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Article

# Mysticism and Ethics in the Theology of Religions and Interreligious Dialogue: Re-Reading Paul Tillich and Jacques-Albert Cuttat

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## Abstract

In today's plural and global context, the Theology of Religions and Interreligious Dialogue play a decisive role in fostering mutual understanding and a genuine culture of encounter. This article examines the theological and spiritual foundations of this task through a re-reading of Paul Tillich and Jacques-Albert Cuttat. Starting from Tillich's unfinished reflection on the significance of the history of religions, this study reconstructs his ontological and pneumatological framework, with particular attention to the notion of a mystical *a priori* as the structural condition of all religious experience. On this basis, it analyses Cuttat's model of "assumptive convergence" between the two "religious hemispheres"—East and West—as an experiential and spiritual unfolding of Tillich's intuition. This article argues that Cuttat's proposal anticipates, in practical and mystical terms, the theology of religions outlined by Tillich, showing how Christian mystical experience can assume, discern, and transfigure other religious traditions without syncretism or relativism. In this perspective, mysticism emerges as a fundamental theological principle for articulating truth, plurality, and ethical responsibility in interreligious dialogue.

**Keywords:** Paul Tillich; Jacques-Albert Cuttat; mysticism; ethics; Theology of Religions; interreligious dialogue; mystical *a priori*; assumptive convergence

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## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, theological thought has been profoundly challenged by the phenomenon of religious and cultural pluralism. The awareness that diverse religious traditions express, from within their particular historical configurations, a universal search for ultimate meaning has led Christian Theology to reformulate its understanding of Revelation, the mediation of Christ, and the place of the Church in relation to other religions. This process of reassessment gave rise to a distinct field, the Theology of Religions, which—beyond earlier forms of comparative apologetics—seeks to understand the presence of the Holy Spirit in the History of Religions and to discern its significance for Christian self-understanding.

Alongside this development, though drawing on centuries of accumulated experience, Interreligious Dialogue has become a constitutive dimension of ecclesial life and theological reflection. It is no longer merely a diplomatic or pastoral gesture, but an arena in which the very credibility of the Christian faith in the contemporary world is at stake. The encounter with other religions presents Theology with a double challenge: to remain faithful to the Christological core of Revelation while, at the same time, recognizing the spiritual and ethical value of other paths of access to the Mystery. In this context, Theology discovers



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itself called to be, more than ever, a Theology in and of relation—a reflection that thinks the Truth of God within the horizon of communion rather than exclusion.

Within this broad movement, marked by numerous significant developments on the part of both theologians and the Catholic Magisterium, the figures of Paul Tillich (1886–1965) and Jacques-Albert Cuttat (1910–1972) offer particularly fertile perspectives worthy of renewed attention. Both addressed, from different contexts, languages, and epistemological frameworks, the question of the encounter between Christianity and the religions of the world; and both did so from a theological standpoint, rather than a merely phenomenological or comparative one.

For Tillich, the question is situated at the ontological and systematic level: how to conceive a Theology of Religions that recognizes the universality of the Unconditioned while simultaneously affirming the historical concreteness and normativity of the Christian event. To sketch an answer, Tillich develops a fertile pneumatological understanding. In *Systematic Theology III*, he describes the presence of the Spirit as “the Presence of God under a definite aspect [...] It is the aspect of God ecstatically present in the human spirit” (Tillich 1963, p. 283). From this perspective, religions are understood as expressions of the same movement of the Spirit in history: places where the divine is manifested and, at the same time, concealed, thus opening the possibility of a normative dialogue in the light of the central event of Christianity: Christ. With the same intention, Tillich postulates the presence of a mystical *a priori* as an anthropological structure capable of receiving Revelation, from which the manifold forms of religious expression take root.

Cuttat, for his part, develops his reflection from a phenomenological and normative perspective on the “deux hémisphères religieux”—two religious hemispheres—(Cuttat 1957, p. 46)—East and West. In a brief article—*Experiencia cristiana y espiritualidad oriental* (1969)—he synthesizes an orientation already developed in *La rencontre des religions* (1957) and *Expérience Chrétienne et Spiritualité Orientale* (1967), when he affirms that authentic dialogue cannot be reductive or defensive, but must be a transformative confrontation in the Spirit, grounded in the “analogie contrastante”—contrasting analogy—(Cuttat 1967, p. 35) of the two hemispheres: “Cuanto más se profundiza en la propia confesión religiosa, se llega a comprender por dentro la de los otros; y cuanto más se penetra en las convicciones diferentes, más profundamente se consigue calar en la propia religión”—The more deeply one enters into one’s own religious confession, the more one comes to understand that of others from within; and the more one penetrates differing convictions, the more profoundly one is able to grasp one’s own religion—(Cuttat 1969, p. 440). This “golden rule”—as he himself calls it—of Interreligious Dialogue constitutes the hermeneutical principle of his thought: otherness does not oppose the Truth revealed in Christ, but leads it to maturity. From this conviction, Christian mysticism becomes the locus of assumptive convergence among religions, a communion in which the Spirit assumes diverse forms of searching and orients them toward the Trinitarian center.

Far removed from any form of religious syncretism or ontological fusion with God, Cuttat writes in *L’expérience chrétienne est-elle capable d’assumer la spiritualité orientale?* (1965): “Mais union peut aussi vouloir dire s’unir au Vouloir divin, coïncider avec l’Intention divine, c’est-à-dire société, communion avec Dieu”—But union can also mean to unite with the divine Will, to coincide with the divine Intention, that is, fellowship, communion with God—(Cuttat 1965, p. 831), hence his affirmation: “Les spiritualités asiatiques et monothéistes [...] se présentent en fait comme ‘autant de sommets distincts, s’élèvant sur une même base’”—Asian and monotheistic spiritualities [...] in fact present themselves as ‘so many distinct summits, rising upon the same base’—(ibid., p. 832). These formulations condense his vision: the Spirit, as the principle of Trinitarian communion, does not suppress differences but transfigures them within the antinomic unity of the Mystery of the Incar-

nation, because «Porte humaine ouverte sur l’infinité divine, le Christ inclut et surélève incomparablement plus qu’il n’exclut et abroge»—A human door open to divine infinity, Christ includes and elevates incomparably more than he excludes and abolishes—(Cuttat 1957, p. 86).

