

THE CLAIM TO UNIQUENESS AND UNIVERSALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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Abstract

In recent years, interreligious dialogue has been a burning topic among theologians across the religious divide. With the rise and influence of globalization and migration, the world is becoming more and more a global village and experiencing a growing need for interaction and unity. Efforts to attain such unity have been evident in all spheres and sectors of life resulting into formation of organizations and unions to facilitate the same. In the religious circles, there have also been similar efforts. The Second Vatican Council is a good example and perhaps a notable fountain of other efforts that the Church has made towards achieving fruitful dialogue with other religions. However, every time believers of different religions meet for a roundtable discussion to engage in dialogue, one of the apparent obstacles has been the claim to uniqueness and universality on the part of each of the parties. Thus, each of the parties has been setting forth the founders of their religions as a no-go zone for interreligious dialogue. This entails that the dialogue begins from such a claim as a condition. With the aid of some selected theologians and the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* and other Church documents, this article examines the concept of uniqueness and universality in interreligious dialogue. It argues that in as much as such a concept is viewed as an obstacle, there is a sense in which it can lay a good foundation for fruitful interreligious dialogue.

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Introduction

Since time immemorial, there have been tensions between different religions in a number of countries and communities which, in some extreme circumstances, have resulted in lack of peaceful coexistence, killings, maiming and other malicious harm. The main source of such tension has been basically the differences in doctrines that each of the religions holds independently or jointly. Thus, for those doctrines that are held jointly, the main issue at stake has been determining the one who holds the right idea about it basing on the fact that the two religions understand such doctrines differently. For the doctrines that are unique to each of the religions, however, the burning question has been determining who has the truth.

Nevertheless, there have been efforts that have been initiated to ensure proper dialogue and peaceful coexistence among believers of Christianity and those of the other religions. Francis Arinze contends that in our times, people of different religions are meeting and interacting more perhaps than in any other period of human history. He further adds that relations across religious frontiers are not just being discussed but are taking place and are increasing.¹ On the part of the Catholic Church, the inclusion of members of other religions during the Second Vatican Council sessions, for instance, was a huge step towards the attainment of true dialogue. As if that was not enough, at the end of the Council, there were documents that were promulgated with the specific aim of initiating and working towards interreligious dialogue. Among such documents are *Nostra Aetate*, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions² and *Unitatis Redintegratio*, Decree on Ecumenism.³ The promulgation of such documents opened the door for more documents that also hint on interreligious dialogue. For instance, as the Council was still in progress, Pope Paul VI wrote *Ecclesiam Suam*⁴ an encyclical whose main theme was dialogue. He

¹Francis Arinze, *Meeting Other Believers*, Herefordshire: Fowler Wright Books, 1997, 1.

² Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html

³Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html

⁴Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, *An Encyclical on the Church* (6 August 1964), Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1964.

later wrote *Evangelii Nuntiandi*⁵ which sought to highlight the missionary activity of the Church including its commitment to dialogue. Pope John Paul II wrote *Redemptoris Missio*⁶ which touches on interreligious dialogue as well. All these efforts made by the Church point to the necessity and urgency of the matter of interreligious dialogue.

Arinze argues that basing on the fact that religious plurality in today's world is a fact, and especially that these religions are a greater part of humanity, interreligious dialogue is no longer optional but is rather necessary.⁷ The dialogue is also necessitated by an ever-increasing desire for interaction as people of differing religions meet much more frequently and communicate on a regular basis than in the past centuries due to economic factors that drive people to look for employment elsewhere as well as the upheavals brought about by natural disasters and wars that displace people.⁸ Ratzinger also notes that in a world that is growing ever closer together, the question about the meeting of religions and cultures has become a most important subject, and one that is certainly not just the business of theology.⁹ However, even if almost everyone agrees that there is a need for unity and dialogue among religions, there have been difficulties in determining the starting point or rather the meeting point among religions that could be utilized as a sure foundation for fruitful dialogue.

While religious doctrines have been said to be the main source of controversy and hence division, the main contributing factor has been the aspect of uniqueness and universality of religious figures and founders of religions. Thus, on one hand, for instance, Christians claim that Jesus is the only Saviour through whom all people can be saved while on the other hand, Muslims dispute this and rather submit that Allah is one and Muhammad is his messenger. None of these two religions seems ready to give up its respective point of view. This article seeks to examine the claim to uniqueness and universality especially in the context of interreligious dialogue. It explores the concept of uniqueness and universality in general, challenges and problems associated with interreligious dialogue and

⁵Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi, An Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelization in the Modern World* (8 December 1975), Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1975.

⁶John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (7 December 1990), Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1991.

⁷Arinze, *Meeting Other Believers*, 8.

⁸Arinze, *Meeting Other Believers*, 9.

⁹Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, Trans Henry Taylor, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003, 9.

the concept of dialogue in the light of some selected theologians, the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* and the document *Dialogue and Proclamation*.¹⁰ Such theologians and *Ecclesiam Suam* have been given a special attention in this discussion because they offer very important and relevant contributions to the claim to uniqueness and universality in interreligious dialogue. The main argument of the paper is that the claim to uniqueness and universality in interreligious dialogue lays a very good foundation for fruitful dialogue rather than hindering it. This is so because it is an affirmation that the parties in dialogue are firmly grounded in their religious belief.

The Concept of Uniqueness and Universality

The effort to initiate interreligious dialogue has been met with a lot of challenges. The intensity of such challenges has differed but each of the challenges has proved to be a milestone in as far as interreligious dialogue is concerned. Peter Phan notes that even in the present day, among the many theological issues that may deter believers of a particular religion from participating in interreligious dialogue is the question whether such a dialogue would require, as a condition, a renunciation or at least a bracketing of their belief in the uniqueness and universality especially of the founder of their religion.¹¹ Almost on all sides of the counterparts involved in interreligious dialogue there has been such a fear. And so, the tendency has been that at the very beginning of the dialogue, the concerned parties posit how much they can expect from the debate and how far they can extend in expressing their beliefs so as not to compromise them with those of the others.

Discussing such a phenomenon from a Christian point of view, Joseph Ratzinger observes that the challenge of the claim to uniqueness and universality also applies especially to the Christian faith, in that from its very origin, and in its essential nature, it claims to know and to proclaim the one true God and the one Saviour of all mankind.¹² Thus, "There is salvation in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). In other words, Jesus is unique to Christianity to the extent that Christianity cannot be thought to exist without Jesus.

¹⁰ Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1991.

¹¹ Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004, 85.

¹² Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religion*, 9.

As if that is not enough, Christians also believe that as a Saviour of humankind, the salvific role of Jesus is not just limited to Christians alone but to all in the sense that there can be no salvation except through the name of Jesus. Paul J. Griffiths also adds that Christians are not the only ones to have developed doctrines that are particularist and exclusivist. He, therefore, considers the claim to uniqueness and universality of Christ as a prerequisite for a properly Christian engagement in interreligious dialogue.¹³

So, what does uniqueness mean? Phan gives a threefold meaning of the term.¹⁴ Firstly, he argues that the term 'unique' means "having no like as in the claim that every human being is unique."¹⁵ In other words, in this sense unique could apply to anything and anybody in as far as he or she is different and distinct from the other. Taken in the context of interreligious dialogue, founders of religions, such as Jesus Christ, would be considered to be one among many. Thus, if Jesus is a Saviour in Christian religion, there may be other Saviours as well distinct to particular religions. And so, from this perspective, Jesus is not considered a universal Saviour. This definition on uniqueness is typical of a perspective known as Pluralism.

Secondly, unique can also mean "being the only one of its sort."¹⁶ In this sense, if we say that Jesus is a Saviour it means that he is the only one who can save and there are no other Saviours except him. This view is held by exclusivists. In the third sense, unique can mean "having no equal or equivalent."¹⁷ This entails that other saviours are capable of saving but they are inferior or dependent on Jesus. This view is held by inclusivists.

Scholars differ on whether it is plausible and reasonable to subscribe to the concept of uniqueness and universality of the founder/s of one's religion. For instance, Gordon Kaufman, John Hick and Langdon Gilkey argue that the modern awareness of the historical-cultural limitation of all knowledge and religious beliefs and of the impossibility of judging the truth claim of another culture

¹³Paul J. Griffiths, "The Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990, 159.

¹⁴Gavin D'Costa also gives a similar understanding of the term uniqueness. That is, he defines it in terms of inclusivist, exclusivist and pluralist perspectives. For more on the same, refer to Gavin D'Costa, ed. "Preface" in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990, viii-ix.

