

Between Charybdis and Scylla: Catholic Theology and Interreligious Dialogue

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Abstract

Why should Catholics enter into dialogue with representatives of non-Christian religious traditions? Although the last decades have witnessed an impressive involvement of Catholic theologians in these contacts, a positive dogmatic framework of interreligious dialogue is still waiting in the wings. On one hand, one can no longer be satisfied with trying to make non-Christians realize that Christianity is their beliefs ultimate truth (what about a dialogue with non-Christians then?). On the other hand, one cannot admit of expecting to get some additional knowledge about God that would not already be contained in Tradition and Scriptures, believed to convey the fullness of Gods Revelation to mankind. Putting forward the Traditions legitimate development, the present paper argues that new insights into the fullness of Gods Revelation can be gained from types of religious thinking born beyond the historical limits of Gods Revelation. According to its essence, this Revelation appeals to the contribution of those who have never heard of it.

Keywords

Salvation, pluralism, defamiliarization

Hardly anything is so opaque to a man's mind as the mind of another man, especially if the two belong to cultures separated for centuries of idiosyncratic civilization. Scholars can reach deep insights into cultures, which seemed *a priori* foreign and exotic, yet a scientific investigation has limited scope. Studies are supposed to depict their object as it stands, not to modify it. Now, imagine that some scholar succeeded in getting the heart of *his* culture meet the heart of the culture he studies, just as when two individuals, by talking with one another, discover that they are not foreign to each other, but that they have indeed something very deep in common. This would not be just another study, but an historical event, something potentially able to modify, to interact with the fate of two societies, just as a dialogue is not merely the best way to know someone else, but is also an

unceasing questioning in which the truth of one's personal horizon is at stake.

To a significant extent, religions lie at the heart of cultures, since as Paul Tillich among many others, has underscored, all known cultures of the world have emerged from a religious matrix. Religions can be seen as the guardians of nations' and societies' identity, and in this sense, they are far less flexible than the societies that came out from them. Now, what would happen if, through the mouths of their authorized speakers – theologians – those venerable traditions would start to talk with one another, so as to enter into a process of dialogue? The rise of Interreligious Dialogue, during the last thirty years, is an event the importance of which cannot be overestimated – something that, in the midst of rising religious violence, could as decisively transform the civilization as, say, the *Rinascimento* in the XIV–XVth centuries or the Enlightenment in the XVIIIth and XIXth. Interreligious Dialogue might shape philosophical consciousness, Hegel's *Sein für sich*, accompanying the process of transforming, technically and economically, the world into a global network. The world is becoming one, not only materially, but also at the deepest levels of its spiritual conscience. The irony of History, dear to Hegel, would strike again. Taken seriously, Interreligious Dialogue reverses a message that the *Aufklärung's* theoreticians thought to be definitive. They claimed that they had irreversibly snatched from religious traditions their leading role in the evolution of mankind, and given it back to its legal holder — that is, human natural reason devoid of religious prejudices. Conversely, the rise of Interreligious Dialogue witnesses that the key to harmony and peace in the emerging world is to be sought in ancestral religious traditions, since it has been generally admitted that philosophers and scientists have been unable to provide such a key.

Catholic theologians, together with their Protestant and Orthodox colleagues, are actively involved in this Dialogue. However, the role that Catholic theology *as such* should play in this process is much less reflected upon. I believe that Catholic theology has a decisive role to play within Interreligious Dialogue. The fundamental issues raised by this Dialogue need the help of Catholic theology to be solved. After recalling the main features of the historical involvement of the Catholic Church in Interreligious Dialogue, I will show how the theological tenets of this Catholic approach enable us to tackle the main dilemma of a *Christian* theology of Interreligious Dialogue.

1. Catholic Theology and the Origins of Interreligious Dialogue

It is evident that the interest in what the world's great religious traditions, including Christianity, have in common owes little to the work

of Catholic theologians, nor of any representative of the main Christian confessions. It has rather developed within XIXth century's theological circles and religious movements that claimed, like Ba'hai faith to overcome narrow confessionalism by producing some new kind of religious synthesis. The reason for this fact seems obvious at first sight: recognized theologians were busy explaining why the true formula of religious universality was to be found in their Church (es), and only in their Church(es), so that beyond each one's boundaries, there could and should subsist hardly anything other than errors or, at the most, distorted images of THE TRUTH proclaimed by their Church(es). Historically, the dynamics of missionary work, whether in the Catholic, the Protestant and even the Orthodox Churches are tightly bound to such an "exclusivistic view", as John Hick calls the extreme opposite of his "pluralistic view".¹

However, Interreligious Dialogue, as implied by the term itself, does not designate a religion of religions derived from esoteric teaching or from a new kind of revelation. It is a dialogue that takes place *between* the main religions, *as they are*, Christianity being only one of them, so that there is no *a priori* idea of replacing those religions by a new religious form endowed with some definite omni-transcendent content. Seen from this perspective, the theological origins of modern Interreligious Dialogue appear far less evident. As strange as it might sound, since the Catholic Church is generally perceived as authoritarian and insufficiently open to any sort of "otherness", I believe that Catholic theologians, as early as the XVIIIth century, played an essential role in promoting the notion of Interreligious Dialogue within Christianity. This is mainly due to the work of Jesuits like Matteo Ricci in China and Roberto de Nobili in India. The idea was that, in order to ensure the success of the Catholic Church in those "exotic" countries, missionaries should show due respect to their customs and openness towards the positive or "christianizable" aspects of local religious beliefs. The adoption of Chinese clothes and the adaptation of Christian terminology to a Confucius-based vocabulary initiated by Ricci is well-known, since it became the topic of a quarrel within the Catholic Church. Opponents of the Society of Jesus blamed them for compromising faith with the beliefs of idolatry. Less known but equally remarkable, is the path of Roberto de Nobili, who, not satisfied with becoming one of the greatest scholars of Hinduism, took the vow of "sannyasia" ("renunciation"), fasting, meditating and walking till his death in the very clothes of a native sannyasi. What comes to light here is the understanding, more or less implicit in the Society, that the content of Christianity is somehow wider than the European form it came to assume since its adoption in the Roman Empire in the IVth century.

