

The Listening Side of Love
Evangelism in the Twenty First Century

Walk in love, even as Christ also loved you, and gave himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling fragrance.

Ephesians 5:2

Introduction

Sometimes when people talk to us, we aren't really listening. We may hear them speak and look them in the eye, saying "I understand" and nodding our heads in agreement. But inwardly we are hurried and impatient, either because we are distracted by other matters or absorbed in our own concerns. Often, before they complete their sentence, we are busy composing our own responses. We think that our concerns are more important than theirs, and we want to turn the conversation in our own direction.

Unfortunately, the sin of un-listening is quite common among religiously zealous people. Indeed, their tendencies to commit the sin can increase with the fervency of their convictions, such that the more strongly they believe, the more sinful they become. It is no surprise that some people propose that, for the sake of peace in the world, people need to hold their beliefs with a relaxed grasp.

Most of us who are Christian know the sin of un-listening from the inside. Conservatives and liberals alike can commit it. For example, if we are evangelical Christians and we are sharing what we call the good news of Christ, we can easily be more interested in explaining the news than in listening to them. Or we may listen to them, but only insofar as we can find an opening for persuading them to adopt our own point of view. No matter how the conversation began, we want to have the last word.

The need, then, is to remember that there is a receptive side of love: a side that listens to others on their own terms and for their own sakes, without trying to change them according to pre-conceived purposes and without needing to have the last word. When we neglect this

aspect, we fall into many forms of forgetfulness. We forget that one of the most important things we can ever do for another person is simply to listen to that person, quietly and without judgment, allowing that person to grow in spirit-guided ways. We forget that we ourselves are made complete and whole by listening to them and, in many instances, learning from them. We forget that even as we might listen to others, we must also our hearts, where God speaks with a sighs too deep for words. We forget that the hills and rivers, animals and plants need to be appreciated on their own terms and for their own sakes – that is, listened to – so that they can have the space to be themselves. And we forget that even God is a deep Listening in which we live and move and have our being, whose divine life is diminished by our own un-listening, and who beckons us into the listening side of love as well as its active complements. God does not call us to stop speaking, but God does call us to listen before we speak.

Of course, listening is not simply a matter of the ears, and it can easily be joined with other more active modes of experience. When a nurse gently binds the wounds of a person who is injured, she is listening with her hands; when a naturalist walks through the forest and sees a bird on a spring morning, he is listening with his eyes; and when a businesswoman calculates the possible outcomes of a business decision with an eye to serving the poor, she is listening with her imagination. There are many ways to listen and there are many kinds of listeners. People who do not hear very well can listen very deeply; and people with perfect hearing can fail to listen.

In order to become more faithful to the listening, most of must repent or turn around. We must undertake a vow to listen and then recommit ourselves day by day. This vow is both freeing and humbling. It frees us from the burden of thinking that the future of the world -- or at least of our small corner of it -- depends entirely on our own actions; and it frees us from being trapped by the idea that we have all the answers, because there is nothing left to learn. Thus a vow to listen is the beginning of a new life in which we are open to novelty and surprise, to differences and uniqueness. Without listening, the religious life can be rooted in the past, but it lacks wings for the future. A vow to listen helps us live with roots and wings.

But a vow to listen is also humbling, because as we undertake the vow we are reminded of how unfaithful we have been. For example, if we have been overly zealous in trying to spread the good news, we must admit that our desire to “share the gospel” has not always been motivated by love, but rather by a desire to be vindicated, to be pure, to be blameless, to be “on the right side” on a day of judgment. It has also been motivated by insecurity and a need to control others, whose differences from us make us uncomfortable. In our un-listening we have been seeking to secure in our own salvation by persuading others

to become like us. We have forgotten that human beings are saved by grace, not by uniformity.

As an antidote to un-listening, and as an inspiration for the listening life, we can turn to Jesus. Of course Jesus talked a lot. We have records of his sayings and teachings, many of which had parallels in the teachings of other Jewish leaders of his day. But precisely because they had these parallels, it was not the power of his teaching alone that made him important to others. After all, he was not the first to say love your neighbor as yourself, and he was not the first to encourage a forgiveness of sins. Why, then, were some people drawn to him? What was his magnetism? Perhaps it was that he so vividly embodied the listening side of his love. When lepers and tax collectors and prostitutes were in his presence, they felt heard and understood. When people suffered from sadness and guilt, they wanted to be close to him, because he could absorb their sins and sufferings. They were drawn to him, not simply for what he said, but for a kind of radiance that came from his own inner condition. It felt good to be around him.

We need not exaggerate this radiance, claiming that it was utterly different in kind from others who glow. All of us know people who have a kind of energy or power that is contagious. They can “light up a room” when they walk into it; they can “brighten the corner” in which they stand. The radiance of Jesus was part of his full humanity, displaying the power of a heart transformed by divine love. Indeed, the gospels suggest that Jesus had two kinds of power, both of which are at the heart of the listening side of love: sympathetic inclusion and sympathetic attunement. Sympathetic inclusion is the capacity of a person to take in or receive many different kinds of experiences and events in a sympathetic way without being overwhelmed. It is the power share in the joys of many other people without being envious, and to share in their sorrows of others without hiding or running away. Sympathetic attunement is the capacity of a person to pay attention to particular people in the here-and-now – to this woman and this man and this child -- without being preoccupied by external agendas. If sympathetic inclusion is open to *all*; sympathetic attunement is open to *each*. Put together, they are open to each and all.

These two capacities – spaciousness and attention, inclusion and attunement – are magnetic in their power. People want to be in the presence of people who understand them and care for them. They want to be loved, not simply by having people do things for them, but by having people be with them, even if nothing can be done. We best remember that every human being whom Jesus healed died, and that he did not prevent their deaths. What attracted them to him, even if he momentarily protracted the length of their days, was his

witness. This is why Christians speak of Jesus as a window to the compassionate side of God. He is Emmanuel: God with us.

Of course, witness is not sufficient for a loving life. After all, capacities for being with others can be marshaled toward destructive ends. Many people in our world have been seduced by charismatic leaders who are endowed with great capacities for sympathetic inclusion and attunement, but who end up absorbing them into their own personal orbits. The charismatic leaders may not realize they are doing this. They may think they have the best of intentions. Still, through their charisma, other people are violated. Radiance has its dangers.

This is why it is so important that Jesus focused his own ministry, not on himself as an object of worship, but on a coming kingdom of God in which the will of God would be done on earth as it is in heaven. He knew that he was not the center of things but rather a window to that center, and that it was people's faith in that deeper center that made them whole. In Christianity this deeper center is God. If we imagine God as an uncreated light that is present throughout the world, then Jesus was not the light itself, but rather a magnifying glass through which it could be found. He tried to help people live from the center, to trust in the light, to walk in love, to live by faith. To live by faith is to live by listening.

By faith need not mean assent to creeds and doctrines concerning God and God's properties. People can live by faith and yet not be sure what they believe. Faith is a deeper and often pre-verbalized trust in a living spirit of healing and wholeness that is already at work in our world, quite apart from our own activities, that can be effective in the lives of others apart from one's mediations. Jesus had this trust and it helped him avoid the dangers of self-absorption. He trusted in his Abba.

For those of us who seek to follow Jesus, such trust is likewise necessary, not only when we act on behalf of others, but also when we listen to them. As we listen to others, we rightly recognize that the good qualities they already possess – their creativity and curiosity, honesty and humility, compassion and tenderness – are a result of their prior openness on their part to a divine spirit. The purpose of our listening, then, is not to bring them into our personal orbit, as if we were the sun and they our planets. It is not to make them become like us or even join our religion. Rather it is to help them become still more open to a spirit to whom, in their own way, they have already been open in some way. Christians call this spirit the Spirit.

Thus, the sin of un-listening is a sin against the Holy Spirit. It is a failure to trust in the presence of divine breathing in the world and in the goodness in the world that can arise from

its workings. Un-listening is un-faith. Conversely, the life of faith involves affirming the availability of the Spirit in the world and also the goodness of the world itself, insofar as it has been responsive to this spirit. This is one reason Jesus seems to have liked little children. It is not that they were evil people who had repented of their sins. Rather it is that they displayed that fundamental goodness which comes when, quite spontaneously, people are available to the beauty of the Spirit.

Protestant Christians sometimes have difficulty affirming life's goodness. Shaped by the idea that human beings are sinners needful of redemption, we often overemphasize that the world is filled with evil, and underemphasize that the world is filled with beauty. We focus on the cross but not creation. A healthy Christianity will recognize that responsiveness to the Spirit involves both sensibilities: honesty about evil and delight in goodness. The cardinal sign of a Christian must be, not simply her willingness to combating injustices in the world, but also her capacity to dance barefoot in the moonlight, alone and with others.

The receptive side of love, then, is open to this goodness. In our time the point is made most clearly in one of the most important books on love to be published by a Christian in the past fifty years: Love, Human and Divine by the Roman Catholic writer, Edward Vacek. Vacek builds upon two ideas that are introduced in the first chapter of Genesis and amplified in various periods of Christian history. One is that, no matter how fallen a human being may be, he or she is made in the image of God and thus worthy of our respect. The other is that the heavens and the earth, and each creature contained within them, are very good from God's point of view. Accordingly Vacek speaks of the receptive side love as a *reception of goodness*. The receptive side of love is moved and shaped by the value of the other.

Vacek proposes that this reception of goodness is applicable not only to friendship love and erotic love, but also to agape. This important to emphasize because agape is sometimes pictured as a kind of love that is unaffected by the other and which acts on behalf of the other quite apart from any merit on the other's part. To the contrary, says Vacek, agape is truly other-centered precisely because it is moved by the value of the other: "Agape is directed to the good of the beloved...We are not the reference point for the value-reality of the beloved. The beloved is. The beloved's actual and potential value is the good we care for." (176)

Three points must be quickly noted. The beloved need not be *human*; the goodness of the beloved need not be *moral goodness*; and the beloved can include *oneself*. Consider, for example, the kinds of non-human beings that can be loved as others. A dog or cat may be loved; a hill or river may be loved; a poem or song may be loved; and God may be loved. In

loving them we are touched by their goodness. In the case of the dog or cat, the goodness is not moral goodness, rather it lies in the beauty of their own being, quite apart from questions of morality. They are subjects of their own lives and somehow lovable in their subjectivity. In the case of a hill or river, the goodness is not simply that they are good for the various creatures who depend on them, but also that they shine forth with dynamics of their own that likewise have a kind of beauty, whether soft or fearful. And in the case of a poem or song, the goodness is not simply that they help make us better people by instructing us in moral truths, but rather that they reveal something about the depths of life itself, whether happy or sad. There are many kinds of goodness and there is thus much to love.

Moreover, the others whom we love need not be *external* to our selves. For example, when we love God, we are not simply loving something that is higher than us or above us or more than us. We are also loving something that is inside us as part of our deepest identity. We are saying “yes” to a potential we have for growing in wisdom and compassion, no matter who we have been in the past. As the Bible puts it, we are made in God’s image and we can grow into God’s likeness. Equally important, when we love dogs and cats and other more than human beings, we are not simply loving others who are external to our bodies, but also loving others who compose our own inner identity, because in our felt relationships with them we are partly formed by them. Not only God, but also the rest of the world, is inside us even as it is more than us. To love God, then, is to love our own capacity to include the rest of the world in a positive way, and thus grow in likeness to God.

Of course, our growth into divine likeness will never be complete, at least this side of the afterlife. Our love will always be finite or limited, because no human being can ever hope to love all that is lovable. To be sure, in moments of ecstasy we may find ourselves filled with a sense of oneness with the universe as a whole. We may share in its sorrows or its beauty. But this sense of oneness is not the whole of love. Oneness of this sort is sympathetic inclusion without sympathetic attunement. Thus, love must also include a sense of two-ness and three-ness and four-ness: that is, a sympathetic attunement to particular beings on their own terms and for their own sakes in their uniqueness. Perhaps this is what makes God “God.” Perhaps God is an inclusive consciousness who is not simply one with the universe, but also many with the universe. *Withness* includes a sense of each and all. If God is to be one with the universe, then God must be one with each of what the Chinese call the ten thousand things. God must be ten thousand, too.

We humans participate in the divine life by loving our neighbors? Who are they? Certainly, as just noted, they include other living beings. Plants and animals, hills and rivers,

are kindred travelers in the pilgrimage of life and we can be neighbors to them. Accordingly a healthy sense of Christian mission rightly involves an impulse to build communities that are ecologically sustainable in relation to the biosystems in which those communities are nested that that are compassionate toward the other animals with whom humans interact. Christian mission is rightly inspired by a sense of respect and care for the community of life. But our most intimate neighbors, or at least those we spend the most time with, are fellow human beings: friends and family members, neighbors and co-workers, people we know and also people whom we do not know, but with whom our own lives are implicated. If love includes being touched by the goodness of another, then we must be touched by their goodness, too. The goodness may be real or ideal. The goodness may consist of qualities possessed by the person, such as the person's humility or creativity or compassion; or the goodness may consist simply of that person's desire to be happy, combined with a recognition on the part of the listener that, with God's help, the person can become humble or creative or compassionate in the future, even as the person may lack these qualities in the present. In other words, the value of a person may be who the person is, or who the person can become, or both. A recognition of this value begins with listening.

The historical importance of such listening cannot be overemphasized. Hans Kung writes that there can be no peace in the world unless there is peace among religions. To this insight we can add that there can be no peace among religions unless there is listening within given religions, such that different people within a tradition listen to one another, and also listening between people of different religions. In other words, listen involves and requires ecumenism, and the point of departure for healthy ecumenism is listening.

Can the world's religions foster this kind of listening? One thing is clear. Each will need to foster listening in its own unique way. A Buddhist can interpret listening as a dimension of that loving-kindness which is essential to the Bodhisattva vow and then add that listening involves a subtle awakening to the interconnectedness of things. A Muslim can interpret listening as a way of paying attention to the signs of Allah that are forever present in the world around us, including the faces and voices of other people. A Jew can interpret listening as the subjective or affective side of I-Thou relations, amid which ordinary life is hallowed, and then add that even God becomes fully God when God's call is listened to. A Confucian can interpret listening as the inner dimension of that reciprocity by which we become fully human, and then add that listening begins in the family but is rightly extended to the neighborhood, the nation, other nations, the heavens and the earth. A Hindu can interpret listening as the subjective side of that deep tolerance – that acceptance and delight in diversity – which is Hinduism's gift to the world and then add that listening involves sight: that is, learning to see the divine in all beings.

To these religious approaches to listening, additional insights from diverse vocations can be added, showing that the listening side of love is by no means reducible to people with religious self-understanding or to the ostensibly religious life. A scientist can add that listening is a dimension of healthy science, since science requires a will to assent: that is, the will to let the facts speak for themselves. An artist can add that artistic creativity requires listening to the possibilities within wood, clay, metal, paint, sound, movement, and then responding to what avails itself. An architect can add that ecologically wise design involves listening to the materials available for use, to the social and natural ecology of the site where a building might be placed, to the contours of light and space, and to the imagined needs of people who might use the building. In many different ways, different kinds of people can say that, in the beginning, there must be listening.

How about the Christian? How might the Christian highlight listening as essential to religious life? If she is evangelical, she might begin by suggesting that in the beginning there was indeed a Word that was with God and that was God; and then propose that this Word was a deep receptivity, a bottomless receptivity, a vibrant and creative Listening. In the very beginning it was (1) a timeless Listening to the very possibility that there could be a world in the first place, accompanied by a decision to act on that possibility, helping to create the universe out of chaos.ⁱ In this mysterious moment, she might add, the mind of God was listening to the heart of God. It is not that God is divided into different pieces, but that there are different realities within God who listen to one another. The mind of God said “Everything is possible.” The heart of God said “I am lonely and need someone to love and be loved by.” The heart won the battle. After that, as the universe began to unfold, the Listening became (2) a more fluid and adaptive Listening to the joys and sufferings of the world as they occur, to the world that God loves, thus absorbing these joys and sufferings into the divine life moment by moment.ⁱⁱ Our hypothetical Christian might then propose that, as God receives influences from the world, the divine life then floods back into the universe, moment by moment, in the form of fresh possibilities – fresh callings – relevant to each new situation.ⁱⁱⁱ She would speak of these callings as the activity of God’s Spirit in the world.^{iv} Thus she would have the two persons in the Trinity: the Creator and the Spirit, the Listener and the Callings.

Turning to Jesus, she might then propose that the God and Spirit were revealed uniquely but not exclusively in the healing ministry of Jesus, whose own life was a ministry of listening: a moment-by-moment taking into account of new situations. And she might add that his moments of listening were followed by wise and compassionate response relative to what was needed at the time, in order to help reveal and bring about the kingdom of God, which was

itself, among other things, a beloved community: a kingdom of listening. In essence she would have developed the seeds of a Trinitarian theology, and also an account of the healing ministry of Christ, grounded in an emphasis on the listening side of love.

After articulating this theology, she might turn to discipleship, explaining that the heart of Christian life is to walk with Christ by sharing in his journey and extending his healing ministry in community with others who seek to do the same. The church, she might say, is best understood as a community of listeners. If asked what this extension might look like, she could quote the Benedictine writer, Joan Chittister, whose description of Benedictine spirituality speaks to all Christians:

Benedictine spirituality is the spirituality of an open heart. A willingness to be touched. A sense of otherness. There is no room for isolated splendor or self-sufficiency. Here all of life becomes a teacher and we its students. The listener can always learn and turn and begin again. The open can always be filled. The real discipline can always be surprised by God. (25)

In concluding her case for listening, our Christian might propose that, in our time, this capacity to be surprised by God takes the form of listening to people of other religions as they might add to Christian revelation and enrich a Christian's capacity to walk in love. Indeed she could say that, at best, evangelism is mutual evangelism, in which people of different traditions share and learn from one another, such that their roots in their own traditions can be deepened by an internalization of wisdom from other sources. "In the foreseeable future," she might say, "authentic Christian mission rightly includes, not the elimination of all other religions, but the promotion of friendship between religions." Thus she has set part of the agenda for a new kind of evangelism, grounded in a vow to listen.

Would any of this make sense to other Christians? Even to evangelicals? I do not know. But I do know that many of these ideas require further amplification, and this is what I will do in the remainder of this essay. The essay is divided into eight sections.

1. The Listening Side of Love.
2. The Metaphysics of Listening
3. God as Deep Listening.
4. Listening to God.
5. Listening to People of Other Religions.
6. Being Converted by People of Other Religions.

7. Mission in Process
7. Tools for Listening
8. The New Evangelical

A brief word about sources is in order, if they are not already very obvious. I write as an active member of a United Methodist Church, an oblate in a Benedictine monastery, a long-time participant in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, and a process theologian. Accordingly four ideas shape the essay: (1) the Wesleyan idea that the heart of Christian living is to walk in love; (2) the Benedictine idea that love includes and requires listening; (3) the Buddhist notion that the universe is a web of connections within which we humans are nodes, such that listening is an expression of, not an exception to, the very nature of things, (4) and the Whiteheadian idea that God – particularly in God’s consequent nature -- is an ongoing act of empathic listening, who is perpetually responsive to each new situation. In weaving these sources together, I am also influenced by a fellow Whiteheadian in the evangelical tradition, Thomas Oord, who defines love as involving two qualities: sympathetic response and intentional action. What Oord means by sympathetic response is close to what Vacek means by the reception of goodness. And both shape my own interpretation of listening. As I suggest shortly, listening is sympathetic reception of goodness with help from what Whitehead calls *experience in the mode of causal efficacy*.

The Listening Side of Love

We Christians are a gregarious people. When presented with problems of injustice and oppression, we like to solve them. When presented with questions of meaning and values, we like to answer them. We like to speak truth to power and preach the word. Often we are guided and even driven by a sense of purpose. Our gregarious spirit is manifest in the history of evangelism. Armed with the idea that we have good news for the world, we have recruited some thirty percent of the world’s population into our tradition, with more on the way. An observer from a less proselytizing religion – Judaism, for example -- might marvel that a social movement which began as a reform movement within Judaism has now grown so large, with many of its members seeking still more recruits into the fold. She might also marvel it has rarely occurred to us that some people might be happier without our intervention -- or that the living spirit of God might work in their lives without our mediation -- or that even as we might have good news for them, they might also have good news for us. She would note that our evangelism, like our image of love, has focused on unilateral action: on giving without receiving, on asserting without listening.

There are many kinds of listening. An advertising executive will listen to other people in order to manipulate their desires; a celebrity will listen to others in order to receive flattery; a torturer will listen to others in order to intensify their suffering. This is not what I have in mind when I speak of “listening” at its best. I have in mind what a Buddhist might call wise and compassionate listening. I mean listening that is guided, not by the aim of conquering or controlling, but by the aim of being with another in a sensitive way and of responding with wisdom and compassion, in light of the larger needs of the world.

In order to distinguish this kind of listening from other kinds, we might use three adjectives. We call it *empathic* listening, because, in relation to other living beings, it seeks to know how they experience the world, inasmuch as is possible, so that it might respond with loving-kindness. We might call it *mindful* listening, because it is undistracted and patient, alert and relaxed, present in the moment and present to its recipient. And we might also call it *deep* listening, because it builds upon the deeper levels of human experience, where humans sense their interconnections with others are affected by what they hear. The person who begins the listening is not precisely the person who finishes listening. Listening changes the listener.

My proposal is that this vulnerability is a form of love. Of course all of this depends on what is meant by love, and this is where the work of Thomas Oord is extremely helpful. Oord bypasses sharp distinctions between self-sacrificial love and self-fulfilling love, between other-regarding love and self-satisfying love, and offers an operational definition of love that can be helpful to the scientist as well as the theologian. To love, he says, *is to act intentionally, in sympathetic response to others (including God), to promote overall well-being*. Understood in this way, listening can be understood (1) as a sympathetic response, insofar as it consists of attunement to the objective conditions and subjective states of others; and (2) as an intentional action, insofar as, under some circumstances, it is an action one chooses to undertake when one could do otherwise. This sympathetic side to love includes sharing in the sufferings of others, but also in the joys; and sometimes it is the latter kind of sympathy – sympathetic joy – that is most difficult for us. A process approach to sympathetic response will emphasize both sides -- compassion and sympathetic joy – as essential to the loving life. And it will add that the very life of God, who is beyond jealousy, can be enriched by the joys of the world: the laughing of the baby and the frolicking of the colt. When we dance barefoot in the moonlight, God is dancing, too.

As Oord’s definition makes clear, though, there is another side of love: a more active side that responds to what is heard and felt by influencing others. Not only are we shaped by others; they are shaped by us, too. This active side can have different tonalities. For example,

it can sometimes be very gentle, not unlike the way Paul described love in First Corinthians. It can be “patient and kind” and “not arrogant” and “not irritable” and “not insisting on its own way.” Oftentimes this gentle tonality is best expressed, not by intervening in the lives of others, but by listening to them, by being with them. Thus listening can be a choice we make, something we decide to do.

And yet the active side of love can also include assertion and intervention, conflict and struggle. Socially-engaged Christians rightly emphasize that love can include struggle against harmful empires – the principalities of greed, hatred, and confusion -- that harm life around us. Spiritually-sensitive Christians will then add that love must often include what the prophet Muhammad calls the greater jihad: that is, struggle against one’s ego. Paul knew these inner jihads well: “I do not understand my own actions; for I do not do what I want; I do the very thing that I hate.” (Romans 7:15) Fundamentally these greater jihads are not struggles against an entity called an ego, but rather with habits of heart and mind that have made idols of legitimate psychological needs that have become false gods: needs to receive approval; to be in control; to be perceived as unique and special; to be right about other things by proving others wrong. Muslims are right to say that, in our time, many jihads are necessary. Consumer culture is a wholesale invitation to narcissism and self-absorption, against which we those who seek to follow Jesus – and those who are inspired by the Qur’an – must continually struggle. The enemies are within us.

But even this more agonized and agonistic side of love – the jihad side -- must begin with listening. If we are struggling against empires, we must listen to who they are and what they say; we must understand the conditions that lead them to develop as they have; we must understand their power brokers; and we must understand our own complicity in their power. Social analysis and self-examination are forms of listening. And if we are struggling against our egos, we must establish a dialogue with our own hearts – our own inner impulses -- so that we know what we ourselves are feeling. Even jihad must begin with listening

This could suggest that listening is merely a psychological process, devoid of cognitive content save some understanding of the subject listened to. A Buddhist will remind us that listening is not simply a psychological state or emotion, but also, in its own quiet way, an ontological realization. In moments when we truly listen to others, the sharp dichotomy between subject and object falls away, and we realize that we are more connected to others than we might otherwise have imagined. They are outside our bodies but inside our experience, which means that our own lives are composed of them in some way. Buddhists call this being composed by others inter-connectedness or inter-being. Christians call it

communion. The Catholic writer, Thomas Berry, speaks of the universe as a communion of subjects not a collection of objects. If this is true, then deep listening is an implicit awakening to this communion.

To use a word like communion should not suggest that we will always like what we hear. We can listen to a person's sadness and wish that person were not so sad; we can listen to a person's anger and wish that person were not so angry; we can listen to our own compulsions and wish they would go away. In relation to the rest of creation, we can listen to the wanton destruction of forests and wish it would cease; we can listen to the abuse of individual animals and wish it were not occurring; we can listen to the pollution of rivers and lament their demise. Thus listening, while including an acceptance of things as they are, even if very sad, combined with a hope for healing and growth.

In short, a life of listening – of hospitality -- includes attunement to actuality and possibility: to the way things are and to the way things can be in the future, given the way things are. The first aspect of listening is essential, and without it the second easily becomes misdirected. If we are trying to help others and we do not listen to them first; we project onto them possibilities for growth that are irrelevant to their lives. Typically these hopes pertain more to our own hopes for growth. We do unto others what we wish were done unto us, forgetting that they are different from us.

It should not be thought that, in allowing others to be others, we cease having power of our own. As noted in the introduction, listening exhibits two kinds of power, both of which are important to Christians. The first is the power on the part of the listener to absorb the experiences of others, to share in their joys and sufferings. We might call it the power of open-mindedness and large-heartedness: that is, of *sympathetic inclusion*. When we are in the presence of people whose hearts and minds can include the experiences and insights of others in magnanimous ways, we are deeply moved by them, but their power does not lie in what they do for us. It lies in who they are and how they can contain so much within their lives. For the Christian this is part of God's power. It is the power of the divine to be wide and inclusive: to be a space within which the whole of the universe, including its suffering, unfolds. This is that aspect of God which rightly evokes worship. Worship is not directed toward a particular being among beings, as if there were twenty five items in the universe and God were then the twenty-sixth. Rather it is directed toward an ungraspable space, a wide embrace, within which the universe unfolds. Worship is not clinging to the space, but letting go into it, in confession and praise, silence and sound.

The second power that listening reveals is the power to touch others in a more direct way. It is *sympathetic attunement*. When other people listen to us in caring and non-judgmental ways, we feel empowered by them in ways that enable us to say and feel things we might not otherwise say and feel. They hear us into speech. For many Christians, God has this kind of power, too. When people pray, they feel that in some way that they cannot understand, God is listening to them and understanding them. This sense of being heard and understood then enables them to pray more honestly. Just as we can be heard into speech by other humans and perhaps also from companion animals, we are also heard into speech by God, whose listening can be felt through them. From this feeling of being heard there emerges the poetry of the Psalms, the lamentations of Jeremiah, and myriad forms of music and art which are, in their way, creative gifts offered to the divine spaciousness. Understood with listening eyes, all art is prayer.

My general point, then, is that listening is both anthropological and theological, both human and divine. It is also cosmological, a feature of the universe itself. To this I turn.

The Metaphysics of Listening

In the paragraphs above I use the word listening as a synonym for what the philosopher Whitehead calls *experience in the mode of causal efficacy*,^v To be more precise, I have used it as a name for this kind of experience (1) as combined with other ways of experiencing the world and (2) as guided by the hope – the subjective aim – that the well-being of the other be realized on earth. The other ways of experiencing can be visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, kinesthetic, introspective, intellectual, imaginative, recollective, and anticipatory. When we gratefully enjoy good food prepared by loving hands, we are listening with our tongues; when we struggle to create more just societies that serve the poor, we are listening with our hope. With help from experience in the mode of causal efficacy, we can listen by dancing, seeing, remembering, hoping, playing, working, laughing, and crying.

The idea of experience in the mode of causal efficacy, then, is what distinguishes Whitehead from other philosophers. It distinguishes him from atomists, who view the universe in terms of radically discrete entities that are isolated from one another by clearly defined boundaries, and also from monists who view the universe in terms of a single substance to which all entities are reduced. Atomists view the human self as a skin-encapsulated ego cut off from the world by the boundaries of the skin, such that listening is a private act that occurs within the psyche, but not between psyches. And monists tend to view the self as a mere manifestation of an undifferentiated energy of which all things are expressions, in which case

listening is unreal, because the others to whom we might listen are indistinguishable from we the listeners.

Whitehead is neither an atomist nor a monist but rather a relational philosopher. For him, the most fundamental kind of relations are not abstract, as in the relation between two ideas that implicate one another, such as “good” and “evil” or “truth” and “falsehood.” Nor are they external, as in the relation of two items of visual perception – say that between a visually perceived chair and a visually perceived table – which are spatially related in some way, but not exactly dependent in any obvious sense. After all, we can move the chair but the table remains where it is. Rather, for Whitehead, the most foundational relations are experiential, because experience itself is a relation.

In Whitehead’s philosophy, to *experience* something is to prehend it, to feel its presence, to take it into account from a subjective point of view. To experience something in the *mode of causal efficacy*, then, is to feel its presence in such a way that the object that is felt is causally effective in one’s life. Imagine that you are visiting with a father who is suffering a great tragedy, say the death of his teenage son, and that as you visit with him, you sense his mood of sadness. From Whitehead’s point of view your sensing of his mood is an example of experience in the mode of causal efficacy. As you sit across from him, his sadness is “there” is in face and body, but also “here” where you are sitting, as part of your own experience of him. Where some might say that two things cannot be in the same place at the same time, your own experience shows that, at least in the case of moods such as sadness, they can indeed be in two places at once, albeit less vividly in you than in him. Your feeling of his feeling, such that his emotions are present and effective in you, is experience in the mode of causal efficacy. Whitehead believes that this kind of event – a feeling of the feelings of others – is the very glue that holds our universe together. Energy-events within the depths of atoms, no less than mental events in the lives of friends, are the building blocks of the universe, and they are together by virtue of their felt relations.

Thus Whitehead gives rise to what might be called a metaphysics of listening – a cosmology of receptivity – by virtue of which it is natural, not supernatural, to listen to others. It is because beings are present in one another by virtue of their felt relations that the universe is itself a *universe*: a network of actualities that are present in one another even as they are different from each other. In Whitehead’s words:

...every actual entity is present in every other actual entity. In fact if we allow for degrees of relevance, and for negligible relevance, we must say that every actual entity is present

in every other actual entity. The philosophy of organism is mainly devoted to the task of making clear the notion of 'being present in another entity.' (PR 50)

Of course the presence of one being in another is not always happy. Rape and murder, violence and domination, are ways in which some beings force themselves into the lives of others. To say that all things are connected is not to say that they are happily connected or rightly connected. Listening, then, is a distinctive way in which one being can be present in another, on the basis of which the connections are fulfilling in a creative and non-violent way. It represents a creative possibility in the history of human consciousness, on the basis of which ancient hatreds can be transformed into love. Listening does not require approval of the other; we can listen to others with an eye to who we hope they can become, rather than who they are. But it does require recognizing that their own feelings – even if hate-filled or delirious, even if despairing and suicidal – are part of one's own life. In the beginning is the listening.

God as Deep Listening

Even God must begin with listening. After all, God cannot respond to the cries of the world, or share in its joys, unless God first hears those cries and feels those joys. And if there was once a time when God existed all alone – when there was no universe as we know it but only the potentials in God's mind for there being a universe – then God had to listen to the potentialities.^{vi} In the beginning, even for God, there had to be a listening.