¹⁵Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, 86.

¹⁶Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, 86.

¹⁷Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, 86.

has rendered the claim of uniqueness and universality of a particular religious tradition no longer credible.¹⁸ Thus, their argument rests on the fact that from a theological point of view, God is an absolute mystery who can never be absolutely represented by any religion or any theological system.¹⁹ Therefore, claiming uniqueness and universality of one's founder implies that one has fully comprehended God, and this is impossible for human beings. Such a view is also inspired by the idea that the "Church, clasping sinners to her bosom, is at once both holy and in need of purification" (LG, 8). This entails that since the Church is also in need of purification and can err, it cannot make any claim to absolute truth.

However, Phan holds a different view. For him, the reasons offered by different thinkers mentioned above do not amount to enough evidence for rejecting the possibility of the claim to uniqueness and universality. He posits that even though human beings are historically and culturally limited, that does not deter them from affirming universal truths such as that Jesus Christ is a unique and universal Saviour.²⁰ He also uses another example, namely stating that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is his messenger does not contradict the ineffability of God but affirms it.²¹ However, he is quick to add that, his counter-argument does not necessarily settle the truth or falsity of the claim to uniqueness and universality itself which still has to be evaluated on its own merits, but it is illogical to reject it a priori on the ground of historical-cultural context.²² But by putting forward such an argument, Phan shoots himself in the foot as he seems not to be sure and convinced of the arguments he puts forward as he keeps on switching from one idea to another. There is no middle way in proving the validity of the argument of whether the concept of uniqueness and universality is tenable or not. Nevertheless, in line with Raimundo Panikkar, Phan goes on to argue that it is impossible not to introduce the aspect of uniqueness and universality of the founder of one's religion in inter-religious dialogue.²³ For him, if one hides and brackets one's deepest religious convictions, interreligious dialogue becomes nothing more than empty chatter about trivia and bagatelles.²⁴

¹⁸Quoted in Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, 87.

¹⁹Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, 87.

²⁰Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, 89.

²¹Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, 90.

²²Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, 89.

²³Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, 91.

²⁴Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, 92.

Dialogue and its Characteristics in the Light of *Ecclesiam Suam*

Pope Paul VI is renowned as the Pope of dialogue. This is because during his papacy he initiated a lot of projects and platforms to ensure dialogue among individuals and religions. Among such initiatives, the most notable ones are the promulgation of Vatican II documents such as *Nostra Aetate* which were specifically aimed at promoting interreligious dialogue, the establishment of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in the Vatican, engaging in dialogue with people of different faiths and the writing of the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* which happened to be his first encyclical. In this encyclical, Pope Paul VI lays foundation in modern times for the Catholic Church's engagement in interreligious relations. Thus, Paul VI posits his understanding of dialogue. But the encyclical goes beyond interreligious dialogue and prefers to call such dialogue as "dialogue with the world" (ES, 12-15).

According to him, the term 'world' refers to those human beings who are opposed to the light of faith and the gift of grace. In our times, these may also be referred to as atheists. Secondly, those whose naive optimism betrays them into thinking that their own energies suffice to win them complete, lasting, and gainful prosperity. Finally, it refers to those who take refuge in an aggressively pessimistic outlook on life and maintain that their vices, weaknesses and moral ailments are inevitable, incurable, or perhaps even desirable as sure manifestations of personal freedom and sincerity (ES, 59). Thus, the major concern of the Pope is to engage the "world," to study it, analyze it in order to find how best to serve the human Society (ES, 5). *Ecclesiam Suam* does not distinguish between Interreligious Dialogue and Ecumenical Dialogue. However, it mentions specific groups that are targeted. These are: atheists and Communists (ES, 99-106); non-Christians (ES, 107-108); non-Catholics and other Christians (ES, 109-120).

The Pope also sees dialogue in terms of concentric circles. The first circle is Mankind. So, the Church is called to enter into dialogue with the world, the entire human race because we share with the whole human race a common nature, a common life, with all its gifts and problems (ES, 97). The Second circle comprises first of all those men and women who worship the one supreme God, whom we also worship. In this case, Jews have a special place since Christianity traces its origin from Judaism. Then comes Islam as a monotheistic religion. The Pope argues that we all admire all that is good and true in their worship of God. Then comes the followers of the great Afro-Asiatic religions (ES, 107). The third circle comprises of all those who

take their name from Christ. This is about the ecumenical dialogue (ES, 109). Such dialogue concerns Protestants, Anglicans as well as other Christians.