¹ See for instance *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, Macmillan, 1988.

This encounter between Christian faith and non-Christian religious traditions cannot be reduced to some strategic attempt at diffusing the former's convictions within the latter's sphere of dominance. The contact with non-Christian forms of civilisation entailed also, inseparably, a kind of test of the truth of Christianity in its European form.

This intuition was renewed by several outstanding spiritual figures in the twentieth century: Jules Monchanin, Henri le Saux and Bede Griffiths, who founded a famous and still active "Benedictine ashram" in India (Shantivanam, 1950). To these pioneers should be added, in the direction of Zen Buddhism, the name of Thomas Merton, the American Cistercian monk. However, one feature distinguishes this renewal: this time, the encounter with other religious traditions no longer refers to missionary work in the accepted sense. In fact, it is primarily for the sake of Christianity itself, moved by the intuition that in the encounter with other religious traditions, something immensely important was at stake, that those pioneers settled temporarily or definitely in India and in the Far East.

Generally speaking, this new line of spiritual research, no matter how poorly understood at the time, has had tremendous consequences in the life of the Catholic Church. The stance taken by the Second Vatican Council on the issue of non-Christian religions owes a great deal to those figures, *via* influential Jesuit theologians like Henri de Lubac and Jean Daniélou. The main texts are to be found in the dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, par.16, and in the declaration *Nostra Aetate*, which states (par.2) that:

[the Church] regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men

Interestingly enough, the modern spiritual adventure of Le Saux and his peers led the Fathers of the Council to re-discover one of the earliest sources of the Christian Tradition: Justin of Alexandria's (+165) notion of "spermatikoi logoi". Facing the massive challenge of dealing with the wisdom and to some extent the holiness present in the achievements – mainly in the philosophical field – of Greco-Latin civilization, Justin, and his followers, like Clement, in the first "Christian school" of Alexandria, claimed that these achievements were derived from the very same Logos who had shortly before revealed himself as the Messiah of Israel. They were like so many seeds of his, *spermatikoi logoi*, or like so many stepping-stones on the way towards the welcoming of the full Truth.² There is little double

² Owing to some sublime absence of hazard, the main writing of Justin, which is referred to here, bears the word "dialogue" in its title, *The Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon*.

that *Nostra Aetate*, speaking of the “Truth that enlightens all men”, as the Logos of the Father illuminates all human quest through the work of the Holy Spirit, alludes to Justin’s doctrine. After the Council, almost all official declarations bearing on the same subject will follow a similar path.³

In *Nostra Aetate*, one also reads statements regarding non-Christian religions that share in — to a lesser (like Islam) or higher degree (like Judaism) — the fullness of the Abrahamic revelation, but they are less pertinent for our immediate purpose. As a rule, given that we want to reflect on the overall significance of non-Christian religions for Christianity, we cannot draw on the very specific type of relationship that unites Christianity with one non-Christian religion in particular in order to sketch out the basic theological framework that we need. This is also why we will focus here on religions that stand, historically and theologically, farther away from Christianity, like Hinduism and Buddhism. In any case, the fact remains that the documents we are talking about witness a major change of attitude in the Catholic Church in the direction of non-Christian religions as a whole, a kind of “conversion” as it were.⁴

In *Ecclesiam suam*, an encyclical letter written just before the opening of the council, Pope Paul VI calls for “prudent participation” by the Church in Interreligious Dialogue. The same year, 1964, he set up a Secretariat for non-Christians, the ancestor of today’s Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (established in 1988), which is now, according to one of the latest decisions of Benedict XVI, to

³ Second Vatican Council, “Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church”, *Ad Gentes*, 3, 11, 15; “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” *Gaudium et Spes*, 10–11, 22, 26, 38, 41, 92–93. Of course, this is the common heritage of all the Christian Churches. Justin’s theology is also present in the most significant contribution of the Orthodox Church to this fundamental issue, the presentation by Metropolitan Georges Khodr at the WCC assembly of Addis Ababa (1971) which deals with the “Economy of the Holy Spirit” as a counterpoise to the Reformation’s “Christomonism”, See Khodr G., “Christianity in a Pluralistic World”, *The Ecumenical Review* 23 (1971). Nevertheless, Catholic thinking, during the Middle Ages, has developed Justin’s insight into a theological program which is relevant in contemporary Interreligious Dialogue: it has tried to bring forward, on a metaphysical basis, the link between nature, as investigated by natural reason, and dogma, the content of God’s supernatural Revelation.

