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**A COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY OF
RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN ASIAN
CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

Even as comparative theology and the theology of religions have offered numerous and compelling approaches to religious diversity, the problem of how to balance the particularities of Catholic Christian revelation with openness to other religious traditions and persons continues to be controversial. Regardless, theological issues and practical questions surrounding religious diversity are not going away. Despite the ongoing controversies, theologians can and must engage these issues in their work. This article opens a new line of inquiry in the theology of religious diversity by drawing out some broader lessons from Asian Catholic theology and then engaging in a comparative experiment that puts John Henry Newman (1801-1890) and Rita Gross (1943-2015) into conversation. It speculates on several ideas emerging from the comparison: namely, conscience, the sanctification of non-Christian practices, and the *sensus fidelium* (sense of the faithful). Ultimately, the article argues that future theologies of religious

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Keywords: Comparative Theology, John Henry Newman, Religious Diversity, Rita Gross, The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)

Even as comparative theology and the theology of religions have offered numerous and compelling approaches to religious diversity, the problem of how to balance the particularities of Catholic Christian revelation with openness to other religious traditions and persons continues to be controversial. Regardless, theological issues and practical questions surrounding religious diversity are not going away. In our globalized and globalizing world, people are in contact across religious, national, ethnic, and socio-economic boundaries more today than ever before through work, school, the Internet, and beyond. And while people are networked in cooperative and productive ways, religious and sectarian violence fractures communities and threatens whole populations. Despite the ongoing controversies, theologians can and must engage these issues in their work.

This article opens a new line of inquiry in the theology of religious diversity by drawing out some broader lessons from Asian Catholic theology and then engaging in a comparative experiment that puts John Henry Newman (1801-1890) and Rita Gross (1943-2015) into conversation. If Western Christian theologians have sometimes treated religious diversity like it was an optional topic for discussion, Asian Christian theologians — by necessity of their diverse contexts and complicated histories — have to foreground issues of religious diversity in their work.

In this article, I take up issues of religious diversity. I refer to the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) as a source for theologians to think through how they might approach religious diversity. I then turn to John Henry Newman, assessing whether (and to what extent) his notions of natural religion and universal revelation could be useful to a theology of religious diversity.¹ From my perspective as a comparative theologian, I bring Buddhist theologian Rita Gross into conversation with Newman and some possible openings in his ideas. Ultimately, I argue that future theologies of religious diversity must be multiple, developing in distinct ways through concrete, distinct, and local dialogues.

¹John Connolly first suggested Newman as a helpful foundation for a theology of religious diversity. See John R. Connolly, *A View of Catholic Faith for the New Millennium*, Lanham: Sheed & Ward, 2005, 140-141.

FABC and Religious Diversity

The FABC, formed in 1972 in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), has been a vibrant force in the Asian Catholic Church.² This non-binding and voluntary body of bishops from South, Southeast, East, and Central Asia is a thoroughly Vatican II-inspired congregation that has worked tirelessly to grow “a new way of being church.” For a truly inculturated Church that emerges from the ground of Asia itself,³ the Asian Church enters into dialogue with three primary characteristics of the Asian context: religions, cultures, and the poor.⁴ FABC recognizes that the facts of profound religious diversity and the minority status of Christianity in most Asian countries, have made interreligious dialogue necessary. Although Christianity is an Asian religion, the Catholic Church, because of its Romanization, has been seen as too Western in Asia and too Asian in the West. FABC has insisted that Western approaches and preoccupations do not work for Asia. It has pushed for real inculturation that shapes the heart and spirit of the Church in Asia. Furthermore, FABC has consistently addressed issues of justice, from devastating poverty and health crises, to political oppression, to persecution of Christians, to sexism in the Church and wider society. It has emphasized the role of women and the laity as essential for building a just Church and world.

The “triple dialogue” with religions, cultures, and the poor emphasizes the role of the local church in understanding and responding to the diverse realities of Asia.⁵ Theologically, priority must be on the local church because the Universal Church is a communion of local churches. Practically and pastorally, local churches are much closer to the ground to understand and respond to the needs of their people. The localization of the triple dialogue also points to the highly intersectional nature of religions, cultures, and the poor.⁶

²See Peter C. Phan, “A New Christianity, But What Kind?” *Mission Studies*, 22, 1 (2005) 59-83.

