Chapter 5

The Indian Ecumenical Conference as an Interreligious Community

The grassroots religious leaders who gathered at the first Indian Ecumenical Conference in 1970 represented diverse tribal communities and religious traditions, but they shared a common concern about the social, cultural and religious crises that native people were experiencing. Bernard Second told his colleagues: "This may be our last chance. We will have to save our communities and revitalize them. We are, by nature, a people who look to our religious traditions to guide us." Andrew Dreadfulwater agreed: "We should have started something like this a long time ago. We have almost let all this religious squabbling smother our spiritual power and destroy us as a strong people." After the Conference ended, John Snow returned to his home on the Stoney Reserve "with a feeling of encouragement and realization that there were many Indian leaders who were concerned with the revival of our cultural, spiritual and religious heritage." These and other Conference leaders hoped to address the problems in their communities by healing religious divisions, reviving religious traditions, and affirming their shared religious heritage. By organizing the Indian Ecumenical Conference, they established and maintained an interreligious community of

native people committed to mutual support through dialogue, cooperation and advocacy.

Second, Dreadfulwater, and Snow expressed the views of many native people in Canada and the United States, who have an experiential awareness of the challenges their communities face as they struggle to survive the effects of dispossession, missionization, education, urbanization and discrimination. During the sixties many government, church, and private sector organizations became more receptive to dealing with the problems native people had been concerned about for some time. Charles Hendry agreed to prepare the Hendry Report in 1968 after he became "acutely aware that the native people of Canada are in serious trouble." The Anglican Church of Canada responded to the report by calling for "radical changes" in their approach to native people and initiating a multifaceted program aimed at native community development. One of the first projects the Anglicans supported was the Indian Ecumenical Conference, an idea conceived by Ian MacKenzie, Robert Thomas and Wilfred Pelletier and proposed through the Institute for Indian Studies. They suggested that the most critical problem facing native communities was the need for religious healing, revival and solidarity. "Strong evidence accumulated since the early 1950s indicates that something has gone wrong in the Churches' relationship to Indian communities. . . . Religious strife and turmoil is rampant in Indian communities."

> Religious strife, or loss of faith in religion, in an Indian tribe literally tears the social fabric of such a small community of kinsmen. The individual and the whole group

> are immobilized in this destructive process. There are no means of social control without common religious sanctions that can be called into play by the whole community. One cannot even fully socialize children in such an atmosphere. A tribe is not just a collection of individuals. It is a wholistic, mutually agreed on system of consistent values. When it is fragmented by religious strife it becomes inoperative and the community must attend only to the problem of fragmentation. Indians as groups, will not take any action except in terms of the sacred, on the basis of unanimous sacred agreement, and only when sanctioned by the sacred. Political action, economic programs, social action etc., must proceed from the sacred. For the Indian there is no distinction between the sacred and the secular, the religious and the political. Secular activity is simply an activity from which an essential ingredient is missing--the sacred.
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> Indians, as communities, tribes or as a people cannot act in their own behalf in any direction in modern times because of this religious fragmentation. No one is more aware of this than Indians themselves. And the need for an Indian "Ecumenical" Conference is uppermost in the minds of many Indian leaders. Native Indian religionists, of all Christian and Aboriginal sects must assemble and start the painful process of conceptually sewing together their fragmented sacred world, so Indians can once again take steps to act for their own future welfare.[1]

This religious "strife" and "fragmentation" reflected the religious divisions increasingly present in native communities. Of course, North America was the home to a great variety of religious traditions long before Christian missionaries arrived; religious "diversity and complexity" is not a recent development in American history.[2] The long process of invasion and dispossession created social, cultural and religious crises in every native community, and opportunistic Christian missionaries often exacerbated these

problems by engaging in aggressive proselytization and denominational competition for native converts. Some ancient religious traditions were lost, but those which survived were joined by a variety of Christian churches and synthetic religious innovations. Native people today live in some of the most religiously diverse communities in North America.

Most of the religious leaders who participated in the Indian Ecumenical Conference accepted religious diversity as an inescapable dimension of contemporary native life. They believed, however, that the survival of their communities depended on finding ways to allow this diversity to be "mutually supportive" rather than destructively divisive. The Steering Committee met in 1972 and discussed the goals of the Conference, which included: addressing the "mutual problems" facing native people; attaining "some form of harmony among the followers of both the Indian and Christian religions"; and reviving "cultural pride in the younger generation of Native people." Conference leaders wanted to address the social problems in their communities, and they believed that these problems were the symptoms of a deeper crisis of identity. As Ernest Tootoosis said,

> There's an exterior darkness in the way of life between the two societies and that's why the younger people are behaving the way they are. They have lost their sense of identity.

In response to the challenges facing native people, Conference leaders organized an interreligious community of native people in order to promote religious healing, revival and solidarity. They

engaged in interreligious dialogue, cooperation and advocacy both formally (at annual gatherings) and informally (through personal interactions throughout the year and all over Canada and the United States). The 1970 Conference report summarized their views:

> Everyone agreed that modern Indian religious life must be a furthering of the historic continuity of time-honoured Indian values and philosophical concerns; that both modern Indian ceremonies and Indian Christianity must be part of that continuity; and that both native ceremonials and Indian Christianity can be mutually supportive or parallel and co-operative or integrated according to the desire of the particular tribe involved. Most felt that the work of future Conferences would be to evolve a way of implementing this process.

