the effects of counter-secularisation outweigh the effects of secularisation. For this reason of patterns revealed sociologically with regards to the strengthening of religion on a global scale, with the exception of the European continent, the role and importance of religion cannot be ignored. Furthermore, in the light of the manner in which the size of our common space

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<sup>12</sup> Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1969), 107.

<sup>13</sup> Dallmayr, “Rethinking Secularism (with Raimon Panikkar),” 715.

<sup>14</sup> Bryan Wilson, “Secularization: The Inherited Model” in Philip Hammond (ed.), *The Sacred in a Secular Age: Toward Revision in the Scientific Study of Religion* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1985), 14, and Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 149-151.

<sup>15</sup> Peter L. Berger, “Secularism in Retreat”, *The National Interest* (winter 1996/97): 4; and Peter L. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview” in Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 1-18.

<sup>16</sup> Fred R. von der Mehden, *Religion and Modernization in Southeast Asia* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 179.

has shrunk because of mutual accessibility, religious communities need to negotiate a common existence among themselves.

### 3. THE DANGER OF INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENT

Marco Pallis asserts that dialogue and cooperation among religions requires goodwill, a “kindly feeling” shared between religious adherents and leaders, in order to succeed in every form.<sup>17</sup> Such required kindness and goodwill, whilst easily identified as a legitimate expression of Christian character, is perhaps the very reason that interfaith dialogue and cooperation poses a cognitive dilemma to its participators. An implicit fear for many a Christian is that of remaining in the tension of standing between a firm conviction of the uniqueness of one’s religious truth claims and entering into the religious worldview of another in an attitude of “epistemological humility”.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the “shrunkeness” of our common space renders this struggle non-negotiable, for we must somehow incorporate those whose beliefs are different from ours, and indeed, even contradictory to ours, into the schema of our own religious worldview. This conflicting tension between fidelity and hospitality is not one that can be ignored. And yet, the Fathers of the Church and the Councils, and in a particular way, the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, would not permit us to retreat into hostility. But such determination does not make the task simpler, for it entails the daunting challenge of ploughing our way through decades and centuries of prejudices, cultures, and also language barriers.

In defining the dilemma of emerging with what he calls an “ethical theology” of dialogue with other religions, Michael Barnes succinctly notes the nature of the intricacies inherent in this interaction between the Christian faith and other religions:

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<sup>17</sup> Pallis, “On Crossing Religious Frontiers”, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Cleenewerck, Laurent, “Methods in Ecumenical Dialogue: Lessons from Critical Thinking, Diplomacy and Physical Sciences” (Master of Ecumenical Studies Thesis, Ukrainian Catholic University, n.d.), 10.

The history of inter-religious relations, often a record of colonial exploitation and unresolved ethnic and inter-communal rivalries, makes a confused situation even more complex. The dangers of manipulation, by one party or the other, the possibilities for misunderstanding on both sides, are all too real. Emphasise distinctiveness and you encourage a self-satisfied sectarianism; suppress it and you risk a fundamentalist backlash.<sup>19</sup>

This tension notwithstanding, dialogue should lead to the deepening of one's commitment to his own faith rather than an erosion of the same.<sup>20</sup> Jaco Cilliers insists that individuals and groups entering into interreligious dialogue need to first seek a deep understanding of their own religious traditions and then share their religious convictions and traditions with others.<sup>21</sup> It is only when there is a deep understanding of one's own religious beliefs that progress can be made in achieving true understanding and respect for the religious beliefs of others. To that end, interfaith dialogue cannot merely be a polite meeting of participants from different traditions who engage in a pleasant swapping of superficial information.<sup>22</sup>

It certainly cannot be said that Christian thinkers have been lackadaisical on this matter. Much thought has in fact been given to the interaction of the Christian faith with other religions in the past several decades. The thoughtful responses in the Christian world emerging as a result of increasing encounters with other religions has brought about three clusters of thought positions pertaining to the relation of the Christian faith to other religions.<sup>23</sup> These

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<sup>19</sup> Barnes, Michael, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 5.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 1–13.

<sup>21</sup> Jaco Cilliers, "Building Bridges for Interfaith Dialogue," in *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding*, ed. David R. Smock (Washington, D.C: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2002), 48.

<sup>22</sup> Cilliers, "Building Bridges", 49.