Trinitarian Christians take this a step further. They argue that God was never alone in quite the sense just noted, because from the very beginning God was three persons. If this is the case, then again there had to be listening in God, because the three persons had to listen to one another in order to know of the other's existence. Although non-Trinitarians and minimal-Trinitarians find it difficult to imagine the divine life as literally constituted by three distinct persons, there may nevertheless be symbolic meaning in the image if we take it as one way of affirming a listening side to God. If God is love and love involves listening to other actualities, then there had to be other actualities for God to listen to, even before the universe came into existence. The concept of Trinity can be understood as a symbolic way of saying that, whatever else God is, God is a deep listening.

Of course, it is important not to be too anthropomorphic. In saying that God listens we need not picture a male deity residing off the planet. In process theology God is One-embracing-many: a pervasive consciousness who is everywhere at once. God is closer to us than our own breathing and yet just as close to the most distant of galaxies on the other side of

the universe. The power of God is persuasive rather than coercive, because the universe has power of its own which even God cannot control.

Equally important, God is not a thing among things. In thinking of God, say process theologians, it is important to avoid what might be called *the fallacy of the self-contained subject*. This fallacy lies in assuming that the various entities of the universe – including even the divine reality – are akin to subjects of a sentence, which exists all by itself apart from relations to the world, to which predicates can then be added. God would be the subject and God's relations with the world would be the predicates. If the predicates are taken away, so the thinking goes, the subject would still exist. In process theology, this is not the way things are. God is not the subject of a sentence to which the predicate love happens to be attached. Rather God is the predicate itself. God is the Love and this love includes a listening. This means that the very essence of God includes deep receptivity, deep feeling, deep listening. Without the Listening, there would be no God.

What can it mean, then, to say that God is a deep listening and that the universe unfolds inside this Listening? Perhaps a helpful analogy can be found in mind-body relations. As the universe unfolds in its ongoing galactic history, this unfolding occurs inside the divine life in much the same way that bodily happenings within our own bodies unfold inside our lives. Just as what happens in our own bodies happens in us even as we are more than our bodies; so what happens in the universe happens in God even as God is more than God's body. If God listens to the cries of the world, then, this listening must be akin to the way in which we listen to what happens inside our own bodies. In physiological psychology the process of listening to what happens in one's own body is called kinesthesia or proprioception (from Latin *proprius*, meaning "one's own"). Sight, taste, smell, touch, and hearing are called exteroceptive senses, because they tell us about the world outside our bodies. By contrast proprioception is an interoceptive sense because it provides feedback solely on what is happening inside one's body. Divine listening is akin to proprioception. God feels the feelings of the sparrow and the child proprioceptively.

Of course, this, too, can seem anthropocentric, or at least biomorphic. If we assume that molecules and atoms and subatomic particles are the really real things of the universe, and that all living beings are made of them, then it can seem as if we are rendering unto God that which belongs only to living beings: namely, some capacity for taking into account other things from a subjective point of view. But in process theology the molecules and atoms and subatomic particles are themselves expressions of energy and energy itself is not lifeless. Rather it is creative and responsive, as evidenced in the fact that molecules and atoms respond to their

environmental conditions. What we call energy at the microscopic level is what we call feeling at the psychic level. To say that there is a consciousness everywhere is not to render unto God what happens to living beings alone. It is to render unto God what also happens to atoms and molecules. Everywhere we look, say process theologians, we see expressions of feeling. God, then, is not the absence of feeling, but the fullness of feeling.

This does not mean that God is all-powerful or all-knowing in traditional senses. In process theology the Womb of the universe knows what is possible in the future, but not what is actual until it is actual. Prior to the decisions of finite creatures as they emerge from and actualize the bottomless abyss of creativity, the future remains open, even for God. Moreover, in their freedom, finite creatures can actualize themselves in ways that even God cannot prevent. What makes God divine, at least for process thinkers, is not that God controls everything that happens and knows all things in advance. What makes God divine is that, whatever happens, God will be present in steadfast love: that is, in empathy and in continuous yet non-controlling action aimed at the world's well-being.

Thus the question emerges: How does God act in the world? And how might we humans be sensitive and responsive to that action? Process theology offers a systematic way of understanding God's continuous yet non-manipulative action in the world. It says that God is active in the world through indwelling and inviting possibilities which, if actualized, help bring forth beauty in the world. These possibilities do not come and go; rather they are always present as opportunities for richness of experience relative to the situation at hand. In biblical language, they are God's callings. And yet these callings are variable, perpetually adjusted to each new situation. God is not simply steadfast in love, but also omni-adaptive. This means that the life of discipleship, of walking with God, must be adaptive, too. The religious life involves and requires flexibility, an ability to hear the call of the moment and an ability to listen to God, whose own promptings can be different at different moments, relative to the circumstances at hand.

Listening to God

How, then, might humans listen to God? It should be clear from what has just been said that the word "God" does not name a particularized being who is one-among-many, but rather a wider compassion – a One-embracing-many – who is both within all living beings as their innermost lure toward wholeness and beyond all beings as a wisdom at the heart of the universe. Given this perspective, listening to God involves two things: (1) being sensitive to the indwelling possibilities that emerge in each situation, responding to their callings, and (2) trying

to imagine the world from God's perspective and listening to others from this wider point of view.

In Christianity, the first way of listening to God is called discernment. It can be a particular act in one moment of experience, or a more generalized habit of acting that occurs spontaneously over spans of time. If we are in the presence of a particular person who is suffering in an intense way, an act of discernment is needed. We will feel inwardly called to listen to that person and to respond to that person in one way or another. If truly responsive to God, this feeling called is an act of discernment. It is what Oord would call sympathetic response to God. Typically such acts occur through imagination and intuition. We place ourselves in the situation of others and feel their feelings; and we simultaneously listen for ideal possibilities for response. It is important to emphasize that discernment can be a communal process as well as an individual process, and thus that communities and nations can listen for, and respond to, divine callings. When this occurs, there can be a certain kind of spiritual osmosis amid which people share in one another's listening. Quaker meetings can sometimes have this quality of shared listening. Ideally, all corporate prayer in acts of worship will involve this kind of shared listening. One purpose of worship, then, is not simply to praise the Lord but to listen to the Lord, who so often speaks in the quieter recesses of the human heart, with sighs too deep for words. This helps prepare a person for ordinary life, in which the habit of discernment is needed. Moreover, in many situations, we ourselves cannot enter into the spirit of worship, even as we are in the presence of others who can. Through spiritual osmosis, their worship becomes part of us. Their prayers become our prayers; their courage our courage. Worship does not simply begin within individuals; it begins between them.

The habit of discernment is a less dramatic and self-conscious process of listening to God. It occurs day by day and moment by moment, as individuals or communities respond afresh to each new situation, trustful that there is a grace sufficient to each moment. This habit may be highly conscious or, as is more often the case, spontaneous and natural. People may be very discerning and not know they are discerning, and people may think they are discerning and not be very discerning. It is important to recognize that people need not have a clear idea of what they mean by God, or even if they believe in God, in order to be discerning. This means that people can respond sympathetically to God, and thus love God, without believing in God. And it means that people may believe in God quite fervently, but not sympathetically respond to God at all, in which case they do not love God. Loving God does not consist in entertaining an image of God in the mind's eye and then saying to that image "I love you." It consists in listening to God, sympathetically responding to God, through discernment and faith.

The second way of listening to God – imagining the world from God’s perspective – is part of faith. Faith means many things, but above all, for the Christian, it means trusting that there is an inclusive perspective in which all living beings are loved and to whom all human beings are accountable for their actions. This inclusive perspective may be conceived in different ways, some of which are more personal and some more transpersonal. Process theology points to a kind of middle ground. Some process theologians freely speak of God as “he” or “she” while others prefer more abstract terminology such as “the divine reality” or “the Adventure of the Universe as One.” Whether personal or transpersonal, this perspective can be imagined. One easy and common way is to imagine oneself at a spatial distance from the earth looking down upon it, seeing all things as distinct but interconnected. Another more difficult way is simply to sense that there is a wider mercy in which all things are included. Either way, this act of imagining is part of the life of faith. It trusts that there is a bigger picture – a wider and trustworthy horizon – in which the universe lives and moves and has its being. From this wider point of view, all living beings are not one-beneath-many or one-over-many but rather one-among-many, embraced the divine reality itself which is One-embracing-many. To love God, then, is to do our best to take on this larger perspective in our daily life and treat others in ways that respect their dignity, which includes their being different from us. It is to honor the dignity of difference.