Organizers of the Indian Ecumenical Conference used the term "ecumenical" at a time when many Christian denominations were also engaged in ecumenical activities. Conference leaders, however, attached a very different meaning to the term. The modern Christian ecumenical movement, which began after World War II and was spurred by the founding of the World Council of Churches and the radical reforms of the Second Vatican Council, has led to a virtual redefinition of "ecumenical" to mean Christian interdenominational cooperation.[3] Conference leaders, however, understood the term in its original sense, meaning universal and inclusive. This choice of terminology reflects the fact that the Indian Ecumenical Conference pioneered an important new approach to contemporary interreligious interaction. Western religious leaders and scholars commonly view interreligious dialogue as a theoretical problem which is addressed when representatives of distinct religious communities discuss

their theological differences. The native religious leaders who participated in the Indian Ecumenical Conference understood it to be a practical problem which involves dialogue, cooperation and advocacy and which takes place within their religiously diverse communities.

Interreligious Interaction

Human existence has always been marked by religious pluralism and every religious tradition has engaged in interreligious interaction at some point in its history; no religious community has enjoyed the idyllic isolation which many of them seem to pursue. These interactions have often taken the form of intolerance and aggression rather than respect and coexistence, despite the fact that every religious tradition emphasizes the importance of personal and communal harmony. Our continuing struggle for world peace is a search for human community and identity; it involves economic negotiation and political mediation, but it is also a religious quest, an ongoing effort at discovering unity amid diversity.

Paul Mojzes has developed a typology to describe the range of potential interactions between religious traditions:

war	(organized, overt violence)
antagonism	(intolerance, hatred, persecution)
indifference	(ignorance, self-absorption)
negotiation	(pragmatic compromise)
dialogue	(respect, mutuality, coexistence)
cooperation	(situational or comprehensive)
synthesis	(individual, communal, institutional)

Mojzes suggested that these types of religious interaction should not be understood as mutually exclusive options or as a linear progression (though he did organize them in a continuum ranging "from hostility to voluntary absorption"). He also noted the diverse interpretations present within religious communities.

> Different members within a given religion may and do display a variety of responses to another religion . . . some may harbor antagonistic feelings or be indifferent, while others may be cooperative or even unify or merge the two views in their lives.

War, antagonism, indifference and negotiation have long histories as strategies for interreligious interaction; dialogue is a more recent approach. "There is a fundamental shift in perception of the other in dialogue as compared to the previous alternatives. In dialogue the other is a partner."[4]

Western scholars, particularly Christian theologians, have developed a new appreciation for religious pluralism during the last decade or so. Some have claimed that we are witnessing "the resurgence of the world religions," the "ascendency of non-Western faiths."[5] It might be more accurate to say that what has changed in recent years is the growing Western awareness--and acceptance--of global religious diversity. Alan Race began his important survey of religious pluralism (from a Christian theological perspective) this way:

> To say that we live in a religiously plural world is not new. What is new, however, is the increasing awareness that this brings with it serious theological issues for the

> Christian church. The days of religious and cultural isolationism are at an end.[6]

Harold Coward used a comparative methodology to consider the "challenge" of religious pluralism; he examined how five different religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism) understand the significance of other religions.[7] The following passage from his Preface reflects the attitudes and assumptions that many Western scholars bring to the study of interreligious interaction:

> One of the things that characterizes today's world is religious pluralism. The world has always had religious plurality. But in the 1980s the breaking of cultural, racial, linguistic, and geographical boundaries is on a scale that the world has not previously seen. For the first time in recorded history we seem to be rapidly becoming a true world community. Today the West is no longer closed within itself. It can no longer regard itself as being the historical and cultural center of the world and as having a religion that is the sole valid way of worship. The same is true for the East. Today everyone is the next-door neighbor and spiritual neighbor of everyone else.
>
> . . . Today every religion, like every culture, is an existential possibility offered to every person. Alien religions have become part of everyday life, and we experience them as a challenge to the claims of truth of our own faith.[8]

Coward's contentions that we are becoming "a true world community" and that "the West is no longer closed within itself" seem overly optimistic in light of contemporary political and economic realities. His reification of abstract constructions--"the West" and "the East"--and his implication that these labels comprehensively describe global religious pluralism serves only to

mystify the diversity and complexity of contemporary religious identity. Is it really true (could it ever be?) that "every religion . . . is an existential possibility offered to every person"? Most importantly, Coward claimed that we experience "alien religions" as "a challenge to the claims of truth of our own faith." By identifying the central problematic of religious pluralism in these oppositional and rationalistic terms, Coward exhibited a distinctively Christian understanding of the situation.

The limitations of Coward's theoretical perspective on religious pluralism are understandable, and they are not unusual. The history of Western scholarship on religion has always been closely related to the religious history of the West. Individual scholars have been Christian or Jewish, Protestant or Catholic, agnostic or atheist, but each has had their theoretical orientations shaped by the theological distinctives of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The relationship between Western scholarship and Christianity is particularly evident in the literature on interreligious dialogue. Apart from the voluminous work of Christian theologians, scholars have paid very little attention to the theoretical and practical implications of religious pluralism as a contemporary problem. Nonsectarian scholarly literature on interreligious interaction has originated primarily from two disciplines: anthropology and the history of religions. Both disciplines emerged from the rise of social scientific thought during the nineteenth century and have maintained a thoroughgoing

evolutionary perspective, and both have been reductionistic in their efforts at explaining religious phenomena. "Anthropology's traditional concentration on nonliterate societies has shaped its approach to religious practice and belief in general."[9] Anthropologists have shown little interest in the actual process of interreligious dialogue, focussing instead on macrohistorical religious interactions described in terms of diffusion, acculturation and syncretism. Their functional and structural interpretations of religion have relied on a mechanistic worldview which reduces religious attitudes and behaviors to materialist terms.