⁴ By way of sampling the previous mentality, let me quote a few lines from the instructions given by King Manuel II, at the beginning of the XVIth century, regarding his Indian missions, as reported by a contemporary: “In order to persuade these people to accept the truths, the priests and friars were to put before them all natural and legal arguments and employ ceremonies prescribed by the Canon Law. And if these people were stubborn in their errors, and would in no wise accept the tenets of true faith, denying the law of peace which should unite mankind for the preservation of the human race, and raising difficulties and obstacles to the exercise of trade and commerce, the means by which peace and love among men are established and maintained for trade is the basis of all human policy — they should in this case be taught by fire and sword and all the horrors of war”, in R. E. Miller, “The Context of Hindu-Christian Dialogue in Kerala”, in *Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, New-York, 1990, p. 53.

be united to the Pontifical Council for Culture. Since 1964, neither Paul VI's successors nor any official instance of the Roman Magisterium has disavowed the Catholic Church's commitment to Interreligious Dialogue. On the contrary, the new orientation has gathered momentum. Along with the more than ever compelling necessity of proclaiming the Gospel to all the nations, John Paul II reaffirmed the importance of Interreligious Dialogue in his encyclical letters, *Redemptor Hominis* in 1979 and *Redemptoris Missio* in 1990.⁵ That mission and Interreligious Dialogue, although formally different, should progress side by side is also the main emphasis of a document that the Congregation for Evangelization and the Council for Interreligious Dialogue have issued in common, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, in 1991. For its part, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue has set on foot permanent working groups (Muslim-Catholic Liaison Committee 1995) and organized an impressive number of bilateral as well as multilateral encounters (Côte d'Ivoire, 1996, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Encounter with Traditional Religions", Taiwan, 1995, "Buddhism and Christianity — Convergence and Divergence", India, 1998 "Word and Silence in Buddhist and Christian Tradition", Rome, 1999 "On the Eve of the Third Millennium: Collaboration among Different Religions", among others . . .).

However, what drew the attention of the world to the commitment of the Catholic Church to Interreligious Dialogue was the prayer-meeting of Assisi, in 1986, and to a lesser extent, the following meeting in 2002, events that gathered, at the invitation of the pope, leaders and representatives of all major religious traditions and Christian churches. It is true that the document *Dominus Jesus*, in 2000, followed by a *Notification* (2001) directed at one of the main Catholic theologians of Interreligious dialogue, Jacques Dupuis, S.J., seem to have cast a shadow on the optimistic perspective traced out during the Council. However, official admonitions are also part of the game, as the ordinary mode in which the Roman Magisterium aims at challenging the reflection of theologians on a topic considered of most importance.

On the whole, it remains a remarkable fact that the Catholic Church, which seemed *a priori* much less flexible than her "rivals", came to play a decisive part in the promotion of Interreligious Dialogue. Why did the task of initiating a friendly dialogue with Eastern non-Christian religions fall on a Church anchored in the Western tradition, and not on the Orthodox Church for instance? The fight against heterodoxy, from a dogmatic standpoint, is consubstantial to

⁵ "Interreligious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission. Understood as a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment, dialogue is not in opposition to the mission *ad gentes*; indeed, it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions" (n. 55).

Orthodox identity — yet no dialogue is possible if it does not go beyond the level of dogmas right from the start. “Very well”, one will say — but then why did this input come from such supposedly imperialistic and in any case heavily dogmatic Church as the Catholic one, and not from one of the offshoots of the Reformation, despite the latter’s theological diversity?

Historically, the World Council of Churches has played a very timid part in the development of Inter-Faith dialogue. The stand taken by Hendrik Kraemer, the Dutch missiologist, at the conference of Tambaram in 1938, has had an unfortunate, but lasting impact. Under the influence of Karl Barth, Kraemer argued that, despite the elements of truth and the converging aspects that could be brought forward, there remained an insuperable discontinuity — a discontinuity based on principle — between Christian *faith*, as originating in God’s supremely free act of self-revelation, and non-Christian *religions*, as mere human attempts at expressing the ultimate Truth.

Of course, this position has been increasingly challenged since the early 60’s, mostly by representatives in contact with non-European forms of civilization. There have been talks about a “cosmic Christ” whose saving action would be involved in traditional non-Christian religions (T.D. Niles, Kandi Conference, 1967). Nevertheless, the tension between the Barthian-evangelical line, insisting on the necessity of mission, and this new trend favouring Interreligious dialogue, has never been solved. This explains why most conferences organized by the WCC, over the past decades, focus on practical side-issues, searching for common stands on problems like peace, ecology, etc., rather than grappling with the fundamental issues that separate Christianity from non-Christian religions. Does it mean that the discontinuity that seems insuperable in Reformation perspective can be lightly overcome within a Catholic framework? To what extent can the Catholic Church avoid compromising the purity of Christian faith by promoting Interreligious Dialogue?

The historical involvement of the Catholic Church in this global process does not say much, in itself, about the possible relevance of a *Catholic* view on Interreligious Dialogue. Considered in its essence, the problem of the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions transcends the classical confessional dilemmas between the various Christian denominations. The discussion would seem to be only hindered by taking into account the subtle doctrinal divergences on which Christianity has repeatedly split in the course of its European history. Nonetheless, I shall contend that the theological problems that Christianity as a whole has to face in this field lead us back to Catholic theology. This means that we must first understand how those problems arose from the very practice of Interreligious Dialogue.

2. The Main Problem for a Christian Theology of Interreligious Dialogue

As we started again to tackle the texts of St John, the texts appeared now in a totally different light. We were coming back from the Upanishads to the Bible with, as it were, eyes wonderfully wide open, eyes that had henceforth got accustomed to depth, and were now able to penetrate in a totally new way the mystery of the Lord. A somewhat similar thing might happen if a Hindu, after having been trained for a long time in the reading of the Scriptures and the meditation of the Mystery of the inner self, would finally start reading the Gospel in the radiance of his “atmanic” experience. We did not intend – this must be constantly reiterated for fear of possible misunderstandings – to discover in the Bible, through the confrontation with the Vedanta, a *sensus plenior* and still unknown that the sacred author himself would have ignored. We were simply discovering what the Lord himself had placed in it. We were also aware of the fact that there are always new discoveries to make while reading the Scriptures. It is precisely for the purpose of helping men to move forward into the mystery of His Word that God has created a great diversity among men and cultures.⁶

In this passage, Henri Le Saux evokes his experience of reading in parallel the Upanishad and St John’s Gospel with a group of Christians and Hindus. Something in *Advaita* is so outstandingly consonant with the Word of God, that it can surely be said to be inspired by the latter — and yet its path is so utterly foreign to the whole of Christian tradition that absolutely nothing out of this tradition can be said to be adequate to the Indian insight.

I doubt anybody has ever progressed further along the track of Interreligious Dialogue than Le Saux. It is unlikely that anyone has ever reached such superior understanding of “non-Christian otherness”. However, it is precisely at this depth that the theological question raised by Interreligious Dialogue can be grasped as fully, as seriously, as possible: is there anything about God that let’s say, not merely an average, stressed and dissatisfied parishioner of the Christian West, but a Benedictine monk who had spent half of his life in the closest contact with Indian religiosity, would be entitled to teach to an authentic *rishi* of the Hindu tradition? Le Saux’s preaching of the Gospel ended in an immersion, in an “extinction”, in *Advaita*’s mystical silence. This of course raises questions concerning the very purpose of the Church’s missionary work. Is not *Advaita*, the path of renunciation, is not *Bhakti*, the path of loving devotion, is not any other religious path indisputably leading to a steady contact with God, to a form of holiness, a path of Salvation at least as respectable as the Christian path? And if it is not, what are we to do with the

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 151–152 (the translation is mine).

claim that it is? In the perspective of Le Saux, the disciples of *Advaita* seem to be perfectly entitled to suggest that dialoguing with people who deny *a priori* the salvific dimension of their path is a *contradictio in adjecto*. It seems difficult to hold that Christianity esteems non-Christian religious traditions, considers the latter as real partners, while at the same time suggesting that those partners are responsible for misleading their adepts concerning the possibility of achieving Salvation through their intermediary.

As we see, the *practical* question about the extent and the way in which Christians are to practise Interreligious Dialogue is directly bound with the *fundamental* question that bears on the salvific superiority of Christian Faith. What kind of theological status is Christianity able to grant to itself among the multiplicity of world's religions?

However, despite the fact that this fundamental question addresses the very possibility *de jure* for Christians to practise Interreligious Dialogue, it is well known that Christian theologians have not waited for a precise answer to be given before getting *de facto* involved in Interreligious Dialogue. This situation has given birth to two ways of understanding what Christian interreligious theology is about. Although those two types are equally legitimate and intimately linked to each other, I believe they should be distinguished from one another for the sake of clarity.

First, there is what could be called an empirical form of interreligious theology: Christian theologians, working in close contact with their non-Christian colleagues, try to underscore the authentic points of convergence and divergence between their respective religious traditions. The writings of Henri le Saux, for instance, are a typical product of this approach.

Second, there is a more fundamental form of interreligious theology: drawing both on the content of their own tradition and the results achieved in the dialogue, Christian theologians try to conceptualize and assess from a dogmatic standpoint the relationship between Christianity and the world's other great religions.

The first form, the empirical one, is *ad extra* whereas the second, the fundamental one, is *ad intra*.

In other words, the question about the salvific status of Christianity is a question that has absolutely no meaning except for a Christian believer.

It reads exactly: to what extent does my Christian belief allow me to recognize other religions as a means of *my* God's Salvation?

Moreover, the two forms of theological enquiry are in a state of mutual tension: the discovery of converging aspects between Christianity and non-Christian traditions naturally incline theologians to expand the traditional boundaries of Christian salvation, whereas theologians who are convinced of the uniqueness of Christian salvation

are satisfied with emphasizing the basic divergences between the great religious traditions. The fundamental issue at stake bears therefore on the determination of a limit: how far should the boundaries of Christian salvation be extended in order to account for the convergences between Christian and non-Christian religions? Empirical, *ad extra* interreligious theology can well point out striking convergences — ultimately, whether Christianity, taking into account this set of convergences, has the means to apply its own idea of salvation to non-Christian traditions, — an issue which only dogmatic, *ad intra* Christian theology is able to deal with.

Regarding this issue, the present theological situation seems quite easy to describe. Since I speak of Interreligious Dialogue, I do not take into account those who, holding to the old exclusivistic view, still believe that no truth whatsoever can be found in non-Christian religions and therefore appear to reject the very idea of initiating a dialogue. Accordingly, the community of Christian theologians can be said to be split into two conflicting camps that are independent of denominational criteria. Still referring to the terminology of John Hick, now almost universally adopted, I will speak of inclusivism to designate the first, pluralism to designate the second. The two positions are embodied in two manifestos successively published in the same collection, the contributors of which include Catholics and Protestants. The books have eloquent titles: *The myth of Christian Uniqueness, towards a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, published in 1988, and *Christian Unity reconsidered, The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, published in 1990.⁷ Let us briefly examine each of the two stands.

The majority of Christian theologians would admit that non-Christian religions contain some truth, but believe at the same time that Christ is the Truth of truths, the ultimate and definitive revelation of the truth foreshadowed by those religions. With Karl Rahner and his famous theory of the “anonymous Christian”,⁸ they are ready to admit that Christ saves some good people without their knowing it — and yet missionary work does not lose its essential significance: Christ is still to be proclaimed to those who are far off as their potential Redeemer, as well as to those who are near, as the true face of their actual Redemption. John Hick, the main promoter of the pluralistic view, illustrates this position in the following way:

“Non-Christian can be saved because unknown to them, Christ is secretly “in a way united” [Hick quotes here the words of John-Paul II in *Redemptor Hominis!*] with them. But the saving truth unknown to

⁷ <Faith meets Faith> series, Orbis Book, New York.

⁸ See *Schriften zur Theologie V*, 1968.

them is known to the Church, which is God's instrument in making the revelation known".⁹

The problem is that Interreligious Dialogue does not address single individuals, but the great religious traditions themselves through the intermediary of qualified interpreters belonging to the latter. If the Church owns *a priori* the whole truth, how can she really be receptive — that is not just pretending a friendly interest for the secret purpose of getting new members — to what others hold to be a truth as absolute as her own? Thus, if the inclusivistic view justifies missionary work, it does not fulfil the conditions required to be a theology of Interreligious Dialogue, since it constitutes the main obstacle on the road towards such a Dialogue.

A minority of theologians have therefore suggested that, in order to accept the truth-claim of non-Christian religions, Christianity should "cross the Rubicon" — a metaphor meant to indicate that Christianity ought to renounce its historical claim to being a universal and absolute religion. Christian faith simply cannot be said to be more "salvific" than any other venerable religion. Hick, speaking of a "copernician revolution", states rather emphatically:

To abandon this claim to an ultimate religious superiority is therefore to pass a critical point, entering new territory from which the whole terrain of Christian Truth is bound to be different. For on the other side of this divide Christianity is seen in a pluralistic context as *one* of the great world faiths, *one* of the streams of religious life through which human beings can be savingly related to that ultimate Reality Christians know as the heavenly Father.¹⁰

On behalf of such a stand, one should invoke some sort of common-sense judgement, which I find expressed in the same volume by Stanley J. Samantha, WCC's main theoretician of religious pluralism:

Where alternative ways of Salvation have provided meaning and purpose for millions of persons in other cultures for more than two or three thousand years, the claim that the Judeo-Christian Western tradition has the *only* answer to all problems in all places and for all persons in the world is presumptuous, if not incredible. This is not to deny the *validity* of the Christian experience of Salvation in Jesus Christ, but it is to question the *exclusive* claims made for it by Christians, claims that are unsupported by any evidence in history, or in the institutional life of the church, or in the lives of many Christians who make such claims. If Salvation comes from God — and for Christians it cannot be otherwise — then possibilities

⁹ "The non-Absoluteness of Christianity" in *Christian Uniqueness reconsidered*, *op.cit.*, p. 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

should be left open to recognize the validity of other experiences of Salvation.¹¹

Although what is said here can hardly be denied, the attempts at reducing the universality of Christianity to a mere product of the Constantino-Justinian era that continued into the XVIth century's Catholic expansionism and the XIXth century's Reformed proselytism, appear to me still hardly convincing. For one thing, I have not come across a consistent "pluralistic" exegesis of the final verses of Matthew's Gospel:

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:

One finds here both exclusiveness – "all power unto me"- and universality – "go and teach all nations".

Another aspect of the problem should be pinpointed. It is all very well to recommend the idea that the Christian faith give up its exclusive claim — but what about other religions' similar claims? Will not those claims endanger the Dialogue as well? Typically, the pluralistic standpoint assumes that all religions should abandon their exclusive claims in order to step into a common Dialogue-process. In Hick's perspective, this does not in the least suppress the notion of an Absolute reality to which each religion would ultimately refer. The main point, in his view, is that all should renounce their claim to this Reality as their property, give up their pretence to know it better than the others, and rather consider this Absolute reality as being common to all, and therefore unidentifiable by any in particular. Transposing to the religious sphere Kant's distinction between the *Ding an sich*, *noumenon*, the unattainable objectivity of things, and what is perceivable of those things through our senses, the *Erscheinungen*, *ta phenomena*, Hick holds that there is a fragmentary insight in this unknowable, unnameable Reality in every true religious experience.¹²

If I am not mistaken, the perspective of Raimon Panikkar goes even further: he denies even the existence of this unique truth around which all religious experiences should more or less gravitate. If Hick is the Copernicus of Interreligious Dialogue, Panikkar is undoubtedly its Einstein. I quote:

The centre is neither the earth (our particular religion), nor the sun (God, transcendence, the absolute . . .). Rather each solar system has its own centre, and every galaxy turns reciprocally around the other. There is no absolute centre. Reality itself is concentric inasmuch as

¹¹ "The Cross and the Rainbow", cf. *ibid.*, p. 77.

¹² See *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, Macmillan, New York, 1985.

each being (each tradition) is the centre of the universe – of its own universe to begin with.¹³

It is difficult to understand exactly what Panikkar has exactly in mind here, since his theological statements always imply some Indian or Asian denial of Western “logical” categories, but I would interpret his position *benigniter* in the following way: the Reality in which world religions move and breathe, is both absolute and relative, so that there is no unique superior point of view to which the content of two different religions could be reduced — the relativity of the human mind is in one line with God’s “transcendent relativity”.