Ecclesiam Suam devotes a section to discuss some characteristics of real dialogue. In other words, a dialogue that lacks such characteristics may not be worthy of its name. Firstly, there must be clarity of expression and language (ES, 81). The Pope contends that the language being used in dialogue should be easy to understand. Secondly, dialogue must be accompanied by meekness which Christ bade us to learn from himself (ES, 81). He adds that it would be a disgrace if our dialogue were marked by arrogance. Thirdly, there must be confidence not only in the power of one's own words, but also in the good will of both parties to the dialogue (ES, 81). Lastly, the dialogue must be guided by prudence (ES, 81). The Pope speaks of the prudence of a teacher who is most careful to make allowances for the psychological and moral circumstances of his hearer.

Interreligious Dialogue According to *Dialogue and Proclamation* (19 May 1991)

In discussing interreligious dialogue, the document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue first of all views dialogue as inseparable from the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. And so, echoing Pope Paul VI, the document views dialogue and proclamation as authentic forms of the one evangelizing mission of the Church.²⁵ The document goes on to mention four forms of dialogue. These are dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of experts and finally dialogue of religious experience. All these forms are ways through which the Catholic Church can enter and engage into dialogue with other religions.

In dialogue of life, people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.²⁶ Dialogue of life happens basically at the human level as people simply live together as brothers and sisters without feeling the urge or forcing one another to switch religions. In other words, dialogue of life is interreligious relationship at the level of the ordinary relational situations of daily life such as family, school, place of social or cultural contact, village meetings, workplace, politics, trade or commerce.²⁷

²⁵Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, #2.

²⁶Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, #42.

²⁷Arinze, *Meeting Other Believers*, 6.

Dialogue of action involves Christians and people of other religions collaborating for the integral development and liberation of people.²⁸ Such integral development includes goals of a humanitarian, social, economic, or political nature which are directed towards the liberation and advancement of humankind. This kind of dialogue often occurs today in the context of international organizations, where Christians and the followers of other religions confront together the problems of the world.

Dialogue of theological exchange which is also known as dialogue of experts, involves specialists seeking to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values.²⁹ It involves exchange of information between experts concerning their religious beliefs.³⁰ They also seek to apply something of their expertise to the problems which are faced by mankind in the course of its history. This is more easily accomplished in pluralistic societies where diverse traditions and ideologies coexist and sometimes come in contact. Phan cautions that it should be noted that first of all the goal of theological interreligious dialogue is not to construe a universal theology of religion whose possibility is predicated upon a core religious experience. Rather the goal of the dialogue of theological exchange is seeking understanding of the other faiths and one's own faith in the light of other faiths.³¹

The last one, dialogue of religious experience, involves persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, sharing their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.³² This type of dialogue can be a mutual enrichment and fruitful cooperation for promoting and preserving the highest values and spiritual ideals of humans. It leads naturally to each partner communicating to the other the reasons for his own faith. The profound differences between the faiths do not prevent this dialogue. Those differences, rather, must be referred back in humility and confidence to God who "is greater than our heart" (Jn 3:20). This kind of dialogue is evident especially during moments when countries have national disasters or national functions that necessitate that people should come and pray together. In Africa, this is a very common phenomenon.

²⁸Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, #42.

²⁹Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, #42.

³⁰Arinze, *Meeting Other Believers*, 7.

³¹Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, 99.

³²Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, #42.

Problems and Challenges in Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue, despite that it promises a harmonious society and world, is marred by a number of problems and challenges which, if not looked into properly, may end up creating more chaos. The first risk of interreligious dialogue is the fear and danger of losing one's faith.³³ There can be fear that the other party is theologically better than oneself and better in articulating his/her religious beliefs and practices or is able to manipulate the other to adopt his/her beliefs. This may make one of the parties to shun the dialogue for fear of putting their faith at risk and in jeopardy. This is a reality as it is not always the case that those engaging in interreligious dialogue are the same in terms of their theological competence. And so, the fear is somehow justifiable. How can we deal with this? Arinze posits that "interreligious dialogue need not take the form of theological discussion at all."³⁴ His argument is an affirmation of what was discussed earlier on about what interreligious dialogue is and what it is not.

Arinze adds that another challenge in interreligious dialogue is the risk of relativism.³⁵ What he means by this is that often in such a dialogue there is an overemphasis that one religion is as good as the other or that all religions are like roads leading to the same God. Arinze refutes such an idea and argues that no matter how one wants to be open to the other and engage them in dialogue, there must be a room for sincerity and objectivity. Thus, he argues that sincerity and objectivity are very important especially in religious matters, because good will, good conscience, honesty, lack of deceit and freedom from duplicity are fundamental religious requirements.³⁶ Pope Paul VI, in his encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* also notes the same danger and warns that it must be avoided. He refers to relativism as the "watering down or whittling away of truth" (ES, 88). He strongly argues that the apostolate must not make vague compromises concerning the principles which regulate and govern the profession of the Christian faith both in theory and in practice. On the contrary, he recommends that "the effective apostle is the man who is completely faithful to Christ's teaching. He alone can remain unaffected by the errors of the world around him, the man who lives his Christian life to the full" (ES, 88).

³³Arinze, *Meeting Other Believers*, 17.

³⁴Arinze, *Meeting Other Believers*, 17.

³⁵Arinze, *Meeting Other Believers*, 18.

³⁶Arinze, *Meeting Other Believers*, 18.

However, the argument of the risk and challenge of relativism is a sensitive one. If one argues that sincerity and objectivity must be put into consideration to minimize cases of relativism, the difficulty comes on the issue of finding a common ground or criterion for determining objectivity and sincerity of a particular religion. Definitely, those engaged in the dialogue will be tempted to posit that their religion is more objective and sincere than the other.

The other challenge is syncretism. This is simply defined as the practice of religion combined with foreign elements from another religion.³⁷ This may be driven by a desire to maintain one's own religion but also to take on board those practices that one finds helpful and attractive from other religions. According to Arnulf Camps, some, especially on the Christian side, are afraid that Jesus Christ will lose his uniqueness and that missionary work will no longer be possible if people dialogue.³⁸ Arinze sternly warns that "syncretism is a danger which has to be watched in interreligious dialogue,"³⁹ and that one simply needs to be rooted in his or her religion and to be certain of one's beliefs to avoid such a temptation.

Heated debates can also be a big challenge for those who engage in interreligious dialogue.⁴⁰ This may result from the parties feeling attacked when their fundamental doctrines are opposed. For example, it is an undeniable fact that Catholics hold in high esteem doctrines such as the Holy Trinity, the Holy Eucharist and the Virgin Mary. If members of other religions argue about these as if they were not reasonable enough to be believed, the Catholics may feel attacked and end up in a heated debate. The same may be the case with Muslims in talking about Muhammad and the Quran and many other religions with seemingly 'untouchable' doctrines.

Towards a Fruitful Interreligious Dialogue

The encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* outlines some prerequisites for a fruitful dialogue. Paul VI seems to contend that if there has to be true dialogue, such principles and guidelines must be put into consideration. Firstly, the encyclical states that for the Church to engage in fruitful dialogue, she must identify herself with those to whom she would bring the Christian message just as the Word of God who himself became a man (ES, 87). This entails humility and

³⁷Arinze, *Meeting Other Believers*, 31.

³⁸Arnulf Camps, *Partners in Dialogue: Christianity and Other World Religions*. Trans John Drury, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983, 18.

³⁹Arinze, *Meeting Other Believers*, 31.

⁴⁰Arinze, *Meeting Other Believers*, 31.

putting oneself at the same level with those with whom the Church engages in dialogue. This aspect is very important because if one comes for dialogue but has a superiority complex dialogue will be almost impossible.