<sup>23</sup> The terrain of these thought clusters is expounded in Paul Knitter, *No other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes to World Religions* (London: SCM 1985); Gavin D'Costa, "Karl

clusters of thought are widely known to be “exclusivism”, “inclusivism”, and “pluralism”. Of course, it could easily be argued that these classifications constitute oversimplifications, and while I am inclined to agree with such an assertion, this has to be set aside as a matter for a separate discussion. Broadly speaking, the *exclusive* position holds that other religions do not fit into the divine scheme of God’s plan for the salvation of humanity, the *inclusive* position holds its own meta-narrative to be the culmination of all other religious trajectories, and the *pluralist* position relativises the relevance and status of all religions in relation to one another.

### **Exclusivism: The Fear of Erosion**

One could argue that exclusivist positions arise at least partially but significantly from a fear of erosion to the claimed uniqueness of one’s religious truth caused by interfaith encounters. José Maria Vigil posits that Christian believers cannot contemplate the theology of religions from a safe distance as if it was an endeavour “outside of and separate from ourselves”. He further explains,

...it is something that touches us intimately, something that can send our faith and the very meaning of our life into crisis. It may lead us to reinterpret, re-understand, and to express in different ways many formulas that we’ve been repeating since the earliest days of our childhood, things we always thought were a given – “just because”.<sup>24</sup>

These possibilities propose to us that it is precisely the fear of erosion to one’s religious convictions stirred by interfaith encounters that has at least partially incited the exclusive vision of the Christian faith in relation to other religions. It is at least in part a self-protectionist framework born out of compulsion.

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Rahner’s Anonymous Christian – A Reappraisal”, *Modern Theology*, 1.2 (1986), 131-48; Michael Barnes, *Religions in Conversation* (London: SPCK, 1989).

<sup>24</sup> Vigil, *Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 17, 18.

One of the most well-known proponents of the exclusivist position on religions is Karl Barth who persistently defended the primacy of revelation and particularity. The hallmark of his position regarding Christianity in relation to other religions is said to be found in his 1934 *Barmen Declaration* which was itself a reaction against the encroachment of Nazi ideology upon the Protestant community of his day. He asserts in this document that no other sources of revelation in the form of "events and powers, figures and truths" exist apart from Christ, and that this forms the basis of the Christian community's proclamation.<sup>25</sup> Interpreters of Barth hold that he is herein alluding to the superiority of the Christian faith over other religions. There are, of course, others who would tend to relegate him to the category of universalism because of his discourse on the "Light" and the "little lights" in his *Church Dogmatics*. However, the jury is still out on whether these latter enunciations represent Barth's attempt at some form of soteriological inclusivism. Whatever the case may be, one must not forget his dispute with his contemporary, Emil Brunner, who heavily criticised him for his neglect of the possibility of natural theology, afterwhich Barth fiercely responded with his article "Nein!" ("No!")<sup>26</sup>

### **Inclusivism: An Attempt at Accommodation**

Inclusivism is an attempt to respect the place of other religions in God's salvation plan even if they do not possess the fullness of divine revelation. A definitive proponent of this position is Karl Rahner himself. In his estimation, since all human persons are the result of God's creative work, they constitute the very canvas upon which God makes his colours present. On his own, God cannot be perceived. Therefore, God has not left himself to remain out of the reach of human perceptibility. Human beings, however, have come to encounter God and his revelation in varying degrees depending on how much their immediate exposure to God's self-revelation comes to their awareness and conscience. Accordingly, Rahner therefore advocates that there are those

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<sup>25</sup> Karl Barth, "The Theological Declaration of Barmen, 8.12" in Arthur C. Cochrane, *The Church's Confessions Under Hitler* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962).

<sup>26</sup> Brunner, Emil and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology: Comprising "Nature and Grace" by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the Reply "No!" By Dr. Karl Barth* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002).

who continue to lack particular knowledge of the Christian Gospel but who nevertheless are already living the theological virtues revealed in Jesus Christ, and are therefore “anonymous Christians”.

[T]he “anonymous Christian” in our sense of the term is the pagan after the beginning of the Christian mission, who lives in the state of Christ’s grace through faith, hope, and love, yet who has no explicit knowledge of the fact that his life is orientated in grace-given salvation to Jesus Christ.<sup>27</sup>

[E]ven outside the Christian body there are individuals – and they are to be found even in the rank of atheists – who are justified by God’s grace and possess the Holy Spirit.<sup>28</sup>

Rahner explains that such a person is an anonymous Christian both to others and to himself, for he would utterly deny that he was a Christian or even that he was a believer in God.

Rahner is not herein downplaying the uniqueness of particular divine revelation in Jesus Christ, and he is vehemently opposed to those who advocate the levelling down of the Christian faith so that it becomes just one among the many. In Rahner’s assessment, salvation continues to be offered and effected in Jesus Christ alone, except that those for whom it is effected may not necessarily be aware of this reality.