Thus, where Tillich sought to integrate religious plurality theologically within the horizon of the Spirit, indicating it as a task for the Theology of the future, Cuttat had already undertaken this path in a concrete manner, anticipating contemporary Interreligious Dialogue: the encounter between religions is not doctrinal negotiation or symbolic juxtaposition, but an experience of the Spirit who unifies without confounding, assumes without absorbing, and leads elements of truth toward their Christological fulfilment.

It is therefore necessary, from the outset, to clarify the scope and methodological status of the proposal developed here. The choice of Paul Tillich and Jacques-Albert Cuttat does not aim to offer an exhaustive panorama of the Theology of Religions, nor to identify both authors as paradigmatic representatives of the contemporary debate. Rather, it entails a genealogical and fundamental-theological rereading of two proposals that, from different contexts and presuppositions, anticipate questions that are central today in reflection on religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue, particularly with regard to the role of mysticism as a theological, epistemological, and practical principle of relation.

In this sense, the comparison between Tillich and Cuttat is not carried out at the level of closed metaphysical systems, nor does it presuppose epistemological homogeneity between them. Tillich elaborates his reflection within a systematic ontology and pneumatology, in which mysticism appears as an *a priori* structure of the human spirit; Cuttat, by contrast, shifts the emphasis toward lived spiritual experience and concrete interreligious discernment. The comparison is nonetheless legitimate insofar as it operates at the level of the theological function that both authors attribute to mysticism in relation to truth, religious plurality, and the action of the Spirit in history. From this perspective, this article explicitly adopts a Christian standpoint: it does not seek to formulate a universal theory of Interreligious Dialogue, but to reflect on how Christianity, drawing on its own theological and spiritual resources, can think and practice dialogue in a way that is faithful to its Christological centre and open to the universal action of the Spirit.

The hypothesis guiding this study is that Cuttat’s proposal constitutes, in a certain sense, an anticipation of the Theology of Religions that Tillich left only sketched in his attempt to analyse the mystical element of religions. What in Tillich appears as a theological requirement—integrating the religious history of humanity into the Christian self-understanding of the Spirit—becomes in Cuttat an assumptive and convergent praxis: a way of living the relation between religions as communion in the Spirit, without confusion or separation. Both authors agree in placing mysticism at the centre of theological discernment. As will be shown, Tillich conceives it as a structural *a priori* of the human spirit; Cuttat, as an experience of communion in which, within the diversity of traditions, the trace of divine Grace is recognised. The aim, ultimately, is to explore the theological fecundity of mysticism as a principle of relation and as the foundation of an ethics of encounter.

Methodologically, this article adopts a fundamental-theological and hermeneutical approach, combining the analysis of this issue in the relevant works of Tillich and Cuttat with the contemporary reception of the Theology of Religions, particularly through the writings of Reinhold Bernhardt. This approach allows the proposals of both authors to be situated within the current horizon of theological reflection, avoiding both a merely historical reading and a superficial application.

This study unfolds in five articulated stages. First, a brief and synthetic *status quaestionis* on the Theology of Religions and Interreligious Dialogue will be offered, distinguishing their specificities and analysing the contributions of Bernhardt. Second, Tillich’s inconclu-

sive proposal will be presented, focusing on his theological understanding of the History of Religions and the place occupied within it by the mystical element. Third, the model of “assumptive convergence” developed by Jacques-Albert Cuttat will be examined as a practical and spiritual anticipation of what Tillich had articulated at a theoretical level. Finally, the conclusions will gather the gains and limits of both approaches, proposing a dual criteriology: one for the Theology of Religions and another for Interreligious Dialogue.

## 2. The Current State of the Theology of Religions and Interreligious Dialogue

In recent decades, Christian reflection on religions has undergone a profound process of reconfiguration. The Theology of Religions, which emerged in the horizon of the Second Vatican Council, has shifted its centre of gravity—from models of exclusion, inclusion, or pluralism toward a hermeneutical understanding of pluralism as the very space in which theological work is to be carried out. Essentially, this shift consists of moving from a Theology concerned primarily with the salvation of the “others” to a Theology that seeks to discern what religious diversity reveals about the Mystery of God. This transition expresses a new epistemological framework in which plurality is no longer regarded as a threat but as a mediation of access to revealed Truth.

This process of theological maturation has not been abrupt, but rather the fruit of a development that has integrated into its own discourse the contributions of other fields of knowledge, such as the Phenomenology of Religion, Philosophical Hermeneutics, and the practice of Interreligious Dialogue itself. From this perspective, theological truth can no longer be understood in terms of exclusivity but of relationality, since alterity becomes the context in which the understanding of Revelation is received and deepened.

Within this development, it is now possible to identify a hermeneutical stage marked by the rise of Comparative Theology (David Tracy, Francis Clooney, James Fredericks, Robert C. Neville, Keith Ward). Despite its limitations and aspects open to constructive critical evaluation, Comparative Theology does not seek to replace the Theology of Religions but to complement it in an interpretative key. Comparative Theology does not aim to classify or hierarchize traditions, but to interpret their internal logic, recognising within them the search for the Divine. This shift from apologetics to hermeneutical discernment has made it possible to situate Interreligious Dialogue as a theological act in its own right. In other words, its basic claim can be summarised by stating that the interreligious context designates not merely the coexistence of religions, but the space in which theological reflection must be carried out today (Matito Fernández 2015).

It should be noted, however, that in many of these recent developments the spiritual or mystical dimension often appears only implicitly or in a fragmentary way. Attention to experience, testimony, and religious practices is a common feature of many of these approaches; nevertheless, mysticism is not always explicitly thematised as a fundamental theological category capable of articulating in a systematic manner the relationship between religious plurality, truth, and the discernment of the Spirit. This observation is significant, as it highlights the need for a deeper foundation that can integrate religious experience and interreligious dialogue within a coherent theological understanding, rather than a merely descriptive one.

Within this broader reconfiguration, the question of truth has progressively emerged as a decisive and contested issue in the Theology of Religions and Interreligious Dialogue. Already in the mid-1980s, Max Seckler identified the question of Truth—*Wahrheitsfrage*—as a critical and unresolved core of the discipline, warning against both the strategic suspension of truth in the name of dialogue and its functional relativization (Seckler 1986). His intervention marked a significant moment in theological reflection by insisting that interre-

ligious openness cannot dispense with a robust account of truth without undermining the intelligibility of faith itself.

From different hermeneutical perspectives, several authors subsequently sought to rethink the notion of truth beyond purely propositional or exclusivist models. Claude Geffré proposed understanding Christian truth as an *événement de sens*—meaning event—, emphasizing its historical, interpretative, and dialogical character (Geffré 1983, 2006). In a closely related yet distinct vein, Adolphe Gesché developed a theological account of truth as gift and event, received within history and oriented toward meaning rather than domination (Gesché 1995). Both approaches contributed to a decisive shift from truth as static possession toward truth as event and interpretation while maintaining a clear reference to Christian confession.

Parallel to these hermeneutical developments, pluralist proposals by Paul F. Knitter—*No Other Name?* (Knitter 1985)—and John Hick—*An Interpretation of Religion* (Hick 1989)—reframed the question of truth within broader soteriological or epistemological horizons, often relativizing the normative status of particular religious traditions in favour of a global framework of salvation or ultimate reality. In response to such approaches, Jacques Dupuis sought to articulate a Christian theology of religious pluralism grounded in a relational economy of salvation, preserving the constitutive uniqueness of Christ while acknowledging the real mediations of other traditions (Dupuis 1997).

From a different epistemological angle, David Tracy developed an influential understanding of truth as public, dialogical, and analogical—*Plurality and Ambiguity* (Tracy 1987)—, offering conceptual tools for interreligious engagement that avoid both exclusivism and relativism. This orientation has been further developed within Comparative Theology, particularly by Francis X. Clooney, who conceives theological truth as emerging through transformative encounter and disciplined comparative practice—*Comparative Theology* (Clooney 2010)—. At the same time, more critical positions—such as those of Gavin D’Costa—*The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (D’Costa 2000)—and Joseph Ratzinger—*Glaube–Wahrheit–Toleranz* (Ratzinger 2003)—have underscored the risks involved in weakening the normative and confessional dimensions of truth in interreligious contexts. Together, these approaches delineate a complex and tension-laden field within which contemporary reflection on truth, plurality, and dialogue has taken shape.

In this context, the thought of Reinholt Bernhardt constitutes one of the most solid and articulated contributions of contemporary theology in the field of the Theology of Religions, without claiming to exhaust the plurality of approaches currently in existence. His recent works—*Ende des Dialogs?* (Bernhardt 2018), *Inter-Religio* (Bernhardt 2019), *Klassiker der Religionstheologie im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Bernhardt 2020), and *Religionstheologie als Religionskritik* (Bernhardt 2023)—articulate a model of the Theology of Religions as theological critique (*Religionstheologische Religionskritik*). Within this model, Bernhardt conceives theological activity as an act of critical self-interpretation of one’s own faith in the context of religious plurality. As he writes: “Ein wichtiger Teil der konstruktiven (im Unterschied zur bloß deskriptiven) Religionstheologie besteht in der theologischen Religionskritik, d. h. in der Selbstkritik der eigenen Religion im Licht des Gottesglaubens”—An important part of constructive (as distinct from merely descriptive) theology of religions consists of theological critique of religion, that is, in the self-critique of one’s own religion in the light of belief in God—(Bernhardt 2019, p. 449). Theology, therefore, does not defend its identity against the other, but allows itself to be purified by the truth of God manifested also in the encounter with the other.

The epistemological foundation of this position lies in the distinction between *Grund*—*ground*—and *Gestalt*—*form*: the ground of faith cannot be unequivocally identified with its historical forms. As Bernhardt states, “Glaubenswahrheit ist ausgespannt zwischen

Glaubensgrund, Glaubensgewissheit und Glaubensaussdruck”—Truth of faith is stretched between the ground of faith, the certainty of faith, and the expression of faith—(Bernhardt 2018, p. 438); consequently, “Alle Wahrheitsansprüche, die für religiöse Aussagen erhoben werden, stehen unter einer theologisch geforderten Relativierung”—All truth claims that are made for religious statements are subject to a theologically required relativization—(Bernhardt 2018, p. 450). Christian truth, therefore, does not dissolve into relativism but understands itself as a relational claim to truth: open, kenotic, and participatory.

This “theological relativization” manifests itself in a change in language and in the structure of knowledge. In contrast to Theology as propositional discourse, Bernhardt describes knowledge of faith as testimony and confession, not merely as demonstrative statement: “Glaubensinhalte können sich nicht mit der Sicherheit des kognitiven Wissens darstellen [...] Sie artikulieren sich in Form von Zeugnissen und Bekenntnissen, nicht im Modus einer ‘fact-asserting-language’”—Contents of faith cannot present themselves with the certainty of cognitive knowledge [...] They articulate themselves in the form of testimonies and confessions, not in the mode of a ‘fact-asserting language’—(Bernhardt 2023, p. 109). Interreligious Dialogue, then, is not an exchange of data but of lived convictions, of personal testimonies that are brought into contrast within a framework of mutual responsibility. Bernhardt expresses this as follows: “Die Wahrheit des Evangeliums wird als persönliche Lebensüberzeugung geschenkt und kann deshalb in ihrem universalen Anspruch nur als persönliche Wahrheitsgewissheit vertreten werden [...] im dialogischen Austausch [...] ‘gegenseitigen Zeugnis im Dialog’”—The truth of the Gospel is given as a personal life-conviction and can therefore, in its universal claim, be represented only as a personal certainty of truth [...] in dialogical exchange [...] ‘mutual witness in dialogue’—(Bernhardt 2019, p. 109).

Religious knowledge thus has a dialogical and hermeneutical character, in which truth occurs as a relational event: “Erkenntnis also im kommunikativen Prozess, d. h. gemeinschaftlich und kontextuell”—Knowledge, therefore, in the communicative process, that is, communal and contextual—(Bernhardt 2018, p. 19). Along these lines, Bernhardt redefines the theological concept of truth in ontological and existential terms: “Wahrheit meint die existenzverwandelnde Partizipation an der Realpräsenz Gottes [ist] personal widerfahrende Ereigniswahrheit”—Truth means the existence-transforming participation in the real presence of God [it is] event-truth personally experienced—(Bernhardt 2018, pp. 19–20). Truth is no longer a property of the statement but a relational event: it takes place between interlocutors, where the Spirit convokes and transforms.

This orientation toward the relational character of truth is sustained by an implicit pneumatology. The Spirit, who transcends every confessional boundary, manifests himself in the languages, symbols, and practices of different traditions. Hence, Bernhardt can affirm: “Der unerwartete Gott kann sich an unerwarteten Orten in unerwarteten Sprachen zur Geltung bringen”—The unexpected God can make himself manifest in unexpected places and in unexpected languages—(Bernhardt 2019, p. 452). Religious pluralism thus becomes a place for understanding Revelation and for discernment, not a threat. Dialogue does not relativize faith; rather, it situates faith in its true pneumatological depth.

Taken together, Bernhardt’s thought marks a point of maturity in the Theology of Religions. His proposal allows pluralism to be understood not as an obstacle to Christian confession but as its critical space of verification. Christian faith can be faithful to itself only insofar as it allows itself to be questioned by the Truth that the Spirit brings about in the History of Religions.

Within this horizon of pneumatological openness and critical discernment, the programmatic proposal of Paul Tillich and the dialogical confrontation developed by Jacques-Albert Cottat offer, as will be shown, complementary keys for this theological field: Tillich

articulates the ontological and systematic conditions of encounter, while Cuttat unfolds them in a concrete spiritual praxis of dialogue between religious traditions. As an anticipation of developments later formulated by Reinhold Bernhardt, both approaches suggest a pneumatological understanding of truth as a relational event, in which mystical experience and ethical discernment appear as inseparable dimensions of the same action of the Spirit, who unifies without confusing and judges without excluding. From this background, the proposals analysed here do not stand at the margins of contemporary debates but rather provide a theological foundation—rooted in a pneumatological and mystical key—for intuitions that today emerge in a dispersed manner within reflection on religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue.

### 3. The Unfinished Proposal of Paul Tillich

#### 3.1. The Theological Orientation of the Problem

Paul Tillich's thought represents one of the most coherent and systematic efforts of the twentieth century to integrate the History of Religions into the horizon of Systematic Theology. In his final lecture, *The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian* (1966), he maintains that "The history of religions in its essential nature does not exist alongside the history of culture. The sacred does not lie beside the secular, but it is its depths" (Tillich 1992, p. 433). With this assertion, Tillich rejects any separation between the religious and the profane, situating religion as the depth-dimension of all culture. Theology, therefore, cannot treat the History of Religions as an external field, but must recognise it as a constitutive part of its own task: discerning the manifestation of the Spirit in the multiple historical forms of the human search for meaning, as expressed in the religions of humanity.

His point of departure is twofold: ontological and Christological. Ontological, because religion expresses the relation between the finite and the ground of being; Christological, because in Christ the union of the divine Logos with humanity is brought to fulfilment, as the concrete universal—despite the well-known difficulties of this concept—of Revelation. Within this correlation, the Spirit is revealed as the creative, vivifying, and critical principle at work within history. As Tillich writes: "Spirit, love, and grace are one and the same reality in different aspects. Spirit is the creative power; love is its creation; grace is the effective presence of love in man" (Tillich 1963, p. 275). The Spirit, as creative and healing power, acts within the History of Religions, unifying and purifying their symbolic forms. Consequently, religions manifest the ambiguity of the sacred sphere: "They are not simply negations of the divine but participate in a distorted way in the power and holiness of the divine [...] Demonization of the holy occurs in all religions day by day" (Tillich 1963, p. 102). Systematic Theology is therefore charged with the task of discerning this structural ambiguity, avoiding both the absolutization of religious mediations and their secularist negation.

In contrast to so-called dialectical theology—represented paradigmatically by K. Barth—Tillich holds that Revelation does not stand in opposition to religions, but rather passes through them and judges them from within. Wherever religions manifest the impulse of the human spirit toward the Unconditioned, they participate in the dynamic of Revelation. Yet, only in the Christian event—where the Unconditioned becomes historical and personal—does this orientation attain its fulfilment. Tillich does not propose a hierarchy of religions, but a dynamic understanding of them, in which the universal Spirit expresses itself in plural and ambiguous symbols, oriented toward their fulfilment in Christ.

### 3.2. The Fundamental Dimensions of Religion: Mystical, Ethical, Sacramental, and Prophetic

At the centre of Tillich's reflection lies his definition of faith as *ultimate concern*: "Faith is the state of being ultimately concerned" (Tillich 1957a, p. 1), a formulation that highlights its ontological character. From this definition, the structural elements of every religion are not merely patterns for diagnosis or comparative analysis, but expressions of religion's very foundation. These elements, however, do not appear without ambiguity; for this reason, they exercise a mutually corrective function, purifying one another from possible distortions. Throughout Tillich's work, four basic dimensions or structural elements of religion can be identified—regardless of typology—grouped into two polarities: the mystical and the ethical; the sacramental and the prophetic. Each represents a necessary pole of religious dynamism, a possible site of distortion and, at the same time, of reciprocal purification.

The first polarity, mystical and ethical, expresses the tension between the immediacy of union with the ground of being and the transformation of existence according to the divine will. In *Systematic Theology II*, Tillich maintains: "Mystical is, first of all, a category which characterizes the divine as being present in experience. In this sense, the mystical is the heart of every religion as religion" (Tillich 1957b, p. 93). This statement encapsulates his conviction that mysticism is not an exceptional path, but a structural element of every religion—though one that carries the risk of dissolving the distinction between God and the human being. Ethics, for its part, translates this union into obedience and historical commitment, preserving distinction and hierarchical relation, as well as the ecstatic movement of the religious subject. Tillich insists that only their integration avoids the danger of one-sidedness: without mysticism, religion becomes legalism; without ethics, it degenerates into quietism.

The second polarity, sacramental and prophetic, governs the historical mediations of the sacred. Tillich develops this principle within the framework of what he calls the *Protestant principle* (Tillich 1963, pp. 243–45): the Spirit acts through sacramental signs, yet also judges them. As he writes: "It is Protestant, because it protests against the tragic demonic self-elevation of religion and liberates religion from itself for the other functions of the human spirit" (Tillich 1963, p. 245). The sacramental guarantees the objective presence of the Spirit; the prophetic secures its critical openness. In this balance lies the constitutive dialectic of religion: every religious form can be a bearer of the Spirit and, at the same time, an object of its judgment.

From this interrelation, which enables a self-balancing of religious experience, Tillich explicitly links the mystical with the sacramental, on the one hand, and the ethical with the prophetic, on the other, in *The Significance of the History of Religions*: "This criticism of the sacramental basis is decisive for Judaism and is one element in Christianity. But again, I would say, if this is without the sacramental and the mystical element, then it becomes moralistic and finally secular" (Tillich 1992, p. 437). He can make this claim because, for Tillich, mysticism does not abolish mediations but reveals their ontological depth, expressing the inner transparency of the sacrament as an immediate presence of the Spirit. Thus, the mystical–ethical polarity is extended into the sacramental–prophetic polarity: the Spirit manifests itself simultaneously as creative presence and as purifying judgment. In this way, Tillich achieves a dynamic synthesis of religious life in its essential dimensions.

### 3.3. The Mystical Element and the Mystical *a Priori*

These considerations regarding the mystical element of religion are grounded in a prior concept, original to Tillich, namely the so-called *mystical a priori*. In *Systematic Theology I*, he states that "the theological concepts of both idealists and naturalists are rooted in a 'mystical a priori,' an awareness of something that transcends the cleavage between subject and object" (Tillich 1951, p. 109). This *mystical a priori* designates the structural disposition

of the human spirit that enables it to recognize the presence of the Unconditioned. It is not a theoretical construct, but the deep structure of consciousness—not psychological, but ontological—that makes openness to the divine possible.

Tillich grounds this notion in his understanding of ontological experience. In the same volume he writes: “Ontological concepts are *a priori* in the strict sense of the word. They determine the nature of experience [...] They are presupposed in every actual experience, since they constitute the very structure of experience itself” (Tillich 1951, p. 165). This *a priori* structure of consciousness allows the divine to manifest itself within the finite as the depth of being. In *The Protestant Era*, he formulates this with particular clarity: “The unconditional [...] is its depth-dimension [...] Awareness of the unconditional is neither the awareness of an ‘object’ nor a discrete theoretical act” (Tillich 1948, p. 90).

This openness, however, is not without ambiguity. What reveals can also distort. In *Systematic Theology III*, Tillich warns: “In religion the ambiguity of self-transcendence appears as the ambiguity of the divine and the demonic [...] They are not simply negations of the divine but participate in a distorted way in the power and holiness of the divine” (Tillich 1963, p. 102). For this reason, mysticism requires discernment in the light of Christological revelation, where union with the ground of being does not abolish the distinction between God and the world. In Christ, communion without confusion is fulfilled: the ground communicates itself to finite existence without absorbing it.

The experience of faith thus entails an ecstatic movement, taking place within the human being, by which the person is grasped by the Spirit. Tillich describes this pneumatological dynamic as an experience of presence: “There is no faith (but only belief) without the Spirit’s grasping the personal center [...] and this is a mystical experience, an experience of the presence of the infinite in the finite. As an ecstatic experience, faith is mystical [...] it does include the mystical as a category, that is, the experience of the Spiritual Presence” (Tillich 1963, p. 242). The Spirit both enables mystical openness and purifies it: what unites also judges; what creates communion also guards against the idolization of religious forms.

Donald F. Dreisbach notes that Tillich’s stance toward mysticism, although it “is a central element of his thought [...] On the other hand, one can even more easily find numerous places where Tillich’s attitude toward mysticism is negative” (Dreisbach 2000, p. 402). The reason is that, while Tillich affirms the ontological validity of mysticism as a constitutive dimension of faith, he insists that it must be subjected to the principle of correlation in order to avoid any pantheistic dissolution. In this regard, A. James Reimer interprets prayer in Tillich as a sign of this living correlation: “We can only pray to the God who prays to himself through us [...] He who speaks through us is he who is spoken to” (Reimer 2000, p. 314). Mysticism, with its intrinsic corrective, does not abolish mediation or distance, but transforms them into a space of active communion.

The mystical *a priori* thus constitutes the ontological and epistemological foundation of Tillich’s theology of religion. It expresses the universal capacity of the human spirit to be grasped by the ground of being and, at the same time, the necessity of discernment in the face of its possible distortions. Within this tension—between revelation and ambiguity, immediacy and mediation—the foundations are laid for a Theology of Religions open to the universality of the Spirit. Tillich’s project remained unfinished, but it traced its essential lines: establishing the correlation between faith and revelation, purifying the ambivalence of the religious phenomenon, grounding it in the mystical *a priori*, and articulating it within a pneumatological understanding of history.

## 4. The Model of Jacques-Albert Cuttat

### 4.1. From Tillich's Unfinished Proposal to Its Realisation in Cuttat

Jacques-Albert Cuttat's reflection converges with the horizon opened by Paul Tillich and, at the same time, extends it into the register of spiritual experience. Whereas Tillich formulates the correlation that must be established between Christianity and the religions from an ontological-pneumatological foundation, Cuttat unfolds it within the sphere of mystical life and practical discernment among religious traditions. His point of departure is not doctrinal levelling, but the recognition of a shared spiritual depth in which religions encounter one another without confusion, even though he ultimately posits their convergence and the assumptive capacity of Christianity to purify and integrate them. From this perspective, dialogue is not a negotiation of statements, but an encounter in the Spirit.

In a certain sense, Cuttat's intuition anticipates some elements of what is now known as the particularist model—the fourth model according to some authors (G. D'Costa, A. McGrath, G. Lindbeck, among others)—insofar as he begins from the irreducibility of the elements of one religious tradition to another. The Cuttatan model, however, diverges from this tendency in two respects. First, its focus is not on religions as such, but on a specific dimension within them: the spiritual or mystical life of their adherents. Second, it affirms the Christological normativity of its dialogical method, since it not only proceeds from the conviction of the universal scope of the Mystery of the Incarnation, but also aims, at the conclusion of its comparison, to show the convergent orientation of other traditions toward Christian mystical experience and the assumptive capacity of Christianity grounded in Christ.

This approach is linked to Tillich's horizon of the “creative and critical Spirit” (cf. [Tillich 1963](#), p. 275), yet Cuttat shifts it onto an experiential terrain, where the unity of the Spirit is not a systematic concept but a mystical reality—against exclusivism—and a Christological one, in which every syncretistic temptation is dispelled—against relativist pluralism. For this reason, he insists that the interreligious encounter must take place “du dedans”—from within—([Cuttat 1965](#), p. 837), through an inner transformation that avoids mere external comparison, so that it may lead “en avant, par-delà le moi, le monde et le prochain, vers Dieu”—forward, beyond the self, the world, and the neighbour, toward God—(*ibid.*), because it is in the interior realm that the Spirit dwells, purifies, transforms, and elevates (cf. [Cuttat 1969](#), p. 442). In this way, Cuttat articulates with clarity the transition from Tillich's theoretical level to a spiritual one: dialogue does not aim at producing a conceptual synthesis, but at allowing divine Grace—present in all traditions—to disclose its deep unity as a Christological event.

### 4.2. From Mystical Structure to Mystical Experience: Keys for the Comparison Between Tillich and Cuttat

The theological dialogue between Paul Tillich and Jacques-Albert Cuttat requires a prior clarification of the status that mysticism occupies within each of their respective approaches. Indeed, although both place mysticism in a central position for thinking the relationship between truth, religious plurality, and the action of the Spirit, they do so from different conceptual presuppositions and levels of analysis. In Tillich, mysticism appears primarily as an ontological and anthropological structure; in Cuttat, as a lived spiritual experience discerned within the interreligious encounter. Clarifying this shift is decisive for justifying the legitimacy of their comparison.

In Tillich's theology, mysticism does not primarily designate an exceptional experience or a particular spiritual path, but rather a structural dimension of all religious experience. The notion of the *mystical a priori* expresses the constitutive disposition of the human spirit to be grasped by the Unconditioned, beyond the subject–object split. It is therefore an

ontological and transcendental category that makes possible the manifestation of the Spirit in history and in the plurality of religions. From this perspective, mysticism is not a later or higher stage of religious life, but the deep core that sustains every openness to revelation, even when such openness remains marked by ambiguity and requires critical discernment in reference to the Christological event.

Cuttat implicitly appropriates this structural intuition, but shifts the emphasis toward its existential and spiritual verification. In his work, mysticism appears above all as a concrete experience of inner transformation, as the locus in which the subject allows itself to be shaped by the action of the Spirit in encounter with other religious traditions. The central question is no longer so much the ontological possibility of religious experience, but the way in which this possibility is historically actualized in spiritual practices, paths of interiority, and processes of interreligious discernment. Mysticism thus becomes the space in which truth is disclosed not as conceptual possession, but as lived and tested communion.

This movement from structure to experience does not imply a rupture between the two authors, but rather a shift in level that can be understood from a perspective proper to Fundamental Theology. If the mystical structure constitutes the condition of possibility of religious experience, mystical experience represents its historical and existential verification. From this point of view, Cuttat's proposal can be read as a concrete—spiritual and practical—realization of Tillich's intuition: what in Tillich is formulated in ontological and pneumatological terms unfolds in Cuttat as a spiritual praxis of encounter and discernment among traditions.

This distinction also makes it possible to clarify the epistemological and metaphysical differences between the two authors without neutralizing the fruitfulness of their dialogue. Tillich operates within an explicit systematic and metaphysical framework, whereas Cuttat adopts a more phenomenological and experiential approach. The comparison, however, is not established at the level of the internal coherence of their respective systems, but at the level of the theological function that mysticism fulfills in both. In each case, mysticism functions as a principle of relation, as a pneumatological mediation that allows Christian truth to be thought in openness to religious plurality without falling into either exclusivism or relativism.

From this perspective, mysticism emerges as the place in which ontology and experience, structure and event, universality of the Spirit and historical singularity are inseparably articulated. The transition from Tillich to Cuttat therefore does not entail a change in object, but a deepening of the same theological problem from distinct and complementary registers. It is precisely in this complementarity that the legitimacy and the interest of their joint reading for the Theology of Religions and Interreligious Dialogue are grounded.

#### 4.3. The Model of “Assumptive Convergence”

Jacques-Albert Cuttat's proposal occupies a significant place in Christian reflection on the encounter between religions, both because of its early formulation and because of the theological density of its approach. Its interest, however, cannot be assessed solely in terms of historical originality or spiritual fecundity. Read from a fundamental-theological perspective, his proposal calls for critical discernment that takes into account not only its contributions, but also the internal tensions it generates, especially with regard to the relationship between pneumatology and Christology, and to the epistemological status of mystical experience within interreligious dialogue.

From this horizon, the model of “assumptive convergence” will not be treated here as a finished solution or as a flawless normative programme, but rather as a theologically significant proposal that opens up a field of reflection which remains actual. Its analysis therefore requires holding together two demands: recognizing the heuristic power of the

proposal, and at the same time subjecting it to a process of discernment that allows it to be situated critically in dialogue with later developments in the Theology of Religions and with the cautions expressed by the Magisterium concerning the risks of syncretism or indifferentism.

The category of “assumptive convergence” constitutes the core of Cuttat’s theological and spiritual thought. In *L’expérience chrétienne est-elle capable d’assumer la spiritualité orientale?* (1965), he clarifies that this convergence does not consist in an absorption of the East by Christianity, but in a movement of reciprocal spiritual assumption with a strong and extensive Christological consistency (cf. [Cuttat 1965](#), p. 852). At bottom, “assumptive convergence” is a spiritual application of the logic of the Incarnation: just as the Word assumes human nature without annihilating it, so the Spirit assumes religious forms without dissolving their identity: “S’il est vrai que c’est la ‘grâce qui nous a été donnée en Jésus-Christ avant la perpétuité des temps’ (II Tim., 1, 9) qui germe au sein de l’immémoriale continuité mystique de l’Orient, n’est-ce pas le devoir du chrétien moderne, placé au carrefour des religions, de prendre conscience de ce qui, dans l’autre hémisphère également confié au Fils par le Père, préfigure le Verbe et débouche sans le nommer Son Corps mystique?”—If it is true that it is the “grace that was given to us in Jesus Christ before the perpetuity of time” (2 Tim 1:9) that germinates within the immemorial mystical continuity of the East, is it not the duty of the modern Christian, situated at the crossroads of religions, to become aware of what, in the other hemisphere likewise entrusted to the Son by the Father, prefigures the Word and leads—without naming it—to his Mystical Body?—([Cuttat 1957](#), p. 45).

In order to carry forward this project, Cuttat develops a method endowed with a strong organic systematicity, articulated in several distinct steps.

First, in order to avoid “l’attitude exclusiviste ou polémique”—the exclusivist or polemical attitude—([Cuttat 1967](#), p. 68), the “humaniste, pragmatique ou descriptive (ou) scientiste”—humanistic, pragmatic or descriptive (or) scientific—(*ibid.*, p. 70), or the “concordiste ou syncréliste”—concordist or syncretistic—(*ibid.*, p. 73), all of which he judges insufficient, the first requirement is the performance of an *épokhē* that is not phenomenological but interreligious: “Notre but, en effet, n’est pas d’en rester à la contemplation philosophique [...], mais bien de les confronter à un niveau aussi central que possible, d’examiner leurs rapports internes réciproques et d’élucider la ‘puissance assumptive’ de chacun des deux types de spiritualité à l’égard de l’autre”—Our aim, indeed, is not to remain at the level of philosophical contemplation [...], but rather to confront them at as central a level as possible, to examine their reciprocal internal relations, and to elucidate the ‘assumptive capacity’ of each of the two types of spirituality in relation to the other—([Cuttat 1965](#), p. 829).

This prior condition makes it possible to initiate an authentic dialogue, since contrasts reveal one’s own identity as well as that of the other, yet within a convergence that—once one’s own confession has been epistemologically reappropriated—can become a path for assuming the other tradition within one’s own, without absorbing or diluting it, but rather as participation in the same dynamism of the Spirit who gives life to all religious forms. This claim is grounded in the Christian conviction that “la vie de la grâce est possible en dehors de l’appartenance visible à l’Église... ; ceci implique pour les fidèles d’autres religions ‘la possibilité corrélatrice de vie mystique’”—the life of grace is possible outside visible membership in the Church... ; this implies for the faithful of other religions the ‘correlative possibility of a mystical life’—([Cuttat 1957](#), pp. 35–36).

The next step consists of deepening the divergences between traditions, carrying the presuppositions of each to their ultimate consequences in order to show their identity and irreducibility. This moment is crucial, since it is necessary to overcome the temptation of a rapid and superficial concordism that would annul differences. A paradigmatic example

is provided by Cuttat's analyses of the archetypes of the yogi and the saint. Both tend toward interiority; yet the interiority of the former is solitary, because it does not generate transcendence, whereas in the latter interiority is open and reciprocal, because it is an inhabited and relational interiority. It does not fuse with any impersonal substance—a monistic configuration—but enters into relation with the personal God, whose image it bears, and is thereby impelled toward encounter with others (cf. [Cuttat 1965](#), pp. 853–54; [1967](#), p. 111). Within this second methodological moment, Cuttat also undertakes an analysis of the various underlying elements of the spiritual itineraries of both traditions—such as supreme values, cosmological conceptions, ultimate aspirations, and so forth. This exercise is intended to be carried out in a purely descriptive manner, so that the other tradition can recognise itself in the description offered.

The final step consists of a purifying and assumptive moment, in which Cuttat seeks to show how the divergences identified may be only apparent, either by calling for conversion or by interpreting them as a preparatory stage leading toward Christian experience.

Thus understood, the Cuttatian model may be interpreted as an attempt to move beyond both classical theological inclusivism and undifferentiated pluralism. Against the former, it maintains that Christianity does not merely absorb other religions, but elevates them insofar as the Spirit makes them participants in its own dynamism. Against the latter, it rejects any levelling of spiritual paths, affirming the normative singularity of Christ as the fullness of Revelation. In this balance, “assumptive convergence” can be described as a middle way between identity and openness: a communion without confusion, a unity that preserves differences. In this sense, and according to the internal logic reconstructed here, Cuttat's model may be regarded as a mystical theology of interreligious dialogue, in which truth is experienced as a relational event, beyond—and yet reintegrating—the inclusivist models of presence (K. Rahner) or fulfilment (J. Daniélou). In the encounter with the other, the Christian does not defend faith as a closed system, but allows it to become transparent as a mediation of the universal Spirit who seeks to make his way, through diverse cultural and religious traditions, toward the Truth revealed in Christ.

#### 4.4. Critical Value and Contemporary Relevance of Cuttat's Model

As we have seen, the thought of Jacques-Albert Cuttat can be read as a turning point in this field which, unfortunately, did not receive the fruitful development it contained—not so much because it offered a closed synthesis, but because it formulated at an early stage theological problems that continue to be debated today. His proposal of “assumptive convergence” constitutes not only a method of interreligious approach, but also a theological hermeneutics of the action of the Spirit in the History of Religions. From this perspective, Cuttat inaugurates a way of thinking about catholicity that is defined neither by geographical extension nor by doctrinal uniformity, but by the capacity of the Christian faith to assume and transfigure what is true and holy in other traditions.

The originality of the Cuttatian model lies in having articulated a spiritual criteriology for dialogue even prior to the conciliar formulation of *Nostra Aetate* ([Second Vatican Council 1965](#)). Whereas pre-conciliar theology tended to conceive religions as “preparations for the Gospel” or as “vestiges of natural truth,” Cuttat recognises within them the active presence of divine Grace, which leads every search toward its fulfilment in Christ. This pneumatological vision makes it possible to understand plurality not as an anomaly within the History of Salvation, but as its very space of verification.

Nevertheless, his approach is not without theological tensions. The universal openness of his pneumatology may give the impression of a displacement of the Christological axis toward an excessive pneumatocentrism, in which the Spirit would appear to operate independently of the Incarnation. This objection is not merely rhetorical, but touches the

core of the articulation between revelation, mediation, and truth in Christianity. Cuttat, however, avoids this drift by strongly affirming the inseparable unity between the Spirit and the Word: the Spirit acts only as the power of the glorified Christ who assumes and elevates all reality. For this reason, the universality of the Spirit does not contradict the uniqueness of Christ, but rather manifests it dynamically within the History of Religions.

In this sense, his thought anticipates concerns that would be expressed decades later by the Magisterium. In the face of the risks of syncretism or indifferentism identified in the Declaration *Dominus Iesus* ([Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000](#)), Cuttat maintains that openness to the other does not dissolve Christian identity, but brings it to maturity. “Assumptive convergence” does not replace the confession of Christ, but expands it in a relational key: insofar as the Christian receives what is true in the other, he or she participates more fully in the truth of Christ, which is communion.

From an epistemological standpoint, Cuttat’s proposal constitutes a genuine Theology of mediation. Knowledge of truth is not attained through rational deduction nor through conceptual syncretism, but within the relational movement of the Spirit who unites without confusing. Within this horizon, mysticism ceases to be a private or marginal domain and becomes the epistemic locus in which Theology becomes catholic in the full sense: universal and relational, because, in its structure of openness and self-gift, it presents itself as the paradigm for every theological understanding of religious plurality.