Listening to People of Other Religions

I borrow the phrase “dignity of difference” from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who uses it in the title of his award-winning book, The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid a Clash of Civilizations (Continuum 2002). In this book Sacks proposes that Judaism offers Christians and Muslims a way of thinking about God that is quite congenial to process theology and that points in the direction of a greater respect for religious diversity. As Sacks explains:

Judaism has a structural peculiarity so perplexing and profound that though its two daughter monotheisms, Christianity and Islam, took much else from it, they did not adopt this: it is a particularist monotheism. It believes in one God but not in one exclusive path to salvation. The God of the Israelites is the God of all mankind, but the demands made on the Israelites are not asked of all mankind. There is no equivalent in Judaism to the doctrine that outside the Church there is no salvation. On the contrary, Judaism’s ancient sages maintained that ‘the pious of the nations have a share in the world to come.’ (53)

The challenge to the religious imagination, says Sacks, is to see God's image in one who is not in our image. This involves recognizing that people of other religions may have relationships with God through their religions that are independent of our relationships. Jews may have relationships with God, but so might Hindus and Buddhists. We then treat them as neighbors – we love them – not by imposing our will upon them in the name of God, but by allowing them what Sacks calls the *dignity of difference*.

Process theology offers a way of thinking about God that respects this dignity. It shows that respect includes allowing them to be who they are, trustful that God is active in their lives even apart from our mediations; that God listens to them on their own terms and for their own sake, even apart from considerations of whether or not they are Christian; and that in the interests of love, we Christians can do the same. Indeed, given that God is partly composed of the world, it follows that people of other religions are part of the very life of God, such that when we turn to them in loving ways, we simultaneously turn to God. In what follows I want to consider how this idea of “mutual turning” might apply to Christian relations to people of other religions and to mission.

In Introducing Theologies of Religion, Paul Knitter demonstrates that four attitudes toward other world religions have emerged in recent Christian history: a replacement model, a fulfillment model, a mutuality model, and an acceptance model. The replacement model says that Christianity possesses the only truth relevant to salvation and that, in the best of worlds, Christianity would be the only religion. The fulfillment model acknowledges that other religions contain wisdom relevant to salvation, but adds that this wisdom is completed or made whole by Christian revelation. The mutuality model says that Christians cannot know in advance what is saving for another person, but that they can enter into dialogue with people of other religions in a spirit of mutual enquiry, learning and sharing with others and trustful that wherever there is truth it is of God and from God, named or not.^{vii} And the acceptance model says that the whole question of transformative dialogue is a dubious aim, because religious people are inevitably shaped and limited by the cultural and linguistic practices of their traditions, which give them life and value, but which separate them from other traditions by unbridgeable differences.

Most people who are familiar with process theology place it in the mutuality camp. This is not simply because it advocates dialogue, but also because it typically disagrees with aspects of the other points of view. For example, contrary to the replacement model, process theologians believe that there is salvation in other religions and propose further that there are multiple forms of salvation, all of which are saving in their own way. Buddhists can be saved by awakening to the interconnectedness of all things; mystical Hindus can be saved by awakening

to the creative abyss of which all things are expressions; and Christians can be saved by awakening to God's love in Christ. Each of these realities – the sheer interconnectedness of things, the bottomless abyss of which all things are expressions, and the God who is Love – is ultimate in its own way. Whereas some might say that the truth is one while the paths are many; process theologians propose that the truths are many, the paths are many, and the salvations are many.

Contrary to the fulfillment perspective, then, process theologians do not believe that Christianity offers, by definition, the ultimate and only form of fulfillment. Whether or not a person's fulfillment lies in "becoming Christian" is best known in the intimacies of dialogue, in which a person shares the richness of his or her own experience. In the Christian's listening to that sharing, amid which the Christian herself can be changed, there is good news, quite apart from results. Moreover, such listening is truly possible. Contrary to the acceptance perspective, process theologians believe that there is more to human experience than its linguistic and cultural dimensions and that, even amid the differences in culture and language, people can understand one another and learn from each other by means of empathy (feeling the feelings of others) and imagination (taking on the perspective of others). Thus it seems, almost by default, that process theology embodies a mutuality approach.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that many process theologians find value in the other approaches. For example, from a process point of view, especially one shaped by evangelical sensibilities, the replacement model is rightly sensitive to the centrality of scripture in Christian life; to the primacy of Jesus for Christian experience; to the reality of evil in human life; to the fact that religion can itself be a source of tragedy in the world; to the human need for help from God; and to the fact that, in some circumstances, people can be saved or made whole by converting to Christianity from other traditions. These themes are emphasized by one or another process theologian.

Similarly, from a process point of view, the fulfillment perspective rightly insists that, for some people, the salvation known through Jesus Christ can help complete or fulfill the salvations already known in other religions. For example, in his now classic *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism*, John Cobb proposes that the salvation known by Pure Land Buddhists through faith in Amida can be deepened by recognizing that Amida's compassion was revealed uniquely, but not exclusively, in Jesus of Nazareth. (Cobb, 119-159)

Analogously, from a process point of view the acceptance perspective rightly emphasizes that, despite commonalities within human experience based on our common evolutionary heritage, human beings are profoundly shaped by the cultural and linguistic circumstances of their lives such that, under certain circumstances, the most appropriate mode of inter-action between people of different religions is an honest acknowledgment of unbridgeable differences. This means, among other things, that while a concern for mutual transformation through dialogue is *often* appropriate, it is not *always* appropriate.

In short, the process approach to world religions is a hybrid approach with many potential variations. One can easily envision Evangelical Process approaches that lean in the direction of replacement theory, at least with respect to themes such as the primacy of scripture and the centrality of Jesus. One can also envision Catholic Process approaches that lean in the direction of fulfillment theory, at least with respect to emphases on the pre-conceptual presence of saving grace in all human life, which is then fulfilled in Christ. And one can easily imagine Post-Modern or Post-Colonial Process approaches that lean in the direction of acceptance theory, at least with respect to the importance of acknowledging the radical otherness – the strangeness of the stranger – amid which respect for strangers, rather than a presumed sharing in their experiences, is highlighted.

Mission in Process

Still, in the last analysis, the process approach is a mutuality approach, and not simply by default but by virtue of its positive affinities with the mutuality perspective. First, the mutuality perspective is open to the possibility that other people may not need the mediation of Jesus in order to find salvation appropriate to their lives. Process thinkers agree, and then add that there are different kinds of salvation, such that, in principle, a person can participate in two or more kinds of salvation simultaneously. If a Buddhist is saved through awakening to the sheer interconnectedness of all things, and a Christian is saved by recognizing God's love for his life and the world, it is possible – and explained in the next section – that his own salvation can be enriched by the salvation that comes in Buddhism and also that a Buddhist can be enriched by the salvation that comes through Christianity. With help from Christianity, a Buddhist can become a better Buddhist; and with help from Buddhism, a Christian can become a better Christian.

Second, the mutuality perspective highlights more deeply an aspect of God which seems neglected in the other points of view: namely the presence of the Spirit of God throughout the world. Process thinkers believe this spirit is present in all people and in all living beings, albeit

in ways appropriate to their particular circumstances. Thus, along with other mutualists, process thinkers trust that the Spirit has inspired people of other religions to awaken to certain truths from which Christians can learn, even as Christians have awakened to truths from which they can learn. Indeed, from the perspective of process theology, the Spirit is present in human life as a lure toward wisdom, which means that wherever there is wisdom it is of God and from God, thus named or not. This does not mean that the many religions are wise about the same things. Religions can be “right” about different things, all of which are religiously important.

Third, the mutuality perspective shows that evangelism can be two way: that even as people of other religions may be enriched by the wisdom of Christianity, so Christians can be enriched by the saving wisdom of other religions. This enrichment can take three forms: intellectual conversion, moral conversion, and attitudinal conversion.

By *intellectual conversion* I mean a widening and deepening of intellectual horizons through lessons gained from other religions. An example might be ways in which Christian understandings of love can be deepened by lessons from Buddhism concerning the mutual immanence of all things in each other. Buddhism can help Christians realize that what has been said about the divine reality – namely that it consists of three persons who are present in each other even as they are distinct from one another – might also be said of the universe as a whole. With help from Buddhism, a Christian might think of the whole universe, and not simply of God, in Trinitarian terms.