This position echoes the Hindu and the Buddhist beliefs according to which some divine dispensation grants to each civilization the religion that suits it best. In this framework, the historical figure of Jesus and the whole approach of God it has given rise to, represents only one channel among several others through which human beings are given access to this polytranscendent and multifaceted Reality. Panikkar’s Christ, totally emptied of European exclusivistic content, but also distinguished from its purely biblical substrate, is the Mystery, that comes up in each living communication among the manifold religious traditions. After all, is there anything more consonant with the Incarnate Word of God than this perpetual setting in communication of peoples and worlds that were primarily closed up from within? Panikkar insists that no concealed revival of Christian universalism is involved here, since he readily concedes that his notion of Christ ought not be shared by a Buddhist for instance, in order for a genuine dialogue to take place. Hence the extreme emphasis on Dialogue for the sake of Dialogue that one finds in his more recent books.¹⁴

As I see it, the main problem connected with pluralism is that this framework is unable to provide Interreligious Dialogue with better support than its rival, the inclusivistic, view, although pluralism’s main purpose is supposed to lie in this allegedly “superior” support. As a matter of fact, a dialogue loses its *raison d’être* as soon as it deprives the involved partners of the opportunity to discuss the truth of their respective convictions. What would be the purpose of initiating a dialogue if all convictions were *a priori* deemed to be equally true and respectable? As Protagoras’ famous saying assumes that “man is the measure of all things”, pluralistic theology could likewise be derived from the postulate that “religious beliefs are the measure of God”. But then, how could the “pluralists” shun the accusation that Socrates, the master of dialogical art, directs at Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*:

the attempt to supervise or refute the notions or opinions of others would be a tedious and enormous piece of folly, if to each man his

¹³ “The Jordan, the Tiber and the Ganges”, cf. *ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁴ See *The Intrareligious Dialogue*, Pauline Press, US, 1999.

own are right; and this must be the case if Protagoras' Truth is the real truth.¹⁵

To summarize, the two antagonistic views, the inclusive and the pluralist seem paradoxically to end up in the very same dilemma: they are unable to fulfil what they promise, that is to justify the active support of Christianity to Interreligious Dialogue. Consequently, in order to promote Interreligious Dialogue, theologians have no other choice than to find a way out of this dilemma. It is here that, in my eyes, Catholic theology is called to play a significant role.

3. Defamiliarizing oneself from the *Logos*: a Catholic Way Between Charybdis and Scylla

The dilemma between inclusivism and pluralism stems, in my eyes, from a certain narrowness of the Reformation's basic theological framework. Once Salvation is equated with the individual's very act of explicit conversion to Christ — "my Saviour and my God!" — no possibility whatsoever is left to conceive of Salvation as being present in a context where Christ is ignored, meaning that the latter is not yet an object of *thematic consciousness*, to use the phenomenological term. Accordingly, the Christian theology that is willing to grant a salvific dimension to non-Christian religions, abolishes what it had hitherto held as one of its most fundamental conditions of possibility: the absolute, indestructible bond between Salvation and Christ. In other words, there is nothing left between, on one hand, the Barthian position (shared by Paul Althaus and Wolfhart Pannenberg among other important figures of contemporary Protestant thinking), which, while being more or less benevolent towards religions in general, notwithstanding removes Salvation from their sphere in order to confine it to a personal act of faith in Christ — and, on the other hand, the pluralistic position, which frees Salvation from any specific link to the Gospel of Christ in order to *expand it to all respectable religious traditions*.

Can we not think, however, of Salvation as being both intrinsically bound with Christ and simultaneously present in non-Christian religions?

Contrasting with this tight theological bond between personal conversion and Salvation, the Catholic Church, since the Second Vatican Council, has repeatedly emphasized that, in a mysterious way, God offers the possibility of attaining Salvation to all human

¹⁵ 161c.

beings of good will who are deprived of the prospect of knowing Christ:

linked with the paschal mystery and patterned on the dying Christ, [the Christian] will hasten forward to resurrection in the strength which comes from hope.(30). All this holds true not only for Christians, *but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way.* (31) For, since Christ died for all men, (32) and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to *every man* the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.¹⁶

This seems common sense: are we to think that God has damned the countless millions of human beings who have never had the possibility of accessing in a true manner the Christ of the Gospel? Is the good God that iniquitous?

Consequently, if, on one hand, great religious traditions contain elements of truth stemming from God's eternal Logos (*Nostra Aetate*, par.2) and if, on the other hand, Salvation achieved through Christ's sacrifice extends to people of good will that are still unaware of it (*Gaudium et Spes*, par.29), one is driven to conclude that great religious traditions can effectively lead some of their followers to partake of the salvific reality granted to all Mankind through Christ's sacrifice.

Now, the question is: to what extent is such a theological attitude capable to provide a safe passage between Charybdis and Scylla, that is between inclusivism and pluralism? Let us see how it enables us to pass the first reef, and then the second.

On the side of a Barthian-type of inclusivism, it will of course be objected that if Salvation is at hand in non-Christian religions, the proclamation of Christ as the Saviour of *all* men loses its meaning. To this objection I will answer by pointing to the essential difference between the following statements:

- a. One can attain to Salvation in some non-Christian religious traditions.
- b. Some non-Christian religions are salvific *per se*.

¹⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, §29. As far as I know, a clear statement of this kind is nowhere to be found in the official documents emanating from the Protestant world. It is true that the latest document of the WCC ("Ecumenical consideration for dialogue and relations with people of other religions", 2002), states that the Spirit of God is at work in non-Christian religions, though in a manner which escapes our grasp (par.14); it emphasizes also that Salvation belongs to God *only*, without giving further doctrinal precisions (par.17); yet it starts by proclaiming that the paschal mystery is "the centre of God's redeeming work for us and for the world" (par.12). At best, the main ambiguity still lingers on: is participation in this Pascal mystery equivalent to explicit faith in Christ? If it is so, I cannot see how non-Christians would be able to achieve Salvation within their own religions, despite God's Spirit having his mysterious ways among them.

