

## *Living the Rhetoric of Dialogue: An Ecumenical Challenge*

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### **Abstract**

“Dialogue is a manner of acting, an attitude; a spirit which guides one’s conduct. It implies concern, respect, and hospitality toward the other. It leaves room for the other person’s identity, modes of expression, and values. Dialogue is thus the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission, as well as of every aspect of it, whether one speaks of simple presence and witness, service, or direct proclamation” (Code of Canon Law, can. 787.1).

Inspired by Raimundo Pannikar’s *The Rhetoric of Dialogue*<sup>1</sup>, this paper is an attempt to gather thoughts and reflections on interfaith dialogue. Ecumenical Theology challenges everyone to tread the path leading to universal sense of brotherhood. People of goodwill, regardless of religious affiliation could very well work together for a common purpose, and have mutual commitment to the people’s struggle for justice and peace, likewise be in solidarity with one another in matters pertaining to protection of human rights and sublime respect for human dignity. Basically, the focus of this presentation shall be on the essence of dialogue and the way it could be done. There shall be an exposition of presuppositions to and theological bases of an inter-religious dialogue as well as a discussion of its viability and attitudinal constraints. The following precepts shall likewise be reflected upon: right to religious freedom; relationships of respect and love; dialogue of salvation; positive and constructive dialogue; universal presence of the Holy Spirit, dialogue of life and fruits of dialogue among others.

Keywords: interreligious dialogue, mutual respect, human dignity

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## Introduction

“The four higher religions that were alive in the age in which Toynbee was living were four variations on a single theme, and that, if all the four components of this heavenly music of the spheres would be audible on earth simultaneously, and with equal clarity, to one pair of human ears, the happy hearer would find himself listening, not to a discord, but to a harmony.”<sup>2</sup>

Ecumenism and interfaith dialogue are instruments that shall help create such a harmony. Ecumenical Theology is one of the many avenues and disciplines that could pave the way to deeper insights, wider horizons and better perspective. Opportunities and experiences of shared reflections and interaction with brothers and sisters from other faith traditions do help a lot in discovering the praxis of theological discussions. Such experiences when welcomed with genuine openness can only be personally and spiritually enriching. It will be affirmed that men and women, regardless of race and religion could very well work together for a common purpose, and have mutual commitment to the promotion of common good, and be in solidarity with one another towards the universal quest for justice and peace.

This paper explores the possibilities of genuine dialogue. There is no intention of discussing actual dialogues that might have transpired nor describe other religions or Christianity.

At the end, the researcher shall include some reflections on and reactions to the challenge of a dialogue as presented by several proponents.

## Dialogue in Perspective

Etymologically, the word *dialogue* simply means “conversation,” although in Western Intellectual history its dominant meaning has been “a piece of work cast in the form of a conversation”<sup>3</sup>. Eliade (1987) presents various types of dialogue:

- a) *Discursive Dialogue* (previously debate or discussion) involves meeting, listening and discussion on the level of mutual competent intellectual inquiry.
- b) *Human Dialogue* on the existential foundations and assumes that it is possible for human beings to meet purely and simply as human beings, irrespective of the beliefs that separate them.
- c) *Secular Dialogue* stresses that where there are tasks to be performed in the world, believers in different creeds may share in a program of joint action, without regard to their respective convictions.
- d) *Spiritual Dialogue* does not focus on debate and discussions, but prayer and meditation; in recent years it has given rise to a considerable number of ashrams and meditation centers in East and West alike.

Dialogue is also referred to as a sustained conversation between parties who are not saying the same thing and who recognize and respect the differences, the contradictions and the mutual exclusions, between their various ways of thinking. The object of this dialogue is understanding and appreciation, leading to further reflection upon the implication for one’s own position of the convictions and sensitivities of the other traditions.<sup>4</sup> It could also mean the exchange of experience and understanding

between two or more partners with the intention that all partners grow in experience and understanding.<sup>5</sup>

## **Interreligious Dialogue**

Interreligious dialogue, according to the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (2002), includes simply living as good neighbours with those of other religions, or working together in matters of common concern, such as in issues of justice, peace, the integrity of creation and so forth. It includes a willingness, according to circumstances, to try to understand better the religion of one's neighbours, and to experience something of their religious life and culture. In other words, dialogue is above all a frame of mind, an attitude.