Historians of religion, on the other hand, have pursued a more humanistic approach to the study of religion. Their methods "are essentially inductive, intended to grasp religion in its concreteness, in its historical creativity, and in its meaningfulness for the cultural, social, and individual lives with which it is interwoven."[10] Most historians of religion have rejected the materialist presumptions of social science, but they have engaged in their own form of reductionism by searching for the "origin" of religion or, more recently, by positing an essential unity among the world's religions. Rudolf Otto is commonly regarded as an early proponent of this approach to religious pluralism.[11] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Frithjof Schuon, Joseph Kitagawa, and N. Ross Reat and Edmund Perry have all offered recent essentialist interpretations of religious pluralism. Smith argued that since all religions have affected each other throughout history, their unity lies in their "common religious history," which he considered to be both an empirical fact and a

theological truth.[12] Schuon believed that the unity of religion exists at a "purely inward and spiritual" level, and that metaphysical Truth is accessible to the "spiritual elite" of every religion who can perceive this pure, universal, absolute, divine knowledge beneath the "veil" of dogmatic and ritualistic symbols.[13] Kitagawa interpreted the history of religion as a quest for human unity and wrote an interdisciplinary (and conveniently selective) narrative describing how humanity has never ceased its attempt to unify across boundaries.[14] Reat and Perry theologized that each religion affirms three essential characteristics of ultimate reality--the undeniability, the desirability, and the elusiveness of transcendence--as "the central spiritual reality of humankind."[15]

Both anthropologists and historians of religions have interpreted religious pluralism in reductionist terms: in the history of religions, "the human diversity of religious experience is reduced to a common transcendent reality;" in anthropology, "the plural experiences of the transcendent are reduced to a common human experience." But religious diversity is an irreducible feature of human existence, for several reasons. Religious traditions make discordant assumptions about ultimate reality (worldview) and describe that reality differently (language); since religions do not share a common intellectual outlook, they have no way "to arrive at a comparative understanding and logical judgment between alternatives." The intellectual and psychological limits of the human mind also preclude any effort to resolve global religious diversity by means of a unifying principle.

> When the limitations of theologizing are taken seriously, all future theologizing with the intent of establishing ultimate claims to knowledge must cease. Is the correct vision for the future one in which thousands of theologians of the various religions all around the world simultaneously put down their pens [or, as the case may be, close their mouths]? What then, silence?[16]

Silence is golden only for those with the gold. In a world filled with conflict and violence, the only viable approach to the problem of religious pluralism is interreligious dialogue, cooperation and advocacy.

Theories of Interreligious Dialogue

The few scholars who have engaged in the systematic study of interreligious dialogue have been Christian theologians, and even they have produced surprisingly few critical works on the subject as a general theoretical problem. This situation has changed dramatically during the last decade, however, and interreligious dialogue is now one of the most dynamic topics in Christian theology; in Leonard Swidler's words, "the outpouring of scholarly literature on interreligious dialogue is fast approaching the flood stage."[17] Both individual theologians and institutional churches representing Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox traditions have been involved in this movement.[18]

> Following the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church established a special department in the Vatican, the business of which was to seek co-operation in dialogue with non-Christian faiths. In 1979 the World Council of Churches published <u>Guidelines on Dialogue with People of</u>

Living Faiths and Ideologies, which was the fruit of ten years serious dialogue across religious boundaries.[19]

Alan Race developed a concise typological framework for categorizing Christian theologies of religion, and his typology is now widely used to describe theories of interreligious dialogue, often without acknowledgement.[20] Several earlier works offered typologies which are more cumbersome and idiosyncratic,[21] but Race adopted only three analytical categories: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.[22] Exclusivist theories of interreligious dialogue are based on the belief that Christianity is unique among the world's religions and that salvation is possible only through Christianity.[23] Exclusivism has been the orthodox position for much of Christian history, and is represented today by conservative Protestants (Evangelicals) and Catholics.[24] Inclusivist theories of interreligious dialogue acknowledge the truth of other religions while asserting the superiority of Christianity; non-Christian religions have been "fulfilled" by Christianity, non-Christian people are really "anonymous" Christians.[25] Inclusivism has a long history as a heterodox position among dissenting groups and individuals, and has become more popular in recent years in response to the challenges of modernity, particularly among liberal Protestants, and Catholics following the Second Vatican Council.[26] Exclusivists and inclusivists differ in their assessment of other religions but they agree on the significance of their own; both groups view interreligious dialogue as a dimension of missiology. Neither exclusivism nor inclusivism is useful in developing a general theory

of interreligious dialogue because both approaches are religiocentric, substantively as well as methodologically.

Pluralist theories of interreligious dialogue, on the other hand, attempt to refrain from judging the absolute or relative value of other religions; since religious truth and efficacy cannot be evaluated from any objective stance, pluralists take a more dialogical approach to the problem. Race identified pluralism with the post-Enlightenment liberal tradition represented by figures such as Ernst Troeltsch and Paul Tillich,[27] but contemporary pluralists have attempted to move beyond the abstract theologizing of Protestant liberalism. Pluralist theories might be described as a postmodern approach to interreligious dialogue, and they are becoming increasingly popular among Christians.

> A pluralistic model represents a new turn--what might be called a "paradigm shift"--in the efforts of Christian theologians, both past and present, to understand the world of other religions and Christianity's place in that world.

Pluralism is "a viable, though still inchoate and controversial," approach to interreligious dialogue;[28] few systematic studies from a pluralist perspective have been published, though a number of interesting anthologies are available.[29]

Some of the more innovative work on interreligious dialogue has been done by theologians in India, where Christianity is still a distinct religious minority. "Plurality of faiths has been an integral part of Indian religious experience for the last more than 2,000 years."[30] "Common participation in day-to-day ceremonies as well as at places of work makes religious plurality a *fact* in India rather

than a field for athletic theologizing."[31] The scholarly, textual traditions of religions such as Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism also lend themselves to the philosophical speculation common to Christian theology. Indian theologians Stanley Samartha (a Protestant)[32] and Raimundo Panikkar (a Catholic)[33] have been leaders in the global study--and practice--of interreligious dialogue.

British scholar John Hick was one of the first Western theologians to adopt a consistently pluralist approach to Christian theology, and his work has been called "perhaps the most developed" among contemporary pluralists.[34] He has written extensively on the theological implications of religious pluralism and on the relationship between Christianity and other religions.[35]

Leonard Swidler

Leonard Swidler, editor of The Journal of Ecumenical Studies and director of the Institute for Interreligious, Interideological Dialogue at Temple University, has made significant contributions to the development of a general theory of interreligious dialogue. Swidler's systematic and formalistic treatments of the subject reflect his training as a Catholic theologian, but his interpretations are useful in a broader context. In the interests of inclusiveness, he addressed the problem of dialogue among both religions and ideologies, defining religion as "an explanation of the meaning of life, and how to live accordingly," and ideology as "such a creed *without* the transcendent." Swidler considered interreligious dialogue (involving Christians) to be a natural outgrowth of the

Christian ecumenical movement. He argued that it is also the inevitable result of a "dramatic shift" in the Western understanding of truth during the last two centuries. "Whereas the notion of truth was largely absolute, static, and exclusive up to the last century," the insights of critical thought (new awareness of the historicity and sociology of knowledge and of the limits of language and hermeneutics) have led to a new view of truth as relational.[36]

Swidler defined interreligious, interideological dialogue as "conversation between two or more persons with differing views, the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that both can change and grow." He believed that interreligious dialogue is not a discussion *about* religious differences, but a conversation *between* religious individuals and communities. Participants "must come to the dialogue as persons somehow significantly identified with a religious community." Swidler's most memorable theoretical contribution may be his "ground rules" for dialogue, which he developed over a period of years and later dubbed the "dialogue decalogue."[37] In a recent article he distilled these ten guidelines down to three "key principles" for interreligious dialogue:

> 1. All participants must define themselves (they must define what it means to be an authentic member of their own traditions).
>
> 2. Dialogue can take place only between equals (all participants must come to learn from the others).
>
> 3. All participants must be at least minimally self-critical of both oneself and one's own religious tradition.[38]

Swidler suggested that dialogue should take place in three areas:

> the practical, where we collaborate to help humanity; the "spiritual," where we attempt to experience the partner's religion or ideology "from within"; and the cognitive, where we seek understanding and truth.

He believed that the cognitive area poses "perhaps the greatest challenge to interreligious, interideological dialogue," and that we need to forge a "universal systematic reflection of religion-ideology." This universal reflection must be composed of language, terms, categories, and images which reflect our common humanity; we need to develop "a humanity-based 'language' that will articulate the transcendent in the immanent, an 'ecumenical Esperanto.'" Developing such a universal language will facilitate the process of dialogue and the achievement of its three goals: "(1) to know oneself ever more profoundly; (2) to know the other ever more authentically; (3) to live ever more fully accordingly."[39]

Paul Knitter

Catholic theologian Paul Knitter has made some of the most radical proposals for a Christian theology of religions; his open-minded approach to the subject has helped him to make some useful theoretical observations on interreligious dialogue as well. Knitter surveyed (Western) popular and Christian attitudes toward religious pluralism in No Other Name? (1985), concluding the book with a chapter on interreligious dialogue. He grounded his study on the common-sense admission that the natural world is essentially pluralistic:

> Pluralism does not result simply from the limitations of the human mind to "get it all together." Rather, pluralism seems to be of the very stuff of reality, the way things are, the way they function. Without multiplicity, without the many others, our world--from atoms to molecules to plants to bugs to humans--would not be able to function and exist. Reality is essentially pluriform: complex, rich, intricate, mysterious.

Knitter found that many people are responding to the reality of religious pluralism by calling for a "unitive pluralism," based on developments in the fields of philosophy (the processive-relational view of reality), sociology and psychology (the priority of world citizenship in a global community), and economics and politics (the need for a new world order). This unitive pluralism will view the differences between the world's religious traditions as being complementary rather than contradictory.[40]

Knitter cited H. Richard Niebuhr in arguing that Christians should adopt a confessional (dialogical) approach to interreligious dialogue, not an apologetic (oppositional) stance. Niebuhr proposed that Christians interact with others by explaining "what has happened to us in our community, how we came to believe, how we reason about things and what we see from our point of view."[41] Knitter's definition of interreligious dialogue is similar to Swidler's: "Dialogue is the exchange of experience and understanding between two or more partners with the intention that all partners grow in experience and understanding." Knitter, however, cast the process of dialogue in a different theoretical light. He proposed that interreligious dialogue should make use of the basic principle of

liberation theology: theory follows praxis; reflection is the second step.

> One of the principal forms of praxis necessary today for discovering the truth of Christian revelation is not only the socio-political praxis of liberation, but also the *praxis of dialogue* with peoples of other faiths. Such an interreligious dialogue can serve as a *hermeneutics of praxis* that will throw ever greater light on the theoretical questions that . . . are the central issues for any Christian theology of world religions.[42]

Knitter endorsed the "theocentric model" of interreligious dialogue articulated by Hick, Panikkar and Samartha: God, not Christ or the church, as the starting point and normative principle for dialogue.[43] Two years later he rejected this position in favor of a "soteriocentric" approach.

> For Christians, that which constitutes the basis and the goal for interreligious dialogue, that which makes mutual understanding and cooperation between the religions possible, that which unites the religions in common discourse and praxis, is *not* how they are related to the church, or how they are related to Christ, nor even how respond to and conceive of God, but rather, to what extent they are promoting *Soteria*--to what extent they are engaged in promoting human welfare and bringing about liberation with and for the poor and nonpersons.[44]

Knitter considered "the experience of the *many poor* and the experience of the *many religions*" to be the two greatest challenges for Christians, and he highlighted the need for dialogue between the theology of liberation and the theology of religions. Breaking with Swidler and many other scholars (and with his own earlier views), Knitter declared:

> A *preferential option for the poor and the nonperson* constitutes both the *necessity* and the *primary purpose* of interreligious dialogue. Religions must speak and act together because only so can they make their crucially important contribution to removing the oppression that contaminates our globe. Dialogue, therefore, is not a luxury for the leisure classes of religion; nor is it a "top priority" after we take care of the essentials. Interreligious dialogue is essential to international liberation.[45]

Dialogue and Praxis

Reflecting their growing awareness of the sociopolitical context for interreligious dialogue, Knitter and Swidler collaborated with Monika Hellwig and John B. Cobb, Jr., on a book titled Death or Dialogue? (1990). In the Introduction Swidler outlined his new understanding of the urgency of our situation. "The future offers two alternatives: death or dialogue. This statement is not over-dramatization." The primary goal of interreligious dialogue is not mutual understanding and personal growth, though these are important, because the very survival of humanity is at stake. Humans have been living in the "Age of Monologue" but are now "poised at the entrance to the Age of Dialogue."

> We can no longer ignore "the other," but we can close our minds and spirits to them, look to them with fear and misunderstanding, come to resent them, and perhaps even hate them. This way of encounter leads to hostility and eventually war and death. . . .
>
> Today nuclear or ecological, or other, catastrophic devastation lies just a little way further down the path of monologue.[46]

Knitter also recognized that the "dialogical imperative" is a product of contemporary philosophical developments, but he agreed

with Swidler that "our present-day world confronts us with an even greater and more urgent need for interreligious cooperation and conversation. . . . The need for *liberation*." Knitter suggested that every religion advocates holistic liberation on a global scale, and that each one struggles against the same threats: physical suffering, socioeconomic oppression, nuclear holocaust, and ecological disaster. A "common moral conversion" to the priority of liberation is the starting point for interreligious praxis and dialogue.

> In the interreligious encounter, what we can envision and what is already taking place in Asia are *base human communities*--communities which gather people not of one religious tradition but people of different religious beliefs who share *one commitment* to overcoming injustice and working with the oppressed. In these communities, the same dynamic as that of the base Christian communities can and is taking place--scriptures are coming alive, doctrine makes sense, religious experience is deepened--between Buddhists and Christians and Hindus.[47]

C. K. Mathew has described such an approach to interreligious dialogue in the context of American society; it is based on establishing a "common community of communities" in a pluralistic situation.[48]

Swidler, Knitter, and other Western scholars are just discovering what religious leaders in oppressed and conflictual communities have known for some time: that interreligious dialogue cannot be separated from the historical, political, socioeconomic realities of human life. A few scholars have explored the contextual nature of interreligious dialogue in recent years. David Hollenbach

studied human rights in the Middle East and found that religious hostility is an important but neglected cause of human rights violations. He noted that Jews, Christians and Muslims make similar affirmations regarding basic human rights, but that their long history of conflict overshadows this commonality; believers in each faith community "frequently compare the theoretical basis for commitment to human rights of their own tradition with the historical records of other communities." He suggested the need for understanding the social role of religious motivations and behaviors, not so that this role can be reduced (a solution which each religious community opposes) but in order to address the root causes of conflict through interreligious dialogue.[49] Gerrie Lubbe studied interreligious dialogue in South Africa, where the political conflict is complicated by considerable religious diversity: Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, tribal religions and Buddhism. Cooperative action by religious communities challenging Apartheid has grown considerably since interreligious prayer and protest meetings began in 1985.[50] Lubbe extracted from the South African experience several principles for interfaith cooperation: religious organizations must not avoid political commitment, they must share the goals of the general liberation movement, and they must pursue both action and dialogue.[51] Ulrich Dornberg studied the relationship between interreligious dialogue and development in Asia, where massive poverty and deeply rooted religious pluralism have forced the Christian minority to recognize the interdependence of development and dialogue. "Development in dialogue" begins with