Secondly, fruitful dialogue also demands that one must forego all privilege and the use of unintelligible language, and adopt the way of life of the most ordinary people in all that is human and honourable (ES, 87). Thus, since the aim of dialogue is to strive to understand the other as well as to be understood, the language that is used must facilitate such a process. So, the language has to be as simple as possible. Failure to abide by and adhere to this principle leaves some participants in an awkward position in the dialogue. Consequently, this may lead to failure to attain the intended goals of the dialogue since it will be assumed that there is communication break-down. Another prerequisite for fruitful dialogue is listening. Before one speaks, one must take great care to listen not only to what others say, but more especially to what they have in their hearts to say (ES, 87). Listening is an important aspect as it gives the other the chance to lay bare what lies within them especially those matters that are connected to their religion. It is also a chance for them to explain themselves especially wherever they have felt misunderstood. Ratzinger adds that we first have to try to understand them as they are in their historical dynamic, in their essential structures and types, as also in their possible relations with one another or as possible threats to each other, before we try to arrive at any judgements.⁴¹ The fourth and last prerequisite for dialogue is the willingness and readiness to behave as brothers and sisters to those with whom dialogue is sought (ES, 87). This is so because dialogue thrives on friendship, and especially on service. If one approaches dialogue with such an attitude, chances of progressing are very high.

While *Ecclesiam Suam* contributes to the quest for a fruitful dialogue by providing the conditions to be observed, Phan contributes to the discussion by presenting his own perspective. He contends that “interreligious dialogue is more than just doctrinal discussion; it is a personal encounter with the whole human person.”⁴² Thus, his argument is that interreligious dialogue should be a multi-perspective endeavour if it is to be fruitful. Even if doctrinal discussion is crucial, especially at the level of dialogue of

⁴¹Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 109.

⁴²Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, 91.

experts as pointed out by *Dialogue and Proclamation*, it should not be considered the only way of approaching dialogue.

For Francis Arinze, attaining fruitful dialogue lies in understanding properly what interreligious dialogue is and what it is not. Thus, he begins by contending that interreligious dialogue is not the same as the study of the various religions neither is it a comparison of them. It is also not a debate between followers of various religions, no matter how friendly it may be. So, what does dialogue entail? He argues that in dialogue encounters, one is not trying to prove oneself right and the other believer wrong.⁴³ This comes back to the point that was stressed in *Ecclesiam Suam* that dialogue is about listening to and understanding the other. Arinze further argues that even though interreligious dialogue entails the meeting together of Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and followers of Traditional Religions, it does not aim at bringing about the unity of all religions in a kind of a super-religion.⁴⁴ It is not a fusion of religions.

Interreligious dialogue is also not an effort to persuade the other person to embrace one's own religion. Even though efforts at conversion are part of the mission of the Church, they should be clearly distinguished from interreligious dialogue.⁴⁵ Arinze summarizes his understanding of interreligious dialogue when he argues that it is a meeting of people of differing religions, in an atmosphere of freedom and openness, in order to listen to the other, to try to understand that person's religion, and hopefully to seek possibilities of collaboration. He adds that such dialogue is reciprocal as opposed to one-way communication.⁴⁶

Conclusion

In the midst of an undeniable fact of religious plurality in the world, the issue of interreligious dialogue continues to be relevant and in high demand. This is why in response to this ever-increasing demand for dialogue there have been a number of conferences that have been organised to initiate and enhance interreligious dialogue. Among many of such conferences, the notable ones are International Conference of Religions for Peace held in Kyoto, Japan in 1970 and the World Conference of Religions and Peace held in Louvain in 1974. However, for such efforts to bear fruits, there must be, first of all, an

⁴³Arinze, *Meeting Other Believers*, 4.

⁴⁴Arinze, *Meeting Other Believers*, 4.

⁴⁵Arinze, *Meeting Other Believers*, 5.

⁴⁶Arinze, *Meeting Other Believers*, 5.

awareness of a global ethic which accepts that we are now in a globalised world in which many cultures live and interact and are constantly in search of a common ground and live in harmony.⁴⁷ The second important factor to bear in mind is to create an atmosphere that respects diversity of religions and hence makes everyone ready to partake in the dialogue. Despite such efforts to form organisations to facilitate interreligious dialogue, the issue of the claim to uniqueness and universality in interreligious dialogue has been seen as one of the obstacles sabotaging efforts at dialogue. Even so, the claim to uniqueness and universality is actually a good prerequisite for dialogue as it proves that one is confident with what he believes in. It also ensures that the parties in dialogue are grounded in their faith.

⁴⁷Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*, London: SCM Press, 2010, 256.