## **Forms of Dialogue**

Citing the 1984 document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (2010) speak about different forms of interreligious dialogue.

- a) The dialogue of life, where every person recognizes the beauty of life, where people openly accept to live in and foster the genuine spirit of brotherhood and building community, sharing their hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, their human frailties and strengths; all believing in the basic respect for the gift of one's life.
- b) The dialogue of action, in which Christians and others collaborate for humanitarian causes, upholding the rights of the last, the lost and the least, promoting holistic and sustainable development and working for the liberation of the destitute from the bondage of poverty, ignorance and any form of oppression.
- c) The dialogue of theological exchange, where acquisition of knowledge is fuelled by the desire to serve mankind and glorify the Transcendent, where theologians seek to deepen their understanding and appreciation of their respective religious beliefs, traditions, values and practices inherent and important to various faith communities.
- d) The dialogue of religious experience, where persons, regardless of affiliation open their doors to welcome guests who are willing to share the same sentiments and experience of the Divine; where persons, convinced about their own religious traditions, are willing to be exposed in their affective domains, sharing their spiritual thoughts and narratives, enriching each other with ways of communicating, praying, meditating and encountering the Deity.

**The challenge of difference**, people that decide to engage in any form of dialogue are prepared and mature enough to know and understand that they are meeting followers of another religion therefore, these followers definitely differ in many facets and convictions. Genuine dialogue can only take place in an atmosphere of mutual love and respect. The challenge of difference then is subsumed to an attitude of openness and joy in meeting brothers and sisters.

## **The Challenge of Pluralism**

Pluralism has been a byword in the world of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. Pluralism is both a gift and a challenge. A gift that offers opportunities to creative discoveries, learning and growing together; a challenge that poses questions to one's

own convictions, a challenge that invites crucial introspection. Pluralism paves the way to co-existence among diverse cultures, beliefs, religions, philosophies and worldviews. Guided by these, the Catholic Church in particular must be at the frontline in promoting respect for pluralism, in upholding everyone's right to freedom from coercion and any form of persecution and prejudice and defend the universal value of common good.

### **The Church's Call to Dialogue**

The Church is mandated to spread the good news of God's love and offer of salvation. The Church then has the moral obligation to reach out to all brethren across borders, race and language. The Church believes in the unity of human race, that we all share but one life and every human being aspires to live in peace and harmony. On this premise, the Church continues to call everyone to dialogue, especially recognizing that the Truth of God's love is found in the hearts of men and women, holiness is in all religions and the spirit of goodness transcends differences in doctrines and practices.

### **Dialogue and the Evangelising Mission of the Church**

Interreligious dialogue is part and parcel of the Church's evangelising mission. The mission of bringing the Good News of Christ's love and offer of salvation can only be achieved when there is authentic speaking and listening, when communication takes place and dialogue becomes the intrinsic attitude.

### **Foundational Teachings**

(Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales, 2002)

#### The Right to Religious Freedom

By virtue of every human being's innate dignity, no one may be coerced to embrace or defy a faith tradition. The right to religious freedom must be upheld at all times and across all places in the world.

#### Relationships of Respect and Love

All men and women, across nations and cultures share a universal understanding and appreciation of mutual respect and love. Each one has the basic desire and capacity for these basic values.

#### Eagerness for Dialogue

Men and women of goodwill, across religions can and must manifest the desire to pursue interreligious dialogue for the sake of world peace and harmony among nations.

#### Dialogue of Salvation

Interreligious dialogue is grounded on the premise that the Almighty embraces all His children and desires that each one receives the gift of salvation, meant for all.

### Positive and Constructive Dialogue

Any dialogue may come to fruition when the motivations and strategies are positive and constructive, when the goal is to build bridges and not to put up higher walls of division, when diversity is seen as an opportunity to unite and not an invitation to attack.

### Dialogue and Proclamation

Proclamation of God's transcendent goodness and providence must break the barriers of pride and conceit, God's love must overrule bias and prejudice that cause much more hatred and division, and the same powerful and salvific love must open the hearts of men and women to seeing the beauty and goodness in every human being.

### Universal Presence of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is not confined in one religion or race. The power of the Holy Spirit is made visible when love, compassion, respect for human dignity, common good, justice and peace are prevalent. All genuine religions believe in and foster these universal manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

### Dialogue of Life

Each person has just one life. This life has to be respected, nurtured and protected. Before even getting into interreligious dialogue, persons can simply come as proponents of one beautiful life. A life that is a gift and a gift becomes as such only when shared.

### Collaborating with Other Religions

On issues of global warming, peaceful coexistence, respect for human dignity, eradicating poverty, active non-violence, education and health—all religions are one in wanting what is best for humankind. These are stepping stones to working in solidarity with other religions, for which there is no reason not to collaborate nor be indifferent.

### Dialogue must Continue

Dialogue is a process, more than an output. Certain results might be achieved at a certain stage, yet the process will have to be sustained. The goals of dialogue are not just cognitive constructs but more of attitudinal expressions and of behavioural manifestations. Hence, leaders must take into account a very crucial dialogue in words and actions, providing wisdom and accompaniment, support and appreciation of efforts no matter how simple they may be.

## **Presuppositions of a Dialogue**

Paul Knitter (1985) advances three general presuppositions that may create conditions for the very possibility of inter-religious dialogue. These he said, contain further theological premises that are necessary if the general presuppositions are to be honestly affirmed and practiced. These theological premises are the attitudes or what he called "hypothesis" – that all the partners in the dialogue must recognize in their own theology before they can begin, much less carry out, a conversation with a believer of another faith:

a.) *Dialogue must be based on personal religious experience and firm truth claims.*<sup>6</sup> Knitter pointed out that the very nature of inter-religious dialogue demands that it be conducted by religious persons, those who can attest that they have experienced the love, mercy and goodness of a Transcendent Being. Without personal religious experience, there is no possibility of entering into a conversation with other persons, for there will be no springboard to work on. A person who truly encountered the Holy is convinced that other beings may have gone through the same experience of encounter with the Holy.

This view has a connection with Toynbee's theory of **Common Essence**<sup>7</sup> which asserted that there are essential counsels and truths, and there are no nonessential practices and proposition. He said "if we can look behind the nonessentials of each religion, we will find that the inner core, the essential experience and insight of all of them is essentially the same. Toynbee was attempting the difficult task of distilling the common faith experience from the amalgam of beliefs and practices. He called this essence or common experience, a sense of the "spiritual presence" within all reality.

b.) *Dialogue must be based on the recognition of the truth in all religions*<sup>8</sup>, the ability to recognize this truth must be grounded in the hypothesis of a common ground and goal for all religions. Dialogue also requires that the partners do not just hear but sincerely listen to each other. Authentic listening to what the other one is sharing manifests understanding, acceptance and openness. This entails humility in recognizing the fact that no one has a monopoly of the truth. The other person has definitely something to say. These presuppositions suggest that men and women recognize that the partners share a common ground that each religion enters into a relationship with an ultimate being, that the partners have a share in the experience of a divine presence, that they share the same fullness and emptiness, that they take inspiration from Someone whose goodness overwhelms everyone. The common goal is to promote unity of mankind and together get rid of threats to dignity of human life. This common goal springs from every human being's innate goodness, that power which naturally pushes him to dream and achieve.

Toynbee calls the foregoing presupposition as **Common Purpose**<sup>9</sup>. He asserted that each man struggles to overcome intrinsic limitations and imperfections not merely of human life but of all life on the face of the earth, likewise struggles with selfishness, with what he called "man worship". Man naturally seeks for something more, quest to believe and trust that someone who is beyond all forces of the universe. He expressed the commonsense views of many today when he concluded that this common task facing all religions is the reason why they should recognize their common essence, the one spiritual reality that animates them all.