Moreover, his model retains significant pastoral and cultural relevance. In a context marked both by ideological polarisation and by closed, exclusionary identities, as well as by spiritual fragmentation and the search for meaning beyond religious institutions, the model of “assumptive convergence” offers a criterion of discernment that avoids both confessional closure and relativistic dissolution. Interreligious dialogue, understood from Cuttat’s perspective, is not an exchange of opinions, but an experience of communion that challenges traditions to overcome their inauthentic forms and to allow themselves to be purified by the truth that the Spirit brings forth in encounter.

Finally, the theological value of the Cuttavian model lies in having organically united mysticism and ethics, spirituality and historical commitment. Interior openness to the Spirit does not stand in opposition to mission, but rather grounds it, since only those who allow themselves to be transformed by the Truth manifested in the other can authentically proclaim their own faith. In this way, “assumptive convergence” anticipates key features of a relationally oriented Fundamental Theology: a Theology that conceives Revelation not as a closed propositional system but as an event of communion in which revealed Truth is deepened and assimilated within history.

## 5. Paths to Be Pursued

The trajectory traced thus far has shown the pertinence of the link between Tillich and Cuttat. The former provided the ontological and systematic foundations for a Theology of Religions grounded in the universality of his pneumatological and anthropological understanding; the latter carried this intuition into the sphere of mystical experience and interreligious discernment, configuring an assumptive and constructive practice of notable scope. Both converge in indicating that the truth of the Christian faith is verified in the encounter with the otherness of the Word and, paradoxically, in openness to the Spirit who acts beyond the visible boundaries of the Church, thus emerging within the interreligious encounter. From this framework, it is necessary to draw out the theological and practical consequences of their proposals.

### 5.1. Criteriology for the Theology of Religions

The Theology of Religions requires an ontological–pneumatological point of departure that allows religious plurality to be understood not as a historical accident, but as the concrete form in which the depth of reality is symbolised in history. Reference to the mystical *a priori* provides the condition of possibility for the experience of the divine, while a pneumatology of history explains its factuality and dynamism.

From this basis, Christian universality must be understood not as a homogenisation of differences, but in terms of the normativity of the Christ-event that discerns, purifies, and transfigures. This horizon requires working with a grammar of polarities: mysticism needs ethics in order to avoid spiritual evasion, and ethics requires mysticism so as not to dissolve into moralism; analogously, the sacramental requires prophetic correction in order not to absolutise form, and the prophetic needs sacramental density so as not to secularise the Mystery.

On this basis, a hermeneutic is required that assumes the always ambivalent character of the religious—capable both of rendering the Holy transparent and of distorting it—and that therefore practises discernment with the same rigor toward one's own tradition as toward others. Correlation, within this framework, is broadened: it no longer merely articulates human questions with revealed response, but opens a space of reciprocal interrogation among traditions—*asymmetrical* in orientation (Christological) and *dialogical* in method (pneumatological).

Consequently, theological truth is verified as a relational event: it is not imposed by the sheer force of propositions, but recognised in its power to transform existence and communion. Catholicity, finally, is measured by its assumptive capacity: the ability to listen, receive, purify, and elevate whatever is true and holy in the religions without diluting Christian confession—a measure recognised in the charity of Christ, as opposed both to exclusivist attitudes, which violate charity, and to relativist ones, which undermine Christ.

### 5.2. Criteriology for Interreligious Dialogue

The practical path of dialogue, as suggested, must begin with an authentic interreligious *épokhē*: the suspension of polemical, scientific, or concordist prejudices—not in order to neutralise identities, but to reopen them “from within” and allow each tradition to manifest its vital centre. This initial requirement bears fruit only when interlocutors allow themselves to be interiorly transformed; dialogue does not advance by the accumulation of external comparisons, but by the conversion of the subject—through intellectual humility and availability for reciprocal purification.

Such a process also demands the real recognition of irreducible differences, for without contrast there is no shared truth, only syncretism. It entails safeguarding alterity without forcing premature translations, calmly distinguishing between cores and forms, between fundamental intuitions and cultural expressions. Within this horizon, the Christian claim is not to absorb but to assume: to receive experiences and values as seeds that find their fulfilment without losing their history, in accordance with the logic of the Incarnation.

The verification of this path is pneumatological and practical: where fruits of freedom and reconciliation, purification of the will, active compassion, and the building of communion are discerned, there the Spirit confirms progress, hence the need to alternate *assumptive* attitudes—presence, hospitality, legitimate symbolic recognition—with *prophetic* attitudes that prevent idolatries of form and denounce instrumentalisation; only this balance preserves dialogue from empty courtesies or sterile polemics.

Finally, dialogue must assume its public dimension. Its truthfulness is tested in shared responsibility for the common good, for without such historical projection mysticism

withdraws into individualistic intimism. With it, by contrast, revealed Truth is tested within history—in the fabric of the world—where it is deepened, assimilated, and shared.

## 6. Conclusions

This study set out from a twofold concern: how to think theologically about religious pluralism without undermining Christian identity, and how to translate such understanding into practices of dialogue that do not collapse into mere tolerance. The re-reading of Tillich and Cuttat has revealed a convergent and fruitful itinerary.

In Tillich, we encounter the systematic foundations: an ontology of the Spirit that accounts for the positivity—and the ambiguity—of the religious phenomenon; the mystical *a priori* that renders intelligible the human openness to the divine; the structure of polarities (mystical–ethical/sacramental–prophetic) as a grammar for discernment; and the Christological locus that orients and purifies universality. In Cuttat, we find the spiritual realisation of this programme: a methodology of assumptive convergence that, beginning from the interreligious *épokhē* and transformed interiority, leads dialogue toward Christological assumption, removed both from religious syncretism and from confessional hermeticism.

Thus, the path that leads from Tillich to Cuttat not only illuminates the recent past of Theology by revealing its enduring fecundity but also outlines a possible orientation for the present: a Theology that thinks and lives catholicity as assumptive capacity, in which the Christian faith, faithful to its centre, learns to recognise, receive, and elevate the multiple voices through which the Spirit continues today to utter the call to the communion of all human beings in Christ.

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