³See “About Us,” Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, <http://www.fabc.org/about.html>. See also Jonathan Yun-Ka Tan, “A New Way of Being Church in Asia: The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) at the Service of Life in Pluralistic Asia,” *Missiology: An International Review* 33, 1 (January 2005) 72-94.

⁴See Thomas C. Fox, *Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002.

⁵See James H. Kroeger, “Asia’s Emerging Catholicity: FABC Insights on the Local Church,” *African Ecclesial Review* 40, 2 (April 1998) 85-100. See also Peter C. Phan, “A New Christianity, But What Kind?” 59-83.

⁶See Evelyn Monteiro, SC, and Antoinette Gutzler, MM, ed., *Ecclesia of Women In Asia: Gathering the Voices of the Silenced*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2005.

Rather than considering “religious diversity” in an abstract vacuum, the FABC contextualizes it in the complex interaction of religions, cultures, and social injustice. These must be approached together and understood in light of the complicated ways they impact each other.

If dialogue is the *mode* of the Asian Church’s mission, and a communion of local churches is the *structure* of the Asian Church’s mission, proclaiming and building the Kingdom of God forms the *content* of the Church’s mission.⁷ “As the FABC’s Fifth Plenary Assembly states: ‘Our challenge is to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God: to promote justice, peace, love, compassion, equality and brotherhood in these Asian realities. In short, it is to work to make [the] Kingdom of God a reality.’”⁸ The Church’s mission is a continuation of Jesus’ mission, to proclaim and build the Kingdom of God by creating a just and compassionate world. For FABC, a Kingdom-centric mission is more appropriate to Asian religious and cultural plurality and maintains focus on the joint spiritual, cultural, and social needs of Asian Catholics.

The shift from a bounded Christocentric mission to a more fluid Kingdom-centric mission, however, seemed to some a dilution of Catholic faith. This explains why there was a significant pushback from Vatican during the papacies of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. But attentiveness to religious diversity and cultural plurality does not mean that FABC denies the truth of Jesus as a unique and universal saviour. It has not questioned the unique salvific role of Jesus — though it has not emphasized it, either. Indeed, some have noted that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church (*Dominus Iesus*, promulgated in 2000) has as one of its underlying concerns Asian theologians (among others), whose Christologies did not sufficiently espouse the unique and universal salvific nature of Christ.⁹ The concern for orthodoxy is understandable from a Roman perspective. From this perspective, Asian bishops and theologians could be seen as compromising the centre of faith. Even the move from a Christocentric mission to something as biblical as a Kingdom-centred mission could seem problematic.

⁷See Miguel Marcelo Quatra, *At the Side of the Multitudes: The Kingdom of God and the Mission of the Church in the FABC Documents (1970-1995)*, Manila: Claretian Publications, 2000.

⁸Peter C. Phan, “‘Reception’ or ‘Subversion’ of Vatican II by the Asian Churches? A New Way of Being Church in Asia,” *Australian eJournal of Theology* 6 (February 2006) 1-19, 11.

⁹Edmund Chia, “*Dominus Iesus* and Asian Theologies,” *Horizons* 29, 2 (September 2002) 277-289.

Returning the focus to the Kingdom through dialogue and a communion of local churches is more than sensitivity to religious pluralism, a valuing of inculturation, and a concern for the poor. An apologetic, aggressive, defensive Christological stance can be deadly in Asia. And it is not only Christians in Communist countries under threat. Growing militant fundamentalism, anti-Western and anti-Christian sentiment, and the unfounded association of Christians with some Christians who practice aggressive proselytization threaten Christian populations across Asia. FABC is acutely aware that an exclusivist Christology can exacerbate delicate and even dangerous situations for Asian Catholics.

While an apologetic Christological stance of Jesus as unique and universal saviour may be doctrinally sound, it is not always pastorally prudent. The FABC emphasizes the Kingdom as the Church's mission, not just because it is both theologically and culturally more appropriate to the Asian context; they do so also because an apologetic and Christocentric approach can endanger minority population Christians in Asia. Pope Francis seems to understand this. In response to the killing of twenty-one Egyptian Coptic Christians in Libya by Islamic State militants, Pope Francis talked of an "ecumenism of blood": "The blood of our Christian brothers and sisters is a testimony which cries out to be heard... It makes no difference whether they be Catholics, Orthodox, Copts or Protestants. They are Christians! Their blood is one and the same. Their blood confesses Christ."¹⁰ But far from glorifying death, the Pope calls us to listen to their suffering. Like the FABC, Pope Francis does not deny that doctrinal issues may divide us, but he also sees a deeper unity, as he recognizes the complexities of real life situations, and calls us to live our faith in these situations.

Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*)¹¹ and Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*)¹² set the stage for the following 50 years of interreligious and ecumenical dialogue. While noting doctrinal

¹⁰"Pope Francis: The Blood of Murdered Copts a 'Witness that Cries Out,'" Vatican Radio, February 16, 2015, http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/02/16/pope_francis_the_blood_of_murdered_copts_a_witness/1123688.

¹¹*Unitatis Redintegratio* (November 21, 1964), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html.

¹²Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* (October 28, 1965), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

concerns and boundaries, both documents take a more open approach to interreligious and ecumenical relations than in the past, recognizing the spiritual depth of other religions and calling for dialogue, collaboration, deeper knowledge, love, and respect. The Decree on Ecumenism highlights the significance of the Church's continual renewal, reformation, and change of heart. While *Nostra Aetate* famously declares, "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions," it also insists that the Church, "ever must proclaim Christ 'the way, the truth, and the life' (John 14:6)."¹³ The document therefore balances between holding onto the unique and universal position of Christ and honouring truth and holiness in other religions.

I have participated in a number of Hindu-Catholic dialogues over the last three years that celebrated the anniversary of Vatican II and discussed *Nostra Aetate*. Some of my Hindu friends have rightfully noted concerns with the document's sense of spiritual privilege, somewhat thin articulation of the world's religions, and presumption of a human unity with a decidedly Christian bent. They appreciate *Nostra Aetate* for its historical significance, but, to them, it is an outdated approach to interreligious relations that could not really work as a framework for true dialogue today. It does not help that *Nostra Aetate* is now often read through the lens of *Dominus Iesus*, a document that almost destroyed the Los Angeles Hindu-Catholic Dialogue (along with any number of dialogues across the world) and still serves to justify suspicion of Catholics in interreligious dialogue today.

Though I also see limits in the Council's articulation of ecumenical and interreligious issues, its emphasis on the importance of collaboration and social justice is just as relevant today as it was in 1965. *Nostra Aetate* says in its section on Islam that, "this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all."¹⁴ Indeed, Pope Francis himself has been explicit in his interreligious and ecumenical messages that daily life and the shared task of building a just world are essential.¹⁵ In this regard, the Pope and the FABC very much carry on the Council when they emphasize

¹³*Nostra Aetate*, 2.

¹⁴*Nostra Aetate*, 3.

¹⁵See "Pope Urges Dialogue of Life to Counter Anti-Christian Violence in African," Vatican Radio, September 08, 2014, <http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-urges-dialogue-of-life-to-counter-anti-christ>.

our contemporary contexts, our shared goals, and social justice commitments.

At the same time, the Western Christian privilege my Hindu friends have noticed in their reading of the documents of the Second Vatican Council is instructive. They say that it is much easier “to forget the past” when you are the one in the position of power. Western Christian privilege has led many Christians to forget that being a Catholic Christian minority in a growing secular West is far different from being a non-Christian minority in the West or a Christian minority in the East. By resituating the Church’s interreligious work in the complex and fraught cultural and social realities of our time, the FABC calls the Church to heed Vatican II’s call to “read the signs of the times”;¹⁶ and precisely in doing so, they decentre Western preoccupations and move the Church beyond Vatican II. A theology of religious diversity informed by the FABC holds in tension the universal and particular, the borders and the border-crossings. It is committed to the shifting, fluid, and dynamic dialogue with religions, culture, and the marginalized. It emphasizes local, multiple theologies and decentres privileged assumptions. With these perspectives in mind, I now turn to John Henry Newman and Rita Gross.