Moltmann (in Hick, 1980) went beyond listening, he said that Christians can only talk about their particular mission if they take note of and respect the different missions of other religions. They can only enter usefully into dialogue with them if they do not merely want to communicate something but to receive the identity of one's own faith on the one hand, but on the other it requires a feeling of one's own incompleteness and a real sense of need for fellowship with the other. This is the only way in which interest in another religion comes into being, a "creative need for the other"<sup>10</sup>. After all, it is always true that no man is an island.

c.) *Dialogue must be based on openness to the possibility of genuine change/conversion*<sup>11</sup>. As partners enter into a dialogue, they actually open themselves to possibilities that will either affirm or negate something about what they believe in. True dialogue opens the path to new insights, new learning. This means the “old ones” may be and could be unlearned. Dialogue can be occasions for renewal, for some changes, for new reflections. Knitter established that the conversion that each partner seeks is not primarily conversion to one’s own belief or religion, but conversion to God’s Truth.

The foregoing constructs are affirmed by Paul Tillich’s (in Johnson, 1990) several ground rules in order to make a dialogue fruitful. It first presupposes that both partners acknowledge the value of the other’s religious conviction (as based ultimately on a revelatory experience), so that they consider the dialogue worthwhile; second, it presupposes that each of them is able to represent his own religious basis with conviction, so that the dialogue is a serious confrontation; third, it presupposes a common ground which makes both dialogue and conflicts possible; and fourth, the openness of both sides to criticism directed against their own religious basis<sup>12</sup>.

### **Theological Basis of Inter-Faith Dialogue**

John Taylor (in Hick, 1980), one of the many proponents of interfaith dialogue came up with some theological bases of dialogue<sup>13</sup>. These are:

a) *Appreciation must precede reconciliation of ideas*. On a premise that every human being finds it difficult to sustain contradictions and live with them, Taylor reiterated that it takes a high degree of maturity to let the opposites co-exist without pretending that they can be made conflicts with one’s own without itching to bring about a premature and naïve accommodation. Further, he said that one has to appreciate the reason for their opposition, grant its integrity and deal honestly with its challenge, without surrendering any of one’s own integrity or diminishing the content of one’s examined convictions. Inter-faith dialogue can be a clear praxis of loving one’s own enemies. The loving may be manifested through the efforts of listening, understanding, recognizing and appreciating the others’ set of beliefs which may be a contradiction to one’s personal conviction.

b) *Past isolation has bred ignorance and suspicion*. Historical events of persecution, aggression, domination and survival justify isolation and counter attacks. Taylor pointed out that one of the bitter fruits of this long history of non-communication is the tendency in every religious culture to read deliberate hostility into the quiet innocent attitudes of people of another faith. These bits of history deserve ample consideration if dialogue is to be realized. The by-products of past isolation, namely ignorance and suspicion may be dismissed as they are untrue and by the fact that true or not, the suspicion are part of the data of many relationships.

c) *Each religion is a tradition of response by ordinary people*. Dialogue seeks a new beginning. People cannot always hold on to the pains of history. There is a need to let go of the past, so that the future may be welcomed. Taylor believes that religion is to be thought as a people’s particular tradition of response to the reality which the Holy Spirit of God had set before their eyes. Everybody would agree that God’s self-

revelation and self-giving is consistent for all, but that different peoples have responded and taught others to respond to what the spirit of God through the events of their history and the vision of their prophets made them aware of. Likewise, there is a need to recognize that every religion's tradition includes the response of disobedience as well as the response of obedience. Thus, every living faith is found to be in a continual process of renewal and purification while at the same time it conserves the tradition and transmits it as something recognizably the same. The foregoing implies that as dialogue begins, it will be discovered that the same word carries an entirely different cluster of meaning in the different traditions and at times be found out that quite different words are used to mean the same thing.

*d) The open, inclusive view in Christian Theology.* Theologians have expressed affirmation of the fact that all persons can find within themselves a natural openness to the Infinite, to the More, to Mystery. Taylor construed that there has always been in the Jewish-Christian tradition another more inclusive view of the wideness of God's grace and redemption. That God's gift of salvation is offered to all mankind, across all religions. Rahner's inclusivism explicates that Christ exists within other religions that God's love is poured out in a universal salvific will.<sup>14</sup>

Pannikar describes inclusivism as an attitude that has a certain quality of magnanimity and grandeur in it. He concluded that man can follow his own path and need not condemn the other. He can even enter into communication with all other ways of life and if he happens to have the real experience of inclusivity, he may be at peace not only with himself but with all other human and divine ways as well. One can be concrete in his allegiance and universal in outlook. Further, the most plausible condition for the claim to truth of one's own tradition is to affirm at the same time that it includes at different levels all that there is truth wherever it exists. The inclusivistic attitude will tend to reinterpret things in such a way as to make them not only palatable but also assimilable.<sup>15</sup>

*e) Christians claim an absolute centrality for Jesus Christ.* It is the nature of religious experience to put into the believer's hands a key which is absolute and irreducible. With minds open to recognize the reality of the experience of divine grace and salvation within all the faiths of mankind, it can be said that what God did through Jesus Christ is the one act which it was always necessary that he should accomplish in time and at the right time if he was to be the God who throughout time is accessible and present to every human being in Judgment and mercy, grace and truth.

*f) Every religion has its "jealousies".* Taylor conceived the idea of jealousies referring to certain points in every religion concerning which the believers are inwardly compelled to claim a universal significance and finality; examples include: the Muslim conviction that the Holy Qu'ran is not just another revelation but is God's last word, the Jewish conviction that Israel's covenant and her attachment to the Holy land has a central significance in the determinate purpose of God; the Christian conviction that in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, God acted decisively for all mankind.

Every profound encounter with God is with a jealous God. This means, having experienced God in that way, no other God will do. These perceptions are undeniably valid. But given a deep mutual respect for one another's irreducible conviction, this



does not bring our discourse to a standstill. A genuine dialogue will not be promoted by the belief of each partner that the ultimate and deepest insight into the truth nevertheless lays on his side.

*g) Some experiences have to be absolute and universalized.* What makes the first apostolic witnesses so remarkable is that, as they thought out the implications of the response they had been compelled to make to Jesus, they refused to retreat any part of that response or diminish the claims they were making for him, even when it began to appear that their response and their claims were in conflict with all the accepted ideas about God. The first four centuries of the Christian Church is a logical following-out of the implications of an original experience which they were not prepared to deny.

*h) We must expose our experience to one another's questioning.* If interfaith dialogue is to become sincere and deep, we have to expose one another to the ways in which, within our separate households of faith, we wrestle with the questions that other religions put to us. Besides letting one another know the absolutes in their own faith that may not be surrendered, the partners in the dialogue must also give serious reflection to the critique which each inevitably brings to bear upon the convictions of the other, however painful and disturbing this may be. If we have this humble attitude of one who is seeking for the real meaning of what he believes, and for the real face of the one in whom he believes, dialogue will be easy with the faithful of other religions.

### **Obstacles to Dialogue**

Already on a purely human level, it is not easy to practice dialogue. Interreligious dialogue is even more difficult. It is important to be aware of the obstacles which may arise. Some would apply equally to members of all religious traditions and impede the success of dialogue. Others may affect some religious traditions more specifically and make it difficult for a process of dialogue to be initiated. Some of the more important obstacles will be mentioned here.

### **Human Factors**

- a) Insufficient knowledge and understanding of one's own faith.
- b) Insufficient knowledge and understanding of the beliefs and practices of other religions, leading to self-sufficiency, apathy and misrepresentation.
- c) Socio-political factors or some burdens of the past that continue to negate the gift of dialogue.
- d) Misinterpretation and lack of understanding of the meaning of terms such as conversion and dialogue, etc.
- e) Indifference, immaturity, lack of openness leading to defensive/aggressive attitudes.
- f) A lack of appreciation for the intrinsic value of interreligious dialogue.
- g) Lack of trust and suspicion about the other's motives in dialogue.
- h) A divisive attitude and an uncompromising stance when expressing religious convictions.
- i) Intolerance, which is often aggravated by association with political, economic, racial and ethnic factors, a lack of reciprocity in dialogue which can lead to frustration.

j) Certain characteristics prevalent at the moment: like materialism, distortion of values, religious indifference, and the emergence of new religious sects that create confusion and give rise to new problems.

### **Dialogue Based on a New Model of Truth**

The foregoing presupposition and theological bases of interfaith dialogue led to and may be summarized through Paul Knitter's theory of a New Model of Truth.<sup>16</sup> The theologian established that genuine dialogue may be reached if the partners would look from a different perspective: that they do not limit themselves within the confines of the truth that they live up to.