By *moral conversion* I mean the application of lessons learned from other religions in practical ways that help Christians love in Oord’s sense of love. An example might be ways in which, with help from Buddhist meditation, Christians do indeed enter more deeply into the listening side of love, because meditation itself helps a person become more patient and less prone to speak before listening. Lessons from ecologically sensitive forms of Buddhism might also help Christians better realize that the whole of life, and not human life alone, is worthy of ethical respect.

By *attitudinal conversion* I mean a conversion of desire and emotion, such that one actually feels the world in a different way. Here again, the dialogue with Buddhism is instructive, because it can help the Christian more deeply feel that life unfolds moment-by-moment, such that we can love things deeply but not cling to them when they pass away. This lesson might deepen a Christian’s capacity for love, by helping her realize that, sometimes, love requires non-attachment, letting go, in order for its fruits to be born.

None of these conversions would mean that the Christian has become a Buddhist. One value of a process approach is that it pictures the Christian life itself as a process of ongoing conversion, of being changed and transformed by God and by the world, when such change and transformation is in the interests of love. Being converted by people of other religions can be an important part of this ongoing conversion. This does not mean, though, that a process approach to mission forbids an impulse to convert others. Indeed, it can be open to the possibility that some people may surely need to be converted by Christianity – or more specifically by establishing a relationship with Christ – in order to be more fully saved. For process thinkers salvation is not all or nothing; it can occur by degrees. A person can be saved in some ways but not in others; and she can be saved in some moments but not in others. If someone asks us if we are saved, we best say: “Sometimes and in some ways; and you might want to ask others about me, too, because sometimes they have better perspective.” This spirit of openness to different kinds and degrees of salvation provides flexibility to a process approach to mission, such that the Christian evangelist must listen before speaking. In what follows, then, I outline a process approach to mission grounded in the notion of listening.

Mission as Listening to God

For most Christians, the word mission suggests reaching out to others in love, inspired by the good news of Jesus Christ. A process approach will emphasize that this reaching out must begin, moment by moment, with a receptivity to the way that God reaches in to human beings. At its best this receptivity is discernment as described above: it is listening to the call of God in human life. The reaching out then emerges from the listening. This means that what mission means in one era may not be what it means in another era. Mission is responsive to different times and different situations. Like the life of discipleship, mission is not a precise path to be followed by each generation, but rather a way of walking that can accommodate different paths.

Mission as Creative Cooperation with God. The heart of Christian mission in any age is to cooperate with the divine reality in helping bring about the “reign of God” in the world, understood as a state of affairs in which the aims and animation of God are realized “on earth as it is in heaven.” Openness to this reign begins with being aware of existing situations on earth and of hopeful possibilities for responding to them, both of which are forms of listening to God. This listening can and should be informed by worship, a study of scripture, and prayer, the aims of which are to help people grow into lives of love, understood as sympathetic response and intentional action. The live of love involves habits of the heart (humility, forgiveness of enemies) that reverse more ego-centered ways of living; and it likewise involves certain communal relationships (shared suffering, freedom from excessive attachment to blood

relationships, welcoming the stranger) that reverse dominating and agonistic forms of relationship. Above all it involves discernment, both individual and communal.

Mission as Part of the Larger History of Life on Earth. As a regulative ideal by which human behavior can be guided, the reign of God is not a return to a primordial evolutionary past, but rather a new direction in the history of human consciousness and activity within the context of evolution. It is not a return to the Garden but rather a seeking of the New Jerusalem. It may have parallels in other wisdom traditions, albeit named in different ways. It is evolutionary in several ways. It presupposes earlier ways of living (ego-centered and tribal) that may have been necessary in earlier times of human development; it builds upon rather than reverses the evolutionary past; and it seeks to participate in the deeper, creative rhythms of the earth itself. To be specific, Christian mission is best understood as an ongoing process, capable of changing in its own self-understanding, that builds upon the Axial age of human consciousness, when humans began to think in more individualistic and stratified terms.

Mission as Personal-Political-Ecological. Cooperating with God's lure toward the reign of God has three sides: (1) a personal side, which pertains to how Christians treat others on a face-to-face basis, amid which Christians treat others with compassion and humility; (2) a political side which is guided by the desire to help build multi-religious communities that are socially just, ecologically sustainable, non-violent, participatory, and spiritually satisfying for all; and (3) an ecological side which seeks to affirm the intrinsic value of all forms of life and live with, not against, the rest of creation. Given the ecological side of mission, questions concerning the relationships between religions, and relations between humans and the earth, cannot be separated. The reality of environmental crises on the one hand, and the shared sense that other forms of life have beauty that help complete human life, form a basis for inter-religious dialogue.

Mission as Creative. A recognition of the divine reality as deep listening requires overcoming the fallacy of grammatical projection, which imagines the divine on the analogy of a subject to whom predicates are then added. If authentic Christian mission is to unfold in the twentieth century, it needs to be enriched by new ways of speaking, by poetry, so that our very ways of thinking are stretched beyond the limitations rendering unto God that which belongs to grammar. More generally, mission is rightly guided by a freedom to seek and discover new ways of speaking, thinking, and acting, which are themselves relevant to new situations. In the twenty-first century, for example, mission will include new media – film, for example – that were unavailable in the past, and which may themselves be perceived as new sources of continuing

revelation. A process approach to mission will be open to possibilities of celluloid and musical and kinesthetic revelation as complements to, and sometimes substitutes for, verbal revelation.

Mission as Dialogical. In light of religious diversity, the personal and political sides of mission involve the promotion of friendship between people of different religions. Such friendship can take the form of face-to-face friendships, when Christians befriend people of other religions in the workplace, in the neighborhood, and other civic sectors. But it can also take the forms of a more generalized respect for people of other religions, even when no face-to-face contact is possible. The latter helps create a culture of peace in local communities, and it involves a willingness on the part of Christians to undertake critical yet sympathetic readings of other religious traditions.

Tools for Dialogue^{viii}

The emphasis on dialogue with other world religions requires that Christians listen to people of other religions and that they be willing to learn from them, to be converted by them. This does not preclude under some circumstances a willingness to encourage the others to be converted as well. But the listening can itself be enriched by tools for listening that emerge from a process approach to other religions. These are best understood as interpretive tools which, under some circumstances, can help Christians understand what is important to people of other religions. These tools can be used in the context of local Christian settings where the world religions are being studied and also in the context of the college classroom. The tools are, in effect, three proposals to keep in mind as dialogue is undertaken: (1) that the world religions reveal four faces of the sacred, (2) that the world's religions emphasize three kinds of truth, and (3) that the world's religions emphasize two kinds of learning.

Four Faces of the Sacred. The word sacred is used in different ways. Some use it to refer to a domain of reality separate from the profane, or the world of ordinary experience. Others use it to refer to whatever is most important in a given religious tradition, whether identical with, or different from, the world of ordinary experience. If we use the word sacred in the latter sense, then from a process point of view there are at least four faces of the sacred: that is, four *ultimate realities* to which different religions have awakened, each of which is irreducible in its own way: (1) the creative abyss from which all things emerge moment-by-moment; (2) the interconnectedness of all things; (3) the present moment of experience; and (4) the divine reality, understood as a reservoir of pure potentiality (the primordial nature) and a boundless empathy (the consequent nature). In mystical traditions, the ultimate to which mystics awaken is the creative Abyss, a bottomless well-spring of creativity, neither good nor

evil in itself, which is manifest in everything that happens. In indigenous traditions the ultimate is the community of life itself, as experienced in relations of kinship and community. In Zen Buddhism and certain forms of this-worldly mysticism, the ultimate is the present moment of experience, understood as the primary “place” where the sacred is discovered. And in many theistic traditions the ultimate is the divine reality, variously called “God” or “Adonai” or “Vishnu” or “Amida.”

Three kinds of Truth. The world’s religions typically yield three kinds of truth, all of which can be listened for: (1) truthful belief, which consists of ideas that illuminate one or another dimension of the way things are; (2) truthful awareness, which consists of feelings which are responsive to, and illuminate, the way things are; and (3) truthful living, which consists of various ways of living with integrity, each of which has its own kind of sincerity and beauty. Often when Christians engage in dialogue with people of other religions, we are interested almost exclusively in truthful belief, whereas it may be that various forms of truthful awareness and truthful living are what is most important to the others. A sensitivity to the fact that “truth” can be in what a person feels and does, and not simply in what a person believes, can widen a Christian’s horizons of appreciation and also give rise to fresh understandings of Christianity.

Two Kinds of Learning. When Christians engage in dialogue with people of other religions, they can be open to the possibility that though they (the Christians) might disagree with the ideas of the other person, they may nevertheless find something true in the awareness and ways of living of the other person, and they can be converted by these truths even as they remain firm in their theological convictions. A Christian engaged in dialogue with a member of an indigenous tradition, for example, may be moved by the feelings of kinship with other creatures that is part of many indigenous traditions, finding great truth in the feelings. The truth of a given religion may be discovered not only from mind-to-body but also body-to-mind. This means that inter-religious dialogue may best proceed not simply by sitting at a table of dialogue engaging in discussions concerning truth, but in undertaking common actions aimed at reducing suffering and promoting well-being, amid which the dialogue partners may themselves be converted by one another.

The New Evangelical

Among Christians, students of theology have been least prone to take seriously the two kinds of learning and the three forms of truth. We theologians have often tended to reduce Christian life to the practical application of firmly held beliefs, in which case the listening side of love, including the active listening that occurs through joint undertakings of community

development, is neglected. And we have assumed that truth is primarily a matter of truthful belief, not truthful living or truthful awareness, in which case we have neglected the latter as merely psychological or merely practical.

Moreover, if we are evangelical theologians, we are profoundly preoccupied with the question of salvation and our focus in relation to other religions naturally concentrates on the question “Who is saved?” The very idea that there can be multiple forms of salvation can be threatening. I close this essay, then, with a consideration of the possibility that theologically-interested evangelicals, deeply concerned with beliefs concerning salvation, might be enriched by the ideas of the previous section and by the process or Whiteheadian approach to dialogue. Of course, despite my own approach to dialogue, which leans in the mutuality direction, many evangelicals advocate what Knitter calls replacement theory. They are exclusivists, inasmuch as they believe non-Christians are excluded (by their own volition) from the only salvation that truly counts: namely, that revealed in, and accomplished by, Jesus. Christians who think this way are going to be part of any foreseeable future. Can exclusivists enter into dialogue with people of other religions, even as they remain exclusivist? I hope so. My proposal is that Christian exclusivists can indeed enter into meaningful dialogue with people of other religions, allowing themselves to be converted even as they continue to claim that the salvation that comes through Jesus is unique and salvific for the whole of humanity.

As noted earlier, Paul Knitter situates many evangelical Christians within the replacement model, of which he says that there are two varieties: (1) the total replacement theorists, who believe that there is no value in other religions and that Christianity should replace all of them, and (2) the partial replacement theorists, who propose that there is genuine wisdom in other religions, but that salvation comes only through faith in Jesus Christ. Knitter is sympathetic to partial replacement evangelicals, because they, like he, are interested in inter-religious dialogue. Citing Harold Netland, a respected Evangelical theologian, Knitter explains that a partial replacement evangelical Christian can, in the words of Netland, “take the other person seriously as a fellow human being” and approach that person in a spirit of “humility, sensitivity, and common courtesy.” (Knitter, 40-41) The dialogue can concern various topics:

- The nature of dialogue itself;
- The content and practices of their respective faith traditions, thus correcting errors in the ways they conceive one another;
- Common social, environmental and political concerns;
- The nature and means of salvation.

In discussing the nature and means of salvation, however, the partial replacement Christian cannot not be open to the possibility that salvation comes by means other than Jesus Christ. Instead this Christian is committed in advance to the idea that salvation comes through Jesus Christ. This means that, when it comes to salvation, he or she must enter into holy competition: that is, a verbal debate concerning what truly is the nature and means of salvation. The hope of the partial replacement Christian is that the other person will be persuaded, with help from the Holy Spirit, to reject the religious tradition of his or her existing condition and become a Christian.

Of course much hinges on what is meant by salvation. By salvation let us mean what Knitter means: not simply a happy state of affairs after death (though it can be that) but also an experiential fulfillment of the deepest yearnings of the human heart in this very life. Given this understanding of salvation, we should note that, amid holy competition, partial replacement Christian will often assume, as might his or her dialogue partner in other religions, that there is only one legitimate form of final salvation. The debate concerns who is right about such salvation: that is, about what it is like and how it is obtained.

We should also note that, amid holy competition, a certain possibility highlighted by process theologians is neglected. It is that there may be *multiple kinds of salvation*, each valuable in its own way, and that there may be *multiple ultimate realities*, around which these respective salvations are centered. This might mean, for example, when the partial replacement Christian describes the kind of salvation that comes through accepting God's grace as revealed in Jesus, and the Buddhist describes the kind of salvation that comes through awakening to the absolute interconnectedness of all things, they might be describing two different, but complementary forms of salvation, respectively centered around two different realities: the divine reality on the one hand and the sheer interconnectedness of all things on the other.

In short, with help from process theology, perhaps partial replacement Christians enter into dialogue more deeply, being open to the possibility that, in listening to a person of another tradition, they might be learn about another kind of salvation and another ultimate reality which is different, but not necessarily competitive, with his or her own. They can recognize that this learning, a learning that comes through deep listening, can be a conversion of sorts. It can be an intellectual conversion, amid which intellectual horizons have been expanded; it can be a moral conversion, amid which insights are internalized from another tradition that deepen the Christians capacities for love. It may also be an attitudinal conversion, amid which they internalize the moods of other religions: the sense of submission in Islam, the sense of struggle

in Judaism, the sense of inner peace in Buddhism, the respect for the earth in indigenous traditions. These conversions can occur without violating the partial replacement conviction that a certain kind of salvation – which for the partial replacement Christian is the most important kind of salvation – comes only through Jesus Christ.

For my part, I cannot go this route. I find myself believing that even the salvation received through Jesus can be received by people in different ways, not all of which require believing in Jesus. Somehow this salvation concerns a sense of reconciliation with God and the world, in this life and the next, if the latter exists. An interesting feature of process thought is that, at least for some process thinkers, there may indeed be life after death, which can itself involve a continuing journey of spiritual development. We might playfully imagine that some development would involve some Buddhists learning that their own Buddhism is fulfilled by God's revelation in Jesus; some Christians recognizing that their own reception of God's revelation in Jesus is fulfilled in Buddhism; perhaps some recognizing that it is fine for there to be multiple salvations, which give new meaning to the idea that in God's house there are many rooms. All is speculative. What is clear, though, is that on this planet there are now many religions, and that, if there is to be peace in the world, there must be peace between religions. The hope is that evangelical Christians, with all their power, can be vessels of this peace. My aim in this paper has been to show how, with help from process thought, evangelicals can enter into dialogue with people of other religions, which sometimes takes the form of holy competition and sometimes of mutual conversion, but which always bears witness to the listening side of love.

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ⁱ Whiteheadians speak of this as the primordial nature of God. Here the divine Listening consists of conceptual prehensions of eternal objects that dwell within the primordial nature.

ⁱⁱ Whiteheadians speak of this as the consequent nature of God. Here the divine Listening consists of physical prehensions of feelings of actualities in the universe, such that those feelings become part of the divine life.

ⁱⁱⁱ This would be what some Whiteheadians call the superjective nature of God: that side of God which floods back into the world upon receiving its ongoing influence, primarily through the provision of initial aims.

^{iv} Whiteheadians speak of these callings as initial aims, or, more precisely, as the initial phase of the subjective aim of each moment of concrescence.

^v To be even more specific, if readers include students of the technical points in Whitehead's philosophy, I have in mind (1) hybrid physical prehensions, when the listener is attentive to the mental states of other human beings and animals, as those states are parts of their dominant occasions of experience and (2) simple physical prehensions when the listener is responding to material and energetic presences in the world. The latter type may be mediated by intervening physical-chemical media; the former can, in principle, be forms of attention that do not require such mediation.

^{vii} See Knitter, Understanding Theologies of Religion. The four models are amply described throughout Knitter's book.

^{viii} See McDaniel, Gandhi's Hope, for a more extensive presentation of these various tools for dialogue.