John Henry Newman and Rita Gross: A Conversation

Francis McGrath cites a set of 1825 sermons of John Henry Newman’s as Newman’s first real foray into the theology of universal revelation. These sermons were inspired by an argument with his brother Charles, who had renounced Christianity. Although Newman admits to two dispensations (Judaism and Christianity), he regards other religions as examples of human alienation from God.¹⁷ Newman does not give much credit to the classic philosophers.¹⁸ Judaism and Christianity share six common doctrines that are theoretically accessible by reason alone, though practically impossible because of sin (monotheism, providence, morality, God’s attributes, the Fall, and restoration). And then there is revelation exclusive to Christianity (five doctrines beyond reason: the atonement, eternal punishment, pardon, sanctifying grace, and heaven and bodily

¹⁶Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), 4, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

¹⁷Francis McGrath, F.M.S., *John Henry Newman: Universal Revelation*, Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997, 17.

¹⁸McGrath, *John Henry Newman: Universal Revelation*, 31.

resurrection).¹⁹ Even so, the God of scripture and the God of nature are the same God.²⁰

The initial ideas of Newman would shift and develop over the course of his life as he engaged other thinkers and issues. He came to see that God reveals Godself in scripture, in the world, and in conscience. God's revelation in the world is called providence, and it is something "authoritatively announced" by and perfected in Christ.²¹ In this regard, Newman clearly has a fulfilment theology. It is equally clear that he recognizes that God not only works in the world beyond scriptural revelation, but also at an individual and global level, and that we can know it. Indeed, Newman argues in his second Oxford University Sermon that no religion has been established by "unaided" reason. No community is denied revelation from God, though only some revelation is "authenticated."²² And, in light of this, Newman argues in *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (1833) that there is a "pagan" dispensation, and its philosophy can be preparatory for revelation.²³

Key to Newman's notion of universal revelation is his notion of conscience. Newman articulates conscience as one of the principal channels through which God self-discloses to every person, across time and culture, without dependence on Judaism or Christianity.²⁴ All people are endowed with a conscience, from which they could know basic principles about God and virtue.²⁵ Newman says,

Conscience implies a relation between the soul and a something exterior, and that, moreover, superior to itself; a relation to an excellence which it does not possess, and to a tribunal over which it has no power... Here, then, at once, we have the elements of a religious system; for what is Religion, but the system of relations existing between us and a Supreme Power, claiming our habitual obedience.²⁶

Conscience is both natural and aided by God, and it naturally orients and moves the person beyond herself. Even so, conscience does not provide us with knowledge of God's "Personality."²⁷ This is the purview

¹⁹McGrath, *John Henry Newman: Universal Revelation*, 32-33.

²⁰McGrath, *John Henry Newman: Universal Revelation*, 33.

²¹McGrath, *John Henry Newman: Universal Revelation*, 42.

²²McGrath, *John Henry Newman: Universal Revelation*, 69.

²³McGrath, *John Henry Newman: Universal Revelation*, 73; See John Henry Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (1833), San Bernadino: Assumption Press, 2014, 51-52.

²⁴McGrath, *John Henry Newman: Universal Revelation*, 18.

²⁵McGrath, *John Henry Newman: Universal Revelation*, 41.

²⁶Newman as quoted in McGrath, *John Henry Newman: Universal Revelation*.

²⁷McGrath, *John Henry Newman: Universal Revelation*, 70.

of revelation. Christ authenticates, announces, integrates, clarifies, and fulfils the truths and values embodied in natural religion.

Newman tries to maintain a distinction between universal revelation and its manifestation in natural religion, on the one hand, and specific revelation and its manifestation in revealed religion, on the other. But this distinction is made fuzzy by places where Newman talks about God's presence in the conscience or God's aid of our reason. Overall, there is a growing openness to the natural conscience and natural religion, even in sin. Such a development allows for his growing positive sense of the classics. Moreover, Newman disagrees publicly with liberal Anglicans who challenged sacraments, practices, or doctrines that may have originated in non-Christian sources. From his perspective, revealed religion integrates, assimilates, develops, and perfects natural religion. This means that a "pagan" origin does not necessarily exclude it. Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845) encapsulates Newman's thinking here. "There is in truth a certain virtue or grace in the Gospel which changes the quality of doctrines, opinions, usages, actions, and personal characters when incorporated with it, and makes them right and acceptable to its Divine Author... Thus [they become] Sacraments under the Gospel."²⁸ God sanctifies non-Christian practices — though God does not sanction them.²⁹ Jewish and Christian revelation authenticates universal revelation; revealed religion corrects, builds on, and sanctifies natural religion.