I assume that the “elements of grace” that the Magisterium recognizes as being present in non-Christian traditions are able to provide individual believers with the spiritual means to attain Salvation. This does not mean however that non-Christian religions are salvific *per se*. Socrates, if he has attained the Salvation promised by Catholic faith to those individuals who have searched for God with a sincere heart but no possible knowledge of Christ, has reached the goal through and by the means of the God-inspired philosophy praised by Justin — yet he has not reached it by means of philosophy *per se*. Otherwise, one would only have to enrol as a student at the Faculty of Philosophy in order to be saved. Similarly, I believe that some individuals can attain Salvation through Indian *Advaita* or Indian *Bakhti*, through following one of Buddhism’s numerous spiritual schools and paths, through Islam, etc. The link between these individuals’ spiritual achievements and the religious universes in which those achievements took place is anything but a mere coincidence — those universes possess the elements of truth and goodness that have guided believers to the right goal. Expressed from a Catholic point of view, non-Christian religions can be said to be co-instrumental in the attainment of Salvation.

This position seems in accordance with the truth-claim of those religions themselves. In so far as I understand them. Hindu *Moksa*, the total deliverance from the illusions of duality stands, like Buddhist *Nirvana*, at the very end of the path, waiting for the few individuals who will be able to go all the way through without getting stuck on a side-path at some point. Meanwhile Christianity belongs to a small group of religions which claim to provide its adepts *immediately, at once*, with Salvation — the only thing one needs, from a Catholic point of view, is baptism. This must sound ridiculous to non-Christian wise men. Yet, as a matter of fact, most non-Christian religions have taken the same Christian “join-and-you’ll-be-saved” pattern. This has an obvious explanation within Christian faith: Salvation comes from redemption, and redemption is accomplished once and for all through the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. Therefore, in Christianity, the problem is not to acquire Salvation, but *not to lose it*, which means keeping the faith, growing constantly in its unique dimension. From this perspective, it makes sense to communicate the Gospel to people whose religious traditions are conceived as being potentially able to guide some of their adepts to Salvation. As a matter of fact, those religions are leading their adherents towards a goal, which corresponds to the very content of the message delivered by the Church. This means that mission should be conceived in a radically new way, as a deeply religious, though utterly complex, form of cooperation. One will say of course that the balance of this cooperation is equivocal from the start, since Christianity claims to know something more about the identity of this goal than

great religious non-Christian traditions. At this precise moment, we come in sight of the second reef, Scylla. Let me recall what Hick says:

Non-Christians can be saved because unknown to them, Christ is secretly “in a way united” with them. But the saving truth unknown to them is known to the Church, which is God’s instrument in making the revelation known.

Thus, according to Scylla, the Church cannot learn from other non-Christian religions if, enforcing everywhere the universalism of her Christ-Logos, she claims to know better from the start concerning the very object that other religions also supposed to profess.

It is not sure, however, that a doctrine of the Logos, as the main tenet of the Church’s participation in Interreligious Dialogue, entails and ratifies *ipso facto* the alleged supremacy of the Church’s tradition over non-Christian traditions. Here, something must be said about the attempt of some theologians, like Jacques Dupuis, S.J. and, to a lesser extent, Claude Geffré, O.P., to find a balance between inclusivism and pluralism by thinking anew the relationship between God’s Logos and the incarnated Christ in an interreligious perspective.

Without questioning the uniqueness of the Incarnation as History’s major event, this theological trend envisages a communication of God’s eternal Logos to the great religions independently of the Incarnation, a communication that would grant a Christian legitimacy to the “otherness” of such non-Christian teachings. It is perfectly fair to invoke Justin’s theology in favour of such an independent communication of the Logos. Ascribing to the action of the Holy Spirit the elements of truth and beauty that are to be found in non-Christian traditions without implying a relationship to the Logos or the Word of God would sound quite ludicrous theologically speaking. *Omnia sunt commune quae ad extra* — there is no personal or hypostatic division in the immanent action of the Trinity. If, according to the vocabulary of appropriation, the action of God, one by nature, can be ascribed to the Holy Spirit as a divine person, its result, in terms of wisdom, should in turn be ascribed to the pre-existent Word of God, in whom dwells the infinite knowledge of the Father.

A difficulty arises in conceiving of some divine knowledge, related to the pre-existent Logos, that would notwithstanding escape the limited consciousness of Jesus-Christ. In this framework, which calls itself “inclusivist pluralism”, other religions would complete what Jesus-Christ has not been able to communicate of God’s mystery.¹⁷ This breaks with the traditional understanding of the Incarnation as making known the fullness of God’s mystery, so that the Good News

¹⁷ See J. Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Orbis Books, 1999, p. 271 sq.

of Christ runs the risk of being reduced to one channel of God's revelation among many others, whatever the qualitative superiority granted it.

In fact, the Holy See has taken very seriously – that is very critically – those views. The Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith issued, in *Dominus Jesus*, deals at length with these views. Theologically speaking, the issue is formulated clearly as follows (ch.2):

... John Paul II has explicitly declared: “To introduce any sort of separation between the Word and Jesus Christ is contrary to the Christian faith... Jesus is the Incarnate Word — a single and indivisible person... Christ is none other than Jesus of Nazareth; he is the Word of God made man for the Salvation of all... In the process of discovering and appreciating the manifold gifts — especially the spiritual treasures — that God has bestowed on every people, we cannot separate those gifts from Jesus Christ, who is at the centre of God's plan of Salvation.

And the passage concludes:

the theory which would attribute, after the incarnation as well, a salvific activity to the Logos as such in his divinity, exercised “in addition to” or “beyond” the humanity of Christ, is not compatible with the Catholic faith.

One does not need to deny the fullness of God's revelation in Christ in order to acknowledge the existence of a saving wisdom in non-Christian religions — a wisdom which, on many points, has something to teach our present understanding of God as derived from the revelation of Jesus-Christ. The key to the solution does not lie in the distance between the pre-existent Logos and the historical Christ, but in the distance between Christ, in whom dwells the fullness of the Logos, and the content of wisdom which the Church, through her meditation on Christ's Gospel, has till now been able to draw from this fullness. What is revealed is one thing — quite another thing is what we are able to grasp of this revelation, even with the help of the Holy Spirit. Christ has made known to his disciples “all things that he has heard of his Father” (Jn. 15, 15) – and yet Christ was well aware that this truth would need time in order to be understood (Jn 16:12): “I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth”.

How could the Church be blamed for imposing her idea of Christ as the absolute truth, on the other great religious traditions, if she needs the help of these other great religious traditions in order to understand the very content of this absolute truth – if she is on her way towards this full understanding of Reality, exactly as other great religious traditions are? Christian theologians are no more imposing their truth on other traditions than representatives of other traditions are

imposing theirs when, after having discovered aspects of the Christian tradition, they conclude that their perception of their own religious truth has become richer?

Of course, I do not imply that authentic Church Tradition contains errors or mistakes — I am only claiming that this Tradition is not yet complete, which I find quite fortunate. It might sound awkward that the Church, in order to reach the full consciousness of her inner mystery, should learn something from non-Christian traditions. Yet this corresponds precisely to the content of Henri Le Saux's experience:

As we started again to tackle the texts of St John, the texts appeared now in a totally different light. We were coming back from the Upanishads to the Bible with, as it were, eyes wonderfully wide open, eyes that had henceforth got accustomed to depth, and were now able to penetrate in a totally new way the mystery of the Lord.

This experiment is reversible, since, from a Christian point of view, any authentic religious tradition partakes of the same unique and divine Logos:

A somewhat similar thing might happen if a Hindu, after having been trained for a long time in the reading of the Scriptures and the meditation of the Mystery of the inner self, would finally start reading the Gospel in the radiance of his "atmanic" experience.

The Christian conviction that the Scriptures give a fuller access to the Truth than the Upanishad entails by no means a reduction of the Upanishad to this specific Truth, which the Church claims to know and teach:

We did not intend — this must be constantly reiterated for fear of possible misunderstandings — to discover in the Bible, through the confrontation with the Vedanta, a *sensus plenior* and still unknown that the sacred author himself would have ignored. We were simply discovering what the Lord himself had placed in it. We were also aware of the fact that there are always new discoveries to make while reading the Scriptures.

By virtue of its unique relationship to the Logos, the tradition of the Vedanta points at something which, although present in the Scriptures and at the deepest level of mankind's consciousness, could not be identified by readers belonging to the European Christian tradition. The Truth contained in the text of Saint John's Gospel ("what the Lord himself had placed in it"), emerges from the contact with the Upanishad, as the intimate secret, prior to any cultural determination, that dwells in the depths of men's consciousness.

To summarize, the contact with non-Christian religious traditions initiates within the Christian consciousness a process of defamiliarization, which leads ultimately to the reminiscence — the Socratic *anamnesis* — of the divine Logos according to its fullest dimensions.

Of course, the logological view is inherent to Christianity (it would be relevant to search for this notion's echo in Buddhism and Brahmanism), but our point is not to deny the superiority and essential difference of Christian faith compared to other religious traditions — otherwise confessing “being Christian” and willing to propagate one's faith would lose any meaning — but to show that such conviction, far from hindering genuine dialogue with other religious traditions, is a powerful argument to furthering it.

Note the conclusion of the passage quoted above:

It is precisely for the purpose of helping men to move forward into the mystery of His Word that God has created a great diversity among men and cultures.

As they enter into dialogue with one another, Christians and non-Christians have to go through the same process of defamiliarizing themselves from their traditional perceptions of the Truth. Christians need non-Christians in order to perceive better what is contained in the full revelation of the Truth entrusted to the Church, whereas non-Christians need Christians in order to investigate the possibility of a fully historical revelation of the Truth they convey.

What makes Interreligious Dialogue so attuned to the Catholic Church is that we do not refer only to the dogmatic teaching of the first millennium when it comes to defining the faith, nor do we appeal only to the existential moment of a personal conversion to Christ. Catholicism cannot dissociate Christian faith from metaphysics in the Aristotelian sense of the word, that is from the understanding of Being *qua* Being. It is through this relationship to Being, derived from knowledge of Christ, that the Church communicates invisibly with non-Christian religions. In aid of this communication, the Church goes so far as to acknowledge the limits of her understanding of the ultimate Truth, as this understanding is submitted to the limits of the human mind and historical circumstances. She is thus aware of the need to meditate theologically on the message of wisdom conveyed by other religions in order to understand the content of *her own* wisdom. She readily recognizes here a way to become what she is and has never had ceased to be: Catholic, that is universal. This means that, once again, the Catholic Church has to undergo deep changes in order to stay faithful to herself.

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