"living human beings in their concrete historical contexts," not religious abstractions, and must originate in communities and small groups.[52]

Christianity and Tribal Religions

Almost all of the scholarly literature on interreligious dialogue has focussed on relationships among the so-called "world" religions; Western scholars have virtually ignored the dialogical significance of the religious traditions of tribal communities. African scholars and religious leaders, and some Christian missionaries in Africa, have begun to explore the subject in the aftermath of the African independence movement. Many of these studies by African Christians and Western missionaries maintain an exclusivist or inclusivist stance toward African tribal religions, making them essentially (if not always explicitly) missiological.[53]

Some scholars, however, have attempted to make an unbiased appraisal of the potential for interreligious dialogue with tribal religions. John Taylor convened a World Council of Churches consultation in Nigeria in 1973, "envisaged as a first step in seeking to identify the genuine issues at stake and the right methods of approach for dialogue."

> [Tribal people], and the contribution the primal traditions and cultures have made to the rest of mankind, have too often been ignored, or regarded as worthy of serious attention only as possible subjects for conversion. Christians have seldom turned to listen to them, and if possible to learn from them, much less to acknowledge the existence of primal forces within themselves.

Taylor noted that the "partners in dialogue" would come from several different religious backgrounds: African independent churches, "neo-primal" movements, and African traditional religions. He referred to the Indian Ecumenical Conference (without naming it) as a model for how this process might work:

> An example combining all three levels of involvement exists in the annual meetings of the religious leaders of the North American Indian peoples, including medicine men, representatives of some of their religious movements and American Indian Christian ministers of many denominations. These meetings began in 1970. . . .

Taylor emphasized the importance of locating "the most authentic representatives of living religious systems, those who are publicly accepted by their own members as responsible leaders." He also observed that the most promising opportunities for interreligious cooperation would arise as "primal and Christian religious leaders confront the new problems facing their members through the great social upheavals across much of Africa and the rest of the world."

> It may well be that dialogue with the adherents of living primal religious systems will be most authentic when their spokesmen stand alongside Christians amid urgent human problems of international, inter-racial and inter-tribal peace, of family security and of the individual's freedom of conscience. Neither tradition can claim an immediate or obvious solution to such problems.[54]

Wande Abimbola, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ife (Nigeria) and a Yoruba priest, argued for "the need for constant dialogue among leaders of the world's religions." Religious intolerance is "at the center" of global conflict; interreligious

dialogue should emphasize our common moral attitudes and values, not our philosophical differences, in order to promote world peace. Abimbola condemned aggressive proselytization for its socially destructive effects:

> Leaders of the two most propagated world religions--Christianity and Islam--have gone out of their way and out of the teachings of Jesus and Muhammad to propagate doctrines of destruction, genocide, war, hatred, and civil strife by emphasizing doctrines which undermine the existence of the other religions of the world. Nowhere has this doctrine of hatred, rather than love, been more prevalent than in black Africa where hundreds of Christians and Islamic missionaries spend millions of dollars every year threatening the ordinary folk of that continent with hell fire, stealing their icons, destroying their temples, and waging a relentless physical and psychological warfare against their priests and their adherents. Such evangelism must be put to rest in the name of the Creator of this earth and the universe.[55]

There has also been little written on the subject of dialogue between Christianity and native religions. This scholarly lack of interest is reflected in the Library of Congress classification system; under the subject heading "Christianity and other religions" are thirty-two subheadings including "African," "Druidism" and "Norse," but no subheading for native religions in North America.[56] Vine Deloria, Jr., raised the question of the potential for dialogue between Christianity and native religions in God is Red (1973), placing theological differences in a broad social and historical context.[57] Benjamin Reist was apparently the only Christian theologian to respond to Deloria's challenge in a direct and substantive way; he outlined a contextual, dialogical model for

theological reflection in a multiracial society.[58] Several Catholic theologians have engaged in theological reflection on the significance of native religions for Christianity; most of them maintain a missiological stance.[59]

A couple of brief articles on interreligious dialogue between native religions and Christianity have appeared in recent years. John Grim described the emergence of an "indigenous" model of "internal" dialogue, "in which active participation of native peoples in all aspects of the dialogue is taking place." Grim pointed to the rise of two ecclesiastical organizations, the Native American Theological Association (among Protestants) and the National Tekakwitha Conference (among Catholics), but also suggested that the emerging model varies according to "local needs."

> This dialogue is largely conducted by individuals who participate in both traditions and, therefore, try to reconcile their belief in both traditions. . . . What is occurring in the contemporary interreligious milieu of many Christian Native Americans is an attempt to recover their primal religious relatedness to self, society, and cosmos. . . .[60]

Stanley McKay, a United Church of Canada leader and a native person, expressed his hesitancy to engage in interreligious dialogue "by writing words. Some of our elders say that when you put thoughts into written form, they lose life."

> Added to the basic concern about the suitability of the written word to communicate our deep feeling for the creation, is the ever present need to address the marginalization of our indigenous peoples around the globe. In other words, is it faithful to enter conversations about

> spirituality when the basic issues are around injustice in a materialistic age?

McKay drew some comparisons between native worldviews and Christian teachings, then closed with a summary of his approach to interreligious dialogue:

> The image of living on the earth in harmony with the creation and therefore the Creator, is a helpful image for me. It means that "faithful" living in the earth will be moving in the rhythm of the creation. It will mean vibrating to the pulse of life in a natural way without having to "own" the source of the music. It allows the Creator to reveal truth to the creation and all may share in it. We have ceremonies and symbols of what may be true for us. We have developed myths and rituals which remind us of the centrality of the Earth in our experience of truth about the Creator. We seek to integrate life so that there will not be boundaries between the secular and religious. For us, The Great Spirit is in the daily earthly concerns about faithful living. Each day we are given is for thanksgiving for the Earth. We are to enjoy it and share it in service of others. This is the way to grow in unity and harmony. There is a word that is central to the movement into harmony with other communities and that is respect. It allows for diversity within the unity of the Creator. The dialogue can then take place in ecumenical community which does not develop defensive arguments to protect some truth. The situation will be one of sharing stories instead of dogmatic statements and involves listening as well as talking.[61]

The Indian Ecumenical Conference

McKay outlined a theory of interreligious dialogue which many Conference leaders and participants would have endorsed: (1) respect for creation and the Creator leads to (2) humble appreciation for one's own traditions and (3) respect for the traditions of others,

so that (4) dialogue can unfold as a process of sharing personal experiences. The Indian Ecumenical Conference pioneered an important new approach to contemporary interreligious interaction, including what Grim described as an emerging "indigenous" model of "internal" dialogue. Conference leaders developed an implicit theory of interreligious dialogue in order to address the need for religious healing, revival and solidarity in their religiously diverse--and divided--communities.

John Snow approached the problem of religious pluralism in the same way that Knitter later did, pointing out the importance of diversity in the natural world:

> The Great Spirit, the Creator, in his wisdom has given to each climate its unique plant life and its unique animal life and its men and women, and He has given them a religion which is fitting to their needs. . . .
>
> My grandfather, Walking Buffalo, a Stoney philosopher who passed away some years ago, would draw examples for all men to understand the lessons of harmony from the Great Spirit's creation.
>
> He told me one day that I must look at the beautiful forest where the trees and shrubs and tiny plants grow in a harmony of variety. He pointed out to me how some trees grow tall and straight and shelter the small trees and the misshapen ones; how the delicate flowers nestle among the grass at the foot of the trees catching the sunlight, as though the trees lean away to allow its rays to give them life. He spoke of the red trees and the white trees and the black trees, each forming a part of a beautiful pattern in their diversity. He showed me how each stands proud and upright in its own way to honour the Maker, the Great Spirit. The diversity of plants and trees makes a beautiful forest. Why is the forest beautiful? Because it grows according to the plan of the Creator. If mankind too could

> stand humbly at the Creator's feet, mankind too could share in the harmony which is the Creation.[62]

Conference leaders also anticipated the work of Knitter and other theorists when they repeatedly emphasized the importance of social context for interreligious interaction. Concern over the breakdown of native community life was a prominent theme throughout the history of the Conference. John Hascall evaluated the situation this way:

> We had a very religious people before the whiteman came. Now our children are disobeying their parents; they are committing suicide; they are doing all kinds of evil things which they never did before when we had our own religion.

Religious confusion and division are the root causes of social crises, and so religious healing, revival and solidarity form the basis for effective social change. Ernest Willie expressed the conviction of all Conference participants when he suggested that one of the "only ways to salvage the Indian people is to reintroduce a sizeable portion of their spiritual legacy." Ernest Tootoosis argued that social change must grow out of religious revival: "any liberation movement must be totally rooted in religion and culture."

Many Conference leaders approached interreligious interaction by emphasizing their shared religious heritage as native people. They focussed on the similarities between various religious traditions rather than their differences; Hascall "saw no contradiction between Christian and Indian spirituality." Snow wrote:

> Our religion, the religion of this Great Island, is not contradictory to the teaching of the great rabbis of the Hebrews, nor is it in conflict with the great Christian teachers.[63]

Theological and ceremonial differences should be respected since pluralism is an irreducible dimension of reality and since there is no objective basis for making value judgments about religious truth and efficacy. Joe Mackinaw refused to criticize Christianity despite its oppressive presence among native people, and even attended some Christian services "since they are still praying to the one God, Manitou." The Indian Ecumenical Conference even made room for diverse opinions on the very question of religious diversity. Andrew Ahenakew believed that "Christianity is now just as much a part of Indian religious identity as tribal religion," while Tootoosis argued, "We must go back to the way our forefathers worshiped." Conference participants recognized (like Mojzes and Grim) that religious traditions are subject to diverse interpretations and that diversity exists in all religious communities and even within some individuals.

Conference organizers and leaders developed several guidelines for interreligious interaction which helped make their annual gatherings worthwhile experiences for all participants. The initial proposal for the Conference emphasized the importance of recruiting "native Indian religionists," those grassroots religious leaders who live and work in native communities, just as Taylor suggested for successful interreligious dialogue in Africa. Conference announcements regularly invited all native religious

leaders to attend, and encouraged native communities to support their leaders by raising travel money through "individual contributions, pie suppers, give-aways, raffles, etc." Delegates to the 1971 Conference

> were even more widely representative than before and embodied the grassroots religious leadership which had both the social responsibility and the power to effect radical change.

One of the primary goals of the Conference was to bring together native religious leaders, but these leaders were egalitarian in their attitude toward interreligious interaction. The 1973 Conference announcement invited all native people to attend, since "in our experience we know that all Native people in [the] Americas have contributions [to make] in relation to their personal experiences."