Indeed, as a Catholic, Newman defends universal revelation, emphasizing the divine source of both and the ways grace builds on nature.³⁰ In his defense of the classics in *The Idea of the University* (1852 and 1858), Newman says, "All that is good, all that is true, all that is beautiful, all that is beneficent, be it great or small, be it perfect or fragmentary, natural as well as supernatural, moral as well as material, comes from Him."³¹ In *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870), Newman outlines three natural avenues for religion:³² our individual minds (that is, our conscience), humanity's collective voice (that is, various human rituals, practices, and doctrines), and world

²⁸John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845), North Charleston: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012, 187.

²⁹McGrath, *John Henry Newman: Universal Revelation*, 190.

³⁰McGrath, *John Henry Newman: Universal Revelation*, 19.

³¹John Henry Newman, *The Idea of the University* (1852 and 1858), introduction by Martin J. Svaglic, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982, 87.

³²John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870), introduction by Nicholas Lash, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979, 303.

order and history.³³ Conscience, however, is the most authoritative channel of knowledge.³⁴ Yet Christianity is unique. Revelation builds on natural religion — it is not superseded — but the truths of revelation do not depend on the truths of natural religion, either. Instead, “belief in revealed truths depends on belief in natural [ones].”³⁵

Newman’s views are complex, unsystematic, and somewhat in tension with each other. At the same time, they are more than a little intriguing and end up not entirely far off from later inclusive fulfillment theologies. But if one is looking for a compelling theology of universal revelation that could work wholesale for our contemporary context, one would certainly be disappointed. In the end, it is clear that there is no real embrace of religious diversity through Newman’s understandings of universal revelation and natural religion. At the same time, Newman’s occasional approach to theology embeds within it a recognition that our understanding evolves in different times and contexts (sometimes dramatically so); this fits well with the Asian Catholic insistence on locality. Thus, Newman’s ideas may be able to be developed in light of current senses of religious diversity. To begin to do this, I take a comparative turn. Rather than use a Christian norm for articulating religious diversity, I take to heart the Asian Catholic practice of decentering dominant Christianity and employ a Buddhist lens.

In her most recent book, Rita Gross tackles religious diversity through Buddhist theology.³⁶ First, she argues that the so-called problem of religious diversity emerges from a basic misunderstanding of self and other. Gross says,

When we perceive and talk about others as if they are fixed, enduring realities, we are already in the realm of duality and have bypassed a more fundamental situation... We need to understand that there is an other only in the experience of a self, that self and other are cocreated, or, in better Buddhist language, arise together and interdependently.³⁷

Even more fundamentally, the self itself is not fixed. Instead, “[i]dentity is a myriad, ever-shifting, ever-changing constellation, not something fixed, rigid, stabile, and enduring.”³⁸ In light of this, religious diversity is simply a phenomenological reality.

³³Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 303-310.

³⁴Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 303.

³⁵Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 321.

³⁶Rita Gross, *Religious Diversity: What’s the Problem? Buddhist Advice for Flourishing with Religious Diversity*, Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014, 5.

³⁷Rita Gross, *Religious Diversity*, 119.

³⁸Rita Gross, *Religious Diversity*, 162.

[R]eligious diversity exists because it is psychologically and spiritually impossible for all human beings to follow one theological outlook or spiritual path... Religious diversity, which is inevitable, natural, and normal, flows from our different spiritual and psychological inclinations.³⁹

Although religious diversity is a phenomenological reality, Gross doesn't advocate for an "anything goes" attitude. Yes, she discounts exclusive truth and the preoccupation with metaphysics, but she also admits to her own Buddhist universalism. For her, "[T]he acid test of a religion's worth lies with what kind of tools it provides its adherents for coping gracefully and kindly with their worlds and the other beings who inhabit them."⁴⁰ Gross therefore proposes the Buddhist notion of *upaya* (skilful means or method) as a resource for approaching religious diversity.

Upaya is the seventh of ten *paramitas*, or perfections, in Mahayana Buddhism. Essentially, it means the skill of adapting religious teachings for various audiences and needs. Gross says,

The usual expectation is that religious teachings would have to do with Wisdom rather than Method because religious teachings purport to be about reality, which would be in the domain of Wisdom. But this is not accurate. Religious *teachings* as well as religious practices are essentially in the realm of *Upaya*, not in the realm of *Prajna* [Wisdom], as Buddhists see it. They are essentially a Method that helps one approach Wisdom, which transcends word and concept, but they are not the content of Wisdom itself. Without such methods, one would be lost, but one is equally lost and mistaken if one confuses the tool with accomplishing the task for which the tool is designed — in this case, the task is developing wisdom. Religious teachings are meant to be contemplated until their meanings are so internalized that one's acts are infused with those meanings and are truly compassionate. Religious teachings are utterly ineffective when they are only memorized and clung to.⁴¹

Religious doctrines and practices are culturally and historically specific *upayas*, or tools, to "attain greater insight."⁴² By shifting the discussion in theologies of religion from metaphysical truth to the effectiveness of religious methods for encouraging "ethical treatment of ourselves and others," we can engage in productive dialogue that enhances our ability to live in a religiously diverse world.⁴³ In this way, Gross both maintains a distinction between *upaya* and Wisdom but also

³⁹Rita Gross, *Religious Diversity*, 85.

⁴⁰Rita Gross, *Religious Diversity*, 85.

⁴¹Rita Gross, *Religious Diversity*, 91.

⁴²Rita Gross, *Religious Diversity*, 91.

⁴³Rita Gross, *Religious Diversity*, 95.

blurs it by advocating for a universalism that requires various *upayas* to actually function effectively so that they move us to Wisdom.

Gross argues that any person of integrity following the moral code of her religious tradition has an ethical responsibility to learn about other religions, and imaginatively and “empathetically enter into it, attempting to understand why that religion feels true to its adherents.”⁴⁴ Ultimately, tolerance and acceptance of religious diversity are simply not enough for our world today. Gross seeks cooperative and mindful flourishing in our religiously diverse world.

On the surface there is little that Gross and Newman share. They have different religious and historical contexts. Whereas Newman wants to defend the classics, Gross wants to promote interreligious flourishing. Gross has no formal theology of revelation, and in fact, Newman is preoccupied with the very truth claims Gross wants to minimize. No doubt, they would find much in each other to fault. Even so, both of them are self-consciously occasional, grounded in their contexts, attentive to the formation and flourishing of persons. The recognition of context and the concern for the formation of persons allow us to bridge worlds imaginatively and speculate how one might develop Newman in light of Gross’s sense of the contemporary realities of religious diversity.

First, Rita Gross’s development of *upaya* can connect with Newman’s understanding of conscience. Conscience is much more for Newman than our conventional understanding of it. Indeed, Walter Conn unpacks three dimensions: desire, discernment, and demand.⁴⁵ We desire God from the depths of our being; and it is our conscience that leads “the mind to God.”⁴⁶ God is the source of our desire, as well as the inner source of our knowledge of God.⁴⁷ God is present in our conscience “as a Personal, All-seeing, All-judging Being.”⁴⁸ Moreover, conscience is a practical wisdom (*phronesis*) with two distinct parts: discernment of value and duty in concrete particular situations, and then the demand to act according to that duty.⁴⁹ For Newman, it is this demand that is “the basis for assenting

⁴⁴Rita Gross, *Religious Diversity*, 7.

⁴⁵Walter E. Conn, “Newman on Conscience,” *Newman Studies Journal* 6, 2 (Fall 2009) 15-26.

⁴⁶Newman as quoted in Walter E. Conn, “Newman on Conscience,” 17.

⁴⁷Walter E. Conn, “Newman on Conscience,” 18.

⁴⁸Newman as quoted in Walter E. Conn, “Newman on Conscience,” 19.

⁴⁹Walter E. Conn, “Newman on Conscience,” 20-23.

to God's existence."⁵⁰ Newman's view of conscience begins and ends with God. Indeed, like *upaya*, conscience leads to true knowledge. But if Gross wants to maintain a distinction between *upaya* and Wisdom, Newman wants to maintain a distinction between the natural knowledge extracted from conscience and the knowledge of revelation. Both blur these distinctions. But at a fundamental level, both *upaya* and conscience are practical knowing directed toward the Ultimate through concrete particulars. Placing conscience at the centre of a theology of religions doesn't reduce theology to ethics or make dialogue dependent on an ossified definition of humanity. Instead, it foregrounds practical knowing in context.

Second, Rita Gross is unequivocal that simple religious tolerance is no longer tenable. Conscience, as it were, demands that people learn about, "empathetically" respond to, and encourage the flourishing of other religions.⁵¹ What does that mean for Newman? His notion of the sacramental principle and his argument that non-Christian practices are purified and sanctified can be rethought and developed. The idea that such practices are purged, assimilated, and then sanctified (without being sanctioned) is clearly problematic using Gross's standard of flourishing with diversity. But why not see sanction in this sanctification? Why not see the process of the sanctification of natural religion as an authentication of living religions that have ongoing practices, traditions, and doctrines? Why not see Christ both as fulfilment of all revelation and also as multiply and diversely manifest — with that multiplicity and diversity divinely willed? That is to say, diversity itself is sanctioned in the process of sanctifying natural religion.

Finally, in light of the centrality of conscience and the sacramental principle, could Newman's view of the *sensus fidelium* (sense of the faithful) and the importance of consultation of the faithful to non-Christians be expanded as well? Rita Gross sees true flourishing as a collaborative project; what if theology and religious practice are collaborative projects as well? In light of Newman's views of conscience, the sacramental principle, and the development of doctrine, perhaps theological understanding can and should develop in dialogue and collaboration. Perhaps when *we* stray, *others* may be preserving apostolic tradition, even though they may not articulate that tradition in the same way. After all, if identity is myriad, ever-changing, flexible, multiple, and shifting, so is tradition. As Newman

⁵⁰Walter E. Conn, "Newman on Conscience," 20-23; see Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 101.

⁵¹Rita Gross, *Religious Diversity*, 7.

says in his *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* (1859), “the tradition of the Apostles, committed to the whole Church in its various constituents and functions *per modum unius*, manifests itself variously at various times... It follows that none of these channels of tradition may be treated with disrespect.”⁵² If other religions are included here, dialogue and collaboration become necessary not only from an ethical perspective, but also from a doctrinal one.

Concluding Statement

Unlike the FABC, Newman is not in dialogue with other religions or the poor. He is, however, a deeply dialogical theologian engaged in and attentive to his immediate cultural context. This engagement is what makes his ideas seem so limiting; yet, the explicit rootedness in his time and the articulation of development in theology are what make his thought so promising. While none of the resources from Newman that I have outlined in conversation with Gross’s understanding of religious diversity — conscience, the sanctification of non-Christian beliefs and practices, and the significance of the *sensus fidelium* — are a direct route to an abstract or universally applicable Catholic theology of religious diversity (indeed, that would not be desirable or even possible for Newman or the Asian bishops), they are rooted in a self-consciously dynamic historical and cultural process that can and should develop. They provide intriguing avenues for a variety of theologies of religious diversity that are attentive to a world both radically networked and heartbreakingly divided. In the end, the Asian Catholic bishops demonstrate a total commitment to an ongoing and ever changing dialogue that is acutely attentive to the local; so does Newman. For both, theology must also be ongoing, ever changing, and provisional. Indeed, if dialogue is to be authentic, agendas and formulations cannot be preset. Careful listening and give-and-take are essential. If theologies of religious diversity are also fluid, provisional, and ever changing, truly dialogical and contextually mindful, there is reason to hope — but we must be willing to abandon the search for an abstract, definitive theology and seek instead a plurality of them.

⁵² See John Henry Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* (1859), ed. John Coulson, Lanham: Sheed & Ward, 1961, 63.