#### The Former Model

This operates on the principles of contradictions. This states that of two propositions, one of which is affirmed and the other, negated; one must be true and the other false. The truth is defined through exclusion, giving absolute quality to whatever has been defined to be true, all the other alternatives are excluded. In terms of religion, there is one religion accepted to be true and all the others are excluded.

#### The New Model

The truth will no longer be identified by its ability to exclude or absorb others. Rather, what is true will reveal itself mainly by its ability to relate to other expressions of truth and to grow through these relationships—truth defined not by exclusion but by relation. The new model reflects what our pluralistic world is discovering: no truth can stand alone; no truth can be totally unchangeable. Truth, by its very nature, needs other truth. Truth without other truth cannot be unique; it cannot exist. Truth, therefore, “prove itself” not by triumphing over all other truth but by testing its ability to interact with other truth—that is, to teach and be taught by them, to include and be included by them. More importantly; the model of truth—through—relationship allows each religion to be unique, such uniqueness can even be called—if we are willing to redefine our terms—absolute. Absoluteness is defined and established not by the ability of a religion to exclude or include others, but by its ability to relate to others, to speak to and listen to others in genuine dialogue.

As we deepen our awareness of what we have encountered in our faith experience, as we search after the hidden face of God, we realize that every discovery, every insight, must be corrected or balanced by its opposite. As we discover the personality of God, we realize that God is beyond personality. As we penetrate into the immanence of divinity we become aware of its transcendence. As we awaken to the “already” of God's kingdom in this world, we become ever more conscious of its “not yet”. Every belief, every doctrinal claim, must therefore be clarified and corrected by its beliefs that, at first sight, claim the contrary. Realizing all these we are disposed to look on different religions with their “contrary” experiences and beliefs not as adversaries but as potential partners.

### **Conclusion**

The theology of interfaith dialogue is a trend that had been set and the message is getting across all religions of the world—dialogue is not only a faddish concept, it is

one of the glaring signs of the times. It is a need of contemporary men and women that has to be addressed.

Knitter's new model of truth exemplifies that the greatness of a truth is its capacity to relate with others truths, not in its capacity to exclude or stand superior over the other. If only men and women will hold on to this new model of truth, this would certainly be a lot better world. Interreligious dialogue explores new paths to certain realities: to the truth of other faiths; to the need for genuine dialogue; to the challenge of entering into somebody else's faith expression/experiences; to the long history of apathy, and yes, even to the flaws of Christianity. There has long been claim for superiority; there has been arrogance and varied manifestations of exclusivism. Now is the time to take each other as a brother and a sister, in its deepest sense.

The challenge at hand is to respond to the call of unity. There is more reason to unite than to fight. As the new model of truth proposes – we can work hand in hand as partners in the pursuit of a common purpose and as inspired by that common essence.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pannikar, R. (1984). *The Interreligious Dialogue*, Bangalore: Asian Trading, p. xiii.

<sup>2</sup>cited by Knitter, P.. (1985). *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitude Toward Other Religions*, New York: Orbis, p.41.

<sup>3</sup>Eliade, M. ed. In chief, (1987). *The Encyclopedia of Religions* ( Vol. 4). New York: McMillan, p.344.

<sup>4</sup> Hick, J. (1980). *Christianity and Other Religions*, Great Britain: William Collins and Sons, p.212.

<sup>5</sup>Knitter, Paul *ibid.* p.207.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.* p.207.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.* p. 38.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.* p.208.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.* p.40.

<sup>10</sup>Hick, John. *Ibid.* p.204.

<sup>11</sup>Knitter, Paul. *Ibid.* p.211.

<sup>12</sup>cited by Johnson, Roger et.al. (1990) *Critical Issues in Modern Religion*, New Jersey; Prentice Hall, p.381.

<sup>13</sup>cited by John, Hick. *Ibid.* p. 212-231.

<sup>14</sup>cited by Roger A. Johnson, *ibid.* p. 398-399.

<sup>15</sup> Pannikar, Raimundo, *ibid.* p. xvi.

<sup>16</sup> Knitter, Paul. *Ibid.* p. 219-222.

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