The inclusivist position likely arises from the recognition that adherents of all religions are persons and are to be respected despite all religions possessing their own unique truth claims. This position generally holds that attempts to understand the faith of the other is not a slippery slope to agreement with and, further still, embrace of the truth claims of religions that might stand in contradiction to those of one’s own.

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<sup>27</sup> Karl Rahner, “Observations on the Problem of the ‘Anonymous Christian’,” in *Theological Investigations*, trans. David Bourke, vol. 14 (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 14: 283.

<sup>28</sup> Rahner, “Observations”, 291.

### Pluralism: The Fear of Dominating

At the other extreme of the continuum, across from exclusivism, are found the various pluralistic positions. The pluralistic angle seems to betray a rather noble and self-effacing consciousness that the assimilation of the religious narratives of other religions into the “Christian meta-narrative” would compromise the uniqueness of other religions in accordance with their self-definition.<sup>29</sup> As a reaction to this fear of the self, many thinkers, be they sociologists of religion, philosophers of religion, or religious practitioners, have spiralled into a web of pluralistic worldviews that they think would give rise to a democratisation of religions. In a way, one may say, that this stems largely from a contrition arising from the Western imperialism of yesteryears, among other probable reasons.

One such thinker, to whom Rahner stands in contradistinction, is John Hick, a key representative of the pluralistic theology of religion. Hick declares that the time has come for a “copernican revolution” such that “Christianity, instead of being the center of the religious universe, would, like the other religions, be centered rather on God”.<sup>30</sup> His “theocentric pluralism” argues that salvation can be attained by way of any religion, which thereby renders moot the unique truth claims of Christianity regarding particular revelation in Jesus Christ and his Church. He dubs the claim to Christian uniqueness a “myth” along with the belief in the incarnation of God.

#### 4. AN ASSESSMENT OF RAIMON PANIKKAR

In the remaining portion of this paper, I wish to consider further the pluralistic position on religions as a way to demonstrate why the fear of compromise on the part of the exclusivists is not unfounded. In particular, I shall seek to present a reasonably sustained assessment on the religious position of Raimon Panikkar, whose stance of pluralism some may find to be particularly unique and intriguing. But such a line of thought is also precisely that which

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<sup>29</sup> Barnes, Michael, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Francis A Sullivan S.J., *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Church's Response* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 170.

brings about a sense of horror on the part of Christian thinkers who are committed to the traditional tenets of the Christian truth claims.

To be sure, pluralism for Panikkar is not to be constructed in the way it is commonly understood. He means it more as an attitude rather than a methodology. He is therefore not a proponent of subsuming all religious worldviews under a universal umbrella the way John Hick does, for that would mean sacrificing the uniqueness of each religious tradition. Neither does he propose the watering down of all religions to a lowest common denominator, for again, that would entail distilling each religion of its specific truth claims. He advocates pluralism as a means of experiencing the realities of the other by way of openness such that one immerses himself into the otherness of the other and makes sense of the ensuing experience.

Pluralism in its ultimate sense is not the tolerance of a diversity of systems under a larger umbrella. It is not a supersystem... The problem of pluralism arises when we are confronted with mutually irreconcilable worldviews or ultimate systems of thought and life. Pluralism has to do with final, unbridgeable human attitudes... We speak then of two different, mutually complementary, although apparently opposite, attitudes, beliefs, or whatever.<sup>31</sup>

Raimon Panikkar takes issue with the fact that interfaith dialogue has always been an instrument for the preservation of peace and mutual understanding. Dialogue between persons, for him, is not to be instrumental for a purpose outside of our "creationhood". It is an end in itself and not a means to an end. Implicit in his contention is the assumption that philosophy of dialogue shapes its very praxis. His observation is correct that interfaith dialogue has until now taken place on a "merely objective or the purely subjective level".<sup>32</sup> In the

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<sup>31</sup> Raimon Panikkar, "Invisible Harmony: A Universal Theory or a Cosmic Confidence", in *Toward Universal Theology in Religion*, Leonard Zwidler, ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987), 125.

<sup>32</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *Intra-religious Dialogue* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), xv.

former case, participants assume that they are able to suspend their subjective sentiments towards matters, even towards their dialogue partners, and lock their encounters in at the level of dogmatic discourse. In the latter instance, participants seek to encounter one another at the level of experience and relationships. But he pushes his case further by employing the argument that beings engage with one another, not externally, but by entering into the being of one another. He calls this reality a “cosmotheandric” one, which is widely known to be a trademark of Panikkar’s vision of reality, in which “There is a kind of *perichoresis*, ‘dwelling within one another’, of these three dimensions of Reality: the Divine, the Human, and the Cosmic”.<sup>33</sup> At the outset, one must admit that his employment of the traditional Trinitarian term applied by the Cappadocian Fathers to their descriptions of the Holy Trinity is indeed nothing short of captivating!

Further to that, in seemingly being somewhat influenced by Martin Buber’s “I and Thou” frame of thought, Panikkar propagates the necessity of intimacy and communion in dialogue, without which it cannot be true dialogue.<sup>34</sup> Without a willingness to enter fully into the other as well as identifying the other as being a part of oneself, the one who is supposed to be a “Thou” can only go as far as being a “non-I”. In fact, he does not just limit such communion to the relationship among human beings, but also between humanity and other members of creation.

He acknowledges that this model of dialogue constitutes a religious act in itself. But if that is so, then it must register that such a religious act cannot be prescribed as one which is held agreeable by the standards of all religious tenets. From a Christian viewpoint, the *perichoresis* which he advocates is a confusion of categorical understanding regarding communion. Panikkar seems to have universalised the makeup of every being and genericised our compatibilities by virtue of our createdness. But createdness does not automatically imply sameness, and if the sameness of all creatures was a

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<sup>33</sup> Raimon Panikkar, “The Myth of Pluralism: The Tower of Babel – A Meditation on Non-Violence,” *Cross Currents* 29, no. 2 (1979): 214–216.

<sup>34</sup> Buber, Martin, *I And Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937).

universal fact, then dialogue would have been rendered unnecessary. The fact of plurality of religions is itself an empirical refutation of Panikkar's dialogical model.

From a traditional Christian perspective, Panikkar also totally ignores the role of the fallenness of the *cosmos* in humanity's possible distorted images and perceptions of God apart from divine self-revelation to His Holy Church. This is not to say that there is nothing true or good, or even holy, in other religions. But that notwithstanding, the fallenness of humanity apart from divine revelation must necessarily mean that a dependence on our own recognition of revelation, even if it is undertaken in collective fashion, is distorted at best. This is why the accompanying guidance of the Holy Spirit must also be incorporated into the Christian understanding of our ecclesial recognition of divine revelation.

Because of his insistence on *perichoresis* and communion, Panikkar in effect abolishes in totality the reality of exclusive truth claims, and asserts that if dialogue is to take place effectively, one must be converted fully into the being of the other, all this without so much as diminishing that which one previously was prior to this encounter. In effect, this must mean that there is no contradiction between being Christian and being Hindu, and that it is even possible to be bi-religious or even tri-religious as he has claimed himself to be. Again, this is certainly not to say that there is nothing that can be learned from religious traditions outside one's own. But learning, and total vulnerability to assimilation so as to emerge with a hybrid religious creature that may in the first place look almost nothing like the one into which one claims to be assimilated, are two distinct attitudes all together.

From a Catholic perspective, Panikkar's preachment is nothing more than religious humanism packaged as philosophical pantheism, and this sorry accusation is well summed up in his own tenet: "We are constitutively open – not only because the whole universe can penetrate us, but also because we can permeate all of reality."<sup>35</sup> He speaks of man not as a part of the order of

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<sup>35</sup> Panikkar, *Intra-religious Dialogue*, xviii.

creation, but as a microcosm of the created world itself. He cannot tolerate a world characterised by difference, for in the final analysis, everyone and everything must be subsumed into one another. In the process of this endeavour, his brand of pluralism implicitly persuades us to turn our attention away from the Creator towards the "self" within and the "self" without. After all, in his estimation, "There is no matter without spirit and no spirit without matter, no World without Man, no God without the universe, etc. God, Man, and World are three 'artificially substantivized forms of the three primordial adjectives which describe Reality.'"<sup>36</sup> There is, in the final analysis, only Reality, and God is its creation. Rather, Reality *is* God.

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

One can easily understand, from Panikkar's assertions regarding interfaith dialogue, how Christian thinkers who are committed to the traditional tenets of the Christian faith might pander to a fear of such extreme compromise and insist on keeping within the margins of safety and self-protectionism that border on non-interaction with other religions. In actuality, both positions are probably motivated by fear of different sorts, which does disservice to authentic dialogue among religions.

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<sup>36</sup> Raimon Panikkar, "Philosophy as Lifestyle," in *Philosophers on Their Own Work*, ed. A. Mercier and M. Svilar (Berne & Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 1978), 206.

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