Conference leaders also believed that interreligious interaction involves dialogue as well as cooperation and advocacy; reflection and action belong together. The cognitive dimension of dialogue is not the most important part of the process (as Swidler suggested), and liberating praxis should not precede theory (as Knitter suggested). Rather, social action and spiritual awareness must be kept in balance. Conferences were primarily experiential, as participants were encouraged to share with and learn from each other. Delegates to the 1971 Conference were more comfortable sharing their religious traditions with one another after having established cooperative relationships the year before. Ceremonies were held throughout each Conference, many of them on an interreligious basis: sunrise ceremonies, healing ceremonies,

grounds blessing and sacred fire ceremonies, Native American Church ceremonies, and Christian worship services. One observer at the 1974 Conference wrote, "Most of the people came to share religious experiences, make contacts and learn ceremonial traditions from religious leaders." Efforts at religious revival focussed especially on the youth, who were admonished to "return to their native traditions" and instructed on "history, language, culture, and spirituality, prophecies, healing rituals, and traditional native ceremonies." Yet Conference leaders were reluctant (as McKay was) to engage in the rationalistic theological discussions often preferred by scholars.[64]

Religious healing and revival among native people was their primary goal, but Conference leaders also engaged in interreligious interaction with the Christian denominations and with the dominant society. The 1970 resolutions addressed churches and governments on specific issues of religious freedom and tolerance, and Conference leaders advocated for other causes as well. Most importantly, they asked the denominations to recognize the validity and importance of native religious traditions, both inside and outside native congregations. Resolution 4 petitioned

> denominational authorities to permit those who work among Indian groups the freedom to use Native languages, traditions, dances, legends, and their own ancient religions as instruments of expression of the Christian life.

Resolution 9 called for them to "extend their respect and assistance" to the Native American Church by treating it like a "small Christian denomination." Conference leaders also asked Anglicans at the 1971

General Synod "to recognize medicine men as religious and spiritual leaders of Indian communities." The national "Indian Day of Prayer" initiated in 1971 served as a symbolic, generic affirmation of native religious traditions.

Conference leaders asked the denominations to support native communities in more mundane ways as well. Resolution 5 stressed the importance of conducting mission work on an interdenominational basis "so as not to encourage excessive competition among sects in Indian communities." The Steering Committee raised funds for the Conferences from several denominations and attempted to convince other Canadian and American denominations to support them financially. Ecclesiastical provincialism led several denominations to develop their own programs in place of the Conference, but Harold Turner argued that this was a mistake, both for native communities and for the denominations: "When Indian spirituality in any form has found itself and can speak with confidence, then a new dialogue can commence with the white Christian community." Willie pointed out that the denominations needed to adopt a listening stance toward dialogue with native people.

> Right now if [Christianity] is to have a place here at [the Conference], it must be one of learning, a posture of soul-searching. It would need to be a re-examination of the whole church.

Anglican Primate Ted Scott was one denominational leader who heeded this advice; when he was presented with a pipe and asked to

speak at the 1973 Conference, he responded by saying, "I am not here to speak to you--I am here to listen."

Conference leaders also had a message for the dominant society regarding several issues involving religious and cultural freedom, native legal rights, and environmental awareness. Resolutions 7 and 8 expressed the importance of allowing native religious leaders to participate in the educational and health care systems, in order to accommodate native cultural traditions. Resolutions 3 and 10 opposed the "perversion" of native religious traditions by exploitative non-native groups and the "indiscriminate desecration" of native religious sites and burial grounds. Resolutions 1, 2 and 6 called for legal protection of native hunting rights, religious freedom, and treaty rights:

> We oppose all interference in the natural and sacred relation between the Indian people and the animals and birds which the Creator placed on this island for our physical and spiritual sustenance.
>
> We recommend that the governments of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah cease harassing members of the Native American Church.
>
> We point out to the governments of the United States and Canada that our treaties with them are not secular contracts to us but sacred covenants, ordained and sanctioned by God, . . .

Concern over growing environmental destruction prompted Conference leaders to address this issue as well. A Hopi religious leader said, "Unless we help our White brothers, they are going to kill themselves and the earth with them." In 1974 Snow extended an open invitation to non-native people who wanted to attend the

Conference in order to develop a new way of thinking about the environment.

> Unless we try to protect the environment, unless we respect the creation of God, unless we respect people, as well as animals, we are doomed--the very hell that Christianity talks about will become a reality.

The religious leaders and other native people who organized and participated in the Indian Ecumenical Conference established an interreligious community, what Knitter might have called a base human community. Delegates to the 1970 Conference discovered "a community of interest" and were encouraged by "a sense of renewed hope, rising from the act of communion and communal worship." During the next two decades they were joined by many other native people as they worked at healing religious divisions, reviving religious traditions, and affirming their shared religious heritage. Harold Turner attended as an observer and was impressed most by "the shared depth of concern for the spiritual renewal of the Indian peoples as having priority over all other approaches to the solution of their problems." Andrew Dreadfulwater summed it up well when he began his talk under the arbor by saying, "This is the fourth year talking about Indians surviving . . . ." Conference participants engaged in interreligious dialogue, cooperation and advocacy in order to bridge the artificial religious boundaries dividing their communities. They offered and received mutual support in this interreligious community, where they worked to secure a future for native people.