

The Development of Interreligious Dialogue after the Second Vatican Council: A Theological Reflection¹

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I wish to first of all thank Monsignor Fitzgerald for placing his trust in me, and inviting me to present a theological paper on the development of interreligious dialogue after the Second Vatican Council.

Since this is an immense task, I would like to start off by indicating the limitations of this paper. On one hand, I shall not address the specific problems posed by Christianity's dialogue with Judaism; it is not because they do not deserve all our attention, but it is precisely their importance that would justify another paper. On the other hand, I will not be able to mention (except briefly) particular issues posed by the dialogue with this or that religion; yet another limitation, since we are all well aware that the dialogue with Islam (very different depending on countries) is not the same as the dialogue with Hinduism or Buddhism, and that the dialogue with so-called traditional religions also has its specific characteristics - without mentioning the specific problems posed by the phenomenon of the new religiosities and the "New Age". Finally, in using for reference the four forms of dialogue now traditionally used — the "dialogue of life", the "dialogue of work", the "dialogue of theological exchanges" and the "dialogue of religious experience"¹, - I immediately acknowledge that my paper will basically be restricted to the perspective of the reflection followed by *theologians* during recent decades and up to modern times. Thereby outlined, this paper will consist in identifying how Christianity globally stands with regard to the other religions and in reflecting on the fundamental issues posed. I shall begin by remembering the most important changes that theological thought has experienced on this subject after the Second Vatican Council; I will then attempt a diagnosis of the current situation and more specifically of the problems we are faced with; finally, I will attempt to indicate the paths to be followed that might allow an understanding or overcoming of these problems, thereby providing a small contribution to a "Christian theology of religions".

I - EVOLUTION AFTER THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

One should first of all remember the importance of certain events that have taken place during recent decades, starting with the famous meetings held in Assisi since 1986, and also acknowledge the considerable impulse provided for relations between Christians and other believers. One should also bear in mind the teachings that have been developed in a certain number of ecclesial documents — from the Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* dated 1975 to the document *Dominus Jesus* dated 2000, including the encyclical *Redemptoris missio* and the various documents provided by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (in particular the document entitled *Dialogue and*

¹ See *Dialogue et annonce. Reflexions et orientations concernant le dialogue interreligieux et l'annonce de l'Évangile* (Document by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelisation of People), § 42, in *La Documentation catholique*, n° 2036 (October 20th 1991), p. 881. Editor's Note: This document also exists in English.

Proclamation)². These documents bear witness to the precious reflections made on the requirements and modalities of an authentic dialogue; they also bear witness to a growing insistence with regard to the universal work of the Holy Spirit, while also reminding us of the fundamental enunciations of the faith about the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ.

I will not however try to comment on these different texts, but would rather — as I have mentioned — present here the principal changes that, on our subject, have marked the thoughts of theologians since the Second Vatican Council. Without claiming to be exhaustive³, it appears possible to distinguish at least three trends in the development of this paper.

1) The *first* trend appeared between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. Until then, fundamentally, one was in the presence of two concurrent positions: on one hand the position that, following the protestant school of thought linked to K. Barth or to H. Kraemer, vigorously emphasised the uniqueness of the Revelation provided by God in Christ and, therefore, leading to a severe assessment of the world of human religions; on the other hand there was a position that, within the framework of reflections proposed by Catholic theologians such as H. de Lubac and J. Danielou, and especially following the indications found in *Lumen gentium* and in *Nostra aetate*, acknowledged religions as having values or "seeds of truth" that — on condition that these are separated from other elements marked by ignorance or sin — deserve to be included in the mystery of Christ and His mystical Body. Karl Rahner also situated himself within this second school of thought, although he provided a new inflexion with his famous concept of an "anonymous Christianity". Now, towards the end of the 1970s, a new debate emerged, caused by a current of thought called "pluralist", and that can be summarised as follows: the second position just mentioned, although preferable to the position assumed by K. Barm, must also be considered as insufficient because maintaining Christianity in a position of excellence and superiority; thereby not sufficiently acknowledging the plurality of religions in the world. It was not Hans Kiing who initiated this current; in his book *Etre chretien* he remained attached to the idea of a normative reference to Jesus Christ; it was rather theologians like John Hick and Paul Knitter who — with various nuances — tended to break away from the previously mentioned currents of thought. John Hick, in particular, became known for his famous metaphor of the Copernican revolution: until now, he explained, the other religions gravitated around Christianity like the sun rotates around the earth according to Ptolemy's ideas; at this point all religions (including Christianity) must be understood as gravitating around the "Ultimate reality". The arguments invoked were in part philosophical (no religion could pretend to have complete knowledge of the Absolute), and partly exegetical and theological (indicating that Jesus Himself referred to the reality of the "Kingdom", transcending all social, cultural or religious particularity, or even emphasising the difference between the historical Jesus and the universal Christ — according to R. Panikkar's formula: "Jesus is the Christ, but the Christ is more than Jesus"). As is well known, this school of thought spoke in favour of issues that not only would go beyond an excessively ecclesiocentric point of view, but equally a Christocentric point of view, and this to the advantage of a real "theocentrism" allowing

^{2 2} *Apostolic Exhortation by Paul VI Evangelii nuntiandi*, in *La Documentation catholique*, n° 1689 (January 4th 1976), p. 1-22; *The Catholic Church's Attitude to believers from other religions. Reflections concerning dialogue and mission (Secretariat for non-Christians)*, n° 1880 (September 2nd 1984), p. 844- 849; *Encyclical by John Paul II Redemptoris missio*, *ibid.*, n° 2022 (February 17th 1991), p. 152-191; *Dialogue and Proclamation (see previous note)*, *loc. cit.*, p. 874-890; *Christianity and the religions (International Theological Commission)*, *Catholic Documentation*, n° 2157 (April 6th 1997), p. 312- 332; *Dominus Jesus. Sur l'unicite et l'universalite salvifique de Jesus-Christ et de l'Eglise (Declaration de la Congregation pour la Doctrine de la Foi)*, *ibid.*, n° 2233 (1^{er} octobre 2000), p. 812-822.

³ For a detailed presentation of the schools of thought present see J. Dupuis, *Vers une theologie chretienne du pluralisme religieux* (also in English), Cerf, 1997, p. 195-237 et p. 271-306; see also M. Aebischer-Crettol, *Vers un acumenisme interreligieux. Jalons pour une theologie chretienne du pluralisme religieux*, Cerf, Paris, 2001, p. 317-629.

the reference of humanity's different traditions to the transcendent mystery of the Absolute or to the "Ultimate reality".

One will observe that it is precisely with the 'pluralist' school of thought that the expression 'the theology of religions' developed, which had already been used by others but that until then had been quite marginal. This is per se extremely significant; the "pluralist" current is effectively marked by the conviction that the traditional problem of the "redemption of others" (and *a fortiori* the "redemption of the infidels", as previously said) is no longer pertinent and must be linked to an issue in which, far from simply taking an interest in the individual destiny of believers within the framework of more or less mistaken or sinful traditions, one now envisages religions as such in a more favourable light acknowledging them to have a positive meaning within God's plan. It is however this same pluralist current that also forged the categories of "exclusivism" and "inclusivism" to characterise previous positions: such categories, used as a sort of rejecting device, allowed precisely the self-definition of the current's own novelty. This said, one must emphasise that the "pluralist" current itself rediscovers very different tendencies. I wish in particular to attract attention to the difference between the 'pluralist' current as it appeared in England and the United States, on one hand, and the reflections of certain theologians defined as "pluralists" in the Asian context. In the first case the current effectively initially developed within the framework of a rather university-like research, the result of dissatisfaction caused by the "exclusivist" and "inclusivist" approaches; in the other case, initial concern was to start from the multi-religious context of Asian societies, while expecting theology to acknowledge such a context, to re-think in a pertinent manner Christianity's position with regard to other religions. It is however true that in practice there are common points between the theses presented by both one side and the other. The so-called 'pluralist' theologians did however share the same concern of distancing themselves from both "exclusivist" and "inclusivist" theologians, as proved by the collection, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness. Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* — which was answered from the "inclusivist" side by another collection entitled, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered. The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*⁴.

2) This debate between "pluralism" and "inclusivism" itself encouraged a *second trend*, marked by the appearance of what one could call, using the words of Jacques Dupuis, a "Christian theology of religious pluralism". This last formula states the case clearly: on one hand there is the intention to not return to the "inclusivist" position, while on the other there is a clear distancing from forms of pluralism not respecting the Christian reference to Jesus Christ as the only mediator between God and humankind. This is effectively Jacques Dupuis's concern: he believes it necessary to move towards a "theology of religious pluralism", but aware of the difficulties raised by extreme forms of pluralism, he also indicates that "the Christian faith cannot avoid stating the constitutive uniqueness of Jesus Christ: in Him, historical particularity coincides with universal meaning"⁵. I will not discuss here Jacques Dupuis' precise arguments, nor the debates his work (*Towards a Christian theology of religious pluralism*⁶) gave rise to. It is sufficient to emphasise his position in the field of

⁴ J. Hick and P. Knitter ed., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness. Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, New York, 1987; G. D'Costa ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered. The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, New York, 1990.

⁵ J. Dupuis, *op. cit.*, Cerf, 1997, p. 461; see also his most recent book. *La rencontre du christianisme et des religions. De l'affrontement au dialogue* (translated from Italian), Cerf, Paris, 2002, in particular p. 244-247.

⁶ See Dupuis, "'The Truth Will Make you Free': The Theology of Religious Pluralism Revisited", in *Louvain Studies*, 24 (1999/3), p. 211-263; M. L. Fitzgerald, "Jacques Dupuis, Toward a Christian Theology of Pluralism", in *Pro Dialogo*, 108 (2001/3), p. 334-341; *Notification de la Congregation pour la Doctrine de la Foi au P. Jacques Dupuis s.j.*, in *La Documentation catholique*, n° 2244 (March 18th 2001), p. 271-273; *Commentaire de la Notification*, *ibid.*, p. 273-276.

the theology of religions: a position which is neither that of classical "inclusivism" nor that of "extreme pluralism", but which, within the framework of the discussion with the most radical pluralist theologians, makes an effort to preserve the reference to Jesus Christ as the only mediator between God and humankind. This is also Claude Geffre's idea: on one hand he is persuaded that one must speak of religious pluralism "no longer simply effectively, but in *principle*", in the sense that this pluralism "is *wanted* by God" or to say the least "is part of God's mysterious plan"; on the other hand he believes that "it is possible to continue to claim for oneself the uniqueness of Christ's mediation without falling into the mistakes and risks posed by a Christian imperialism, intolerable as far as other religions are concerned and dissuasive as regards to all dialogue"; in distancing himself from J. Hick's thesis, he presents the mystery of Jesus Christ as the "universal reality" specifying that: "Instead of dismissing the scandal of the Incarnation as an encounter between the absolute and the relative, it is in analysing in depth this encounter that it becomes possible to ensure Christ's universality, and therefore that of Christianity - avoiding at the same time the hurdle of imperialism as regards to the real attitude of Christians when faced with their non-Christian interlocutors⁷".

3) A *third trend* can be found in the recent evolution of the theology of religions. It is negatively characterised by a certain distancing from the problems of the "pluralist" theologies, from their manner of crystallising debates around the opposition between "exclusivism", "inclusivism" and "pluralism", and more fundamentally from their dominant concern with affirming the role of religions in God's plan. Positively, it is mainly animated by concern for taking into account the real experience of the interreligious encounter and, within the same context, fully acknowledging the singularity of Christianity — the acknowledgement of this singularity not understood as an obstacle to dialogue but rather as how it is able to provide it with its real foundation, for the benefit of humankind. This is for example the position assumed by Jean-Marc Aveline: "I do not believe that, for the years to come, the most important question will be that of the role of religions as far as redemption is concerned, although I acknowledge that the fact that this question as it has been posed, marked a decisive stage in recent theology's history. I believe instead that the dynamics of theological research will instead lead to the inner vibration that occurs in the intelligence of faith once, on one hand, one accepts to consider the *otherness*, the hidden, the irreducible part of Himself that is inherent to the revelation that God gives in Jesus Christ according to the confession of evangelical testimony, and also accepting to understand God's revelation as a *commitment* to the redemption of the world, and the Church's mission as the renewed expression of this commitment in view of the Kingdom⁸". Within this perspective, there is no reason therefore to reflect on the place the different religions occupy in God's plan — after all who are we to pronounce an opinion on this issue? —; what is instead required from Christians is that they should fully acknowledge the singularity of their own tradition and that, based on this, they be fully committed in the encounter with other believers, concerned with contributing in this manner also to justice and peace.

These are at least three of the trends that have appeared during the past two or three decades. Obviously they are not sufficient for providing a complete picture of recent evolutions, but they do provide a few reference points and thereby prepare us for a diagnosis of the current situation.

II - A DIAGNOSIS OF THE CURRENT SITUATION

⁷ Cl. Geffre, *Profession Theologien. Quelle pensée chrétienne pour le XXI siècle? Entretien avec Gwendoline Jarczyk*, Albin Michel, 1999, p. 139, 143 et 145-146.

⁸ J.-M. Aveline, "Le dialogue interreligieux, chemin d'espérance pour l'humanité", in *Chemins de dialogue*, 21 (May 2003), p. 33-34. Also see the fundamental study by the same author: *L'enjeu christologique en théologie des religions, l'œuvre de Tillich - Troeltsch*, Cerf, Paris, 2003.

It is not necessary to insist on the precious acquisitions of the recent period. Generally speaking, one cannot help being impressed by the considerable development of reflections on Christianity and other religions, a reflection however that does not simply apply to a specific field of Christian theology, but that progressively involves all Christian theology. There are various experiences: without being able to return to the specific contribution of the Church's texts as well as meetings and dialogues organised in the field, let us at least remember that theological literature has been enriched, all at once, with a considerable number of documents of global or systematic importance in the field of the theology of religions, but also with numerous particular studies that have allowed the comparison, on various subjects, of the doctrines and practices of different religions. The debates themselves among the different schools of thought previously mentioned, have greatly contributed to a more in-depth analysis of the reflection, both by the manner in which they emphasised the limitations of certain positions and the solutions they attempted to propose.

The ascertainment of such development must not however prevent us from identifying the difficulties present, since each in its ways reveals paths still to be followed. I wish to at least list the most important among these.

A *first difficulty* concerns the diversity of situations, mentioned at the very beginning of this paper. To provide only one example, at times reflections formulated in an Indian context — and marked by a legitimate concern of opening to the spiritual richness of Hinduism - do not appear transposable to the situation in the Near East and the Middle East, where Christian communities are confronted with a strong Islamic majority, or to the situation in Western Europe where Christianity is both weakened by the increasing competition posed by certain religions, by the phenomenon of a "new religiosity" and (in the case of France) by the resurgence of militant secularism.

A *second difficulty* arises from the very evolutions I mentioned earlier. The debates held between "inclusivism" and "pluralism", like those ongoing also within the "pluralist" current, emphasise a basic issue: how far can one go in stating the positive role played by other religions in God's plan? On one hand, for example, is it possible to be satisfied with the traditional "inclusivist" position that, due to the manner in which it positions other religions compared to Christianity, risks providing Christianity with a superior status and limiting instead the possibility of an authentic dialogue? But on the other hand, one could ask whether, by acknowledging excessively globally the positive role of other religions in God's plan, one does not risk concealing the incompatibilities that necessarily exist between these religions and Christianity? Does one not above all risk damaging what is usually called the "uniqueness of Christ"?

The *third difficulty* consists precisely in this issue of the uniqueness of Christ. I consider this the most radical issue. Of course, one should first eliminate a few misunderstandings on this subject; effectively, it can happen that Asian theologians challenge the insistence shown by Western theology about the uniqueness of Christ, but that above all they challenge the manner in which Christianity has wanted to impose the Christian faith to the disadvantage of values spread by Asia's great religious traditions; if correctly understood, their criticism effectively concerns a degree of ostentation shown by Christianity in its behaviour with regard to others, and not on the statement concerning the uniqueness of Christ as such. However, once this misunderstanding has been removed, the basic issue appears in all its radicalism: imagine that Christianity had never attempted to impose itself on anyone, imagine it is perfectly respectful of the right of other believers to profess their own faith, does it not at least remain the bearer of an unprecedented claim due to what is inscribed in the heart of the profession of the Christian faith — acknowledging the man Jesus as "the Only Son", as the "only mediator between God and humankind", as the "only Saviour"? And since it is impossible to relativise an enunciation so central to the Christian faith, the question

becomes therefore: how does one justify such an enunciation in times in which we are marked by such an acute conscience regarding the plurality of religions?

This issue becomes a real one in situations known as "dual belonging" or "multiple belonging", which leads us to become aware of a *fourth difficulty* — that of coexistence between adhering to the Christian faith and references to practices and beliefs belonging to other traditions. The problem appears in various ways; in some cases it is men and women who, having become Christians, remain attached to certain aspects of their own cultural and religious traditions (this applies often to certain African societies or the Asian context);

or they are Christians who follow practices or beliefs close to Hinduism or Buddhism, often seen in Western Europe or in North America. In many cases, of course, the Christians in question only superficially follow other traditions, without their faith being really affected; often these borrowed elements are basically cultural, and as such do not affect their basic adhesion to Christianity. At times, however, one is in the presence of a pure and simple juxtaposition between practices and beliefs that cannot easily be reconciled. Hence the problem: how should one theologially interpret the situations of dual or multiple belonging? Can one in certain cases admit their legitimacy, if the Christian belonging remains dominant and relativised, due to the extent of elements borrowed from other traditions? Should one on the contrary fear the risk of "syncretistic" confusions that could seriously damage the Christian identity? One however discovers the limitations of a theology that, in its way of confronting the problem of relations between Christianity and other religions, appears not to pay attention to these phenomena of our times — phenomena that are without doubt increasing to the same extent that a mingling of culture and religion marks these times of "globalisation".

The evolutions of the theology of religions place us in the presence of a *fifth difficulty*: how does one justify the Church's evangelising role and work? We see here, in a sense, an inversion of what was the global movement of theological reflections after the Second Vatican Council. It has often been said that, effectively, the immediately post-Council theology had been centred on the question of the Church, and that after that it showed greater interest in issues concerning Christ, to then at last address the issue of the Triune God. Now, did the problems raised by Christianity's debate with the religions not lead to following the same path in the opposite direction? To the extent that the issue concerning God- is considered as the principle question here (in particular within the framework of the so-called "pluralist" currents, often denned as "theocentric"), one inevitably not only once again questions Christology (as I mentioned with regard to debates about the uniqueness of Christ), but once again addresses also the strictly ecclesiological issue. It is the very radicalness of the questions raised by the pluralist theology of religions that moves us in this direction; in fact, if this theology considers that religions have a positive meaning in the history of redemption, the problem still arises with all its force: why the Church? Even if renouncing (as one should) the straightforward interpretation of the saying "no salvation outside the Church", should one not at least justify the role of the Church and her mission of announcing the Gospel within the context of our multi-religious situation?

Finally I wish to recall a *sixth difficulty* that is not in the same league as the previous ones, but that also requires consideration: the issue linked to interreligious violence. Of course we are not unaware that this violence is to a great extent political; how could one deny, however, that in many cases this violence is linked to certain strictly religious schools of thought? The date of September 11th had already assumed a symbolic value: can the theology of religions ignore the fact that violence has to be resorted to in the name of a certain understanding of Islam, and that, in the opposite sense, a war has been declared against Iraq, suspected of being a centre of terrorism called "Islamist"? Can this theology also ignore other forms of violence, political of course, but

nonetheless linked to religions, that have occurred for a number of decades in various parts of the world — whether in the Near East, India, and Pakistan, or in Sri Lanka? This does not mean ignoring all the efforts for peace, and in particular rejoicing at the initiatives undertaken by Pope John Paul II since the famous meeting in Assisi, as well as by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace; however the recurrence or at times even the development of forms of violence — more or less linked to religious traditions — should of course invite theology to reflect on these forms of violence, that in part feed on references to religious matters and claim to find in these the ultimate foundations for their legitimacy.

The difficulties I have observed are, as one can see, of great importance and it would be foolish to expect excessively immediate answers to be provided. I will therefore not attempt to re-address them systematically, but I will try at least to provide a few paths that the theology of religions could follow in attempting to clarify and overcome these problems.

III- PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

I begin by reminding you of the central text in the *Nostra Aetate* about the Church's relations with other religions:

"The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She 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. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ 'the way, the truth, and the life' (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to himself".⁹

This carefully balanced document invites two requirements to be instantly formulated which the whole of Christian theology of religions must make the effort to consider. The first is a need for "respect" for what is "true and holy" in other religions; one should of course add, based on other parts of the Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, that this respect should not only concern that which "is true and holy" but must also characterise the attitude with regard to other believers themselves (it is this that is more emphasised in the Declaration's first and last paragraphs). One will observe an important point: as far as religions proper are concerned, the Declaration obviously does not state that all is true and holy in other religions, but acknowledges that there are a number of divergences between their practices or doctrines and those of Christianity; but there are elements of truth and holiness in other religions, and the text's first objective is precisely an invitation to "respect them". The second requirement is that of faithfulness to Christ, who is not here qualified as "unique", but about Whom numerous expressions provide us with the equivalent: Christ Himself is "the way, the truth and the life", it is in Him that "men may find the fullness of religious life", it is in Him that "God has reconciled all things to Himself".

Hence two requirements: this is the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, a teaching that would often be repeated in the Magisterium's documents during the following decades and that represents a rule for all Christian theology of religions. One must not ignore that these two requirements are so to speak in mutual tension; this must precisely be a fruitful tension and not at all a contradiction. In wishing to correctly interpret this tension, it is not for example enough to say: "one must respect other believers or all that is true and holy in them, *but* one must also be faithful to one's faith"; the two requirements must not be understood as being conflicting, they are rather to be grasped in their articulation and even in their fundamental unity.

⁹ *Nostra Aetate*, §2.

Hence the impact on the theology of religions. Seriously considering *the two* requirements just mentioned, obviously involves excluding the possibility of still reasoning in the traditional perspective of the "salvation of the infidels": accepting that other believers can be saved *in spite of* their religions, which are globally mistaken and sinful, would mean forgetting one of the requirements enunciated by the Council, acknowledging all "that is true and holy" in these religions. Hence the impact on the theology of religions. However seriously considering *both* requirements mentioned, equally excludes, in a Christian perspective, being able to consider all religions as being globally true and holy: such an intention (in addition to not considering the real divergences between religions) would sacrifice the second requirement already enunciated by the Council, that of faithfulness to Christ, who Christians do not consider one religious founder among others, but who is "the way, the truth and the life", and it is in His light that all religions must be discerned and assessed. One could also ask oneself, paradoxically, whether the same intention would not also affect the first requirement, to the extent that an excessively global manner of speech with regard to the positive value of religions in God's plan would — no less than the so-called "inclusivist position" - risk appearing as an insufficiently respectful statement with regard to other religions, about which Christianity would seem to claim to know *all* the significance in human history and in the economy of salvation. Is it not already a lot to dare to acknowledge what "is true and holy" in other religions, and does respect not imply that one renounces complete knowledge of what they represent within God's plan?

The reference to the two requirements formulated by the Second Vatican Council does not however only help in distancing oneself from approaches that would not be satisfactory from this point of view. It is also a positive invitation to specify the paths following which a Christian theology of religions could precisely and seriously address these two requirements — without opposing one to the other, without being content with juxtaposing them, but rather attempting to acknowledge their fundamental unity. Such a theology should above all answer the following question: how should one account for the Christian faith, not *in spite of the* need for respect with regard to other believers or the values of their traditions, but *with the very attitude* of this respect? Of course, if one turns the question around: how is this respect to be expressed, not *in spite of our* love for Jesus Christ, but *within the framework* of our adhesion to Him and also in the name of our beliefs?

This is the crucial question we are faced with today. Without claiming to solve it in all its aspects, I would like to at least suggest four stages that a Christian theology of religions must follow to honour this issue and to also answer some of the difficulties I have mentioned in part two of this paper.

1) The first stage consists in undertaking a critical discernment of our history as far as Christianity's relations with other religions are concerned

A number of clarifications are needed here. First of all the expression "critical discernment" is not necessarily endowed with a negative meaning; if one bears in mind the etymology of the word "critical", it indicates rather something involving choice, or "judgement", allowing one to identify what is neither good nor just, but that also allows the acknowledgment of the values present. On the other hand the expression "critical discernment" does not imply that we must position ourselves as accusers with regard to the past: furthermore we could easily give in to anachronism, assessing the past in the light of today's criteria, we must not forget that the ultimate judgement is nothing to do with us, but arises from the mystery of God.

What however authorises us to pass judgement on the past? And I would even say: what obliges us to do so? On the one hand, due to the fact that we ourselves are members of the humankind that preceded us, we cannot remain indifferent with regard to what has been done and said: saying

nothing on this subject would mean failing in our responsibilities — just as we would be failing in our responsibilities if we refused to assume a position among our contemporaries to approve what they say that is good, or pronounce our disagreement with those who seem to us mistaken or unjust. What on the other hand pushes us to reanalyse our past in a "critical" manner, are those very requirements previously mentioned — the need for respect as regards to other believers or all that is true and holy in their religions, the need for faithfulness to Jesus Christ as "the way, the truth and the life". These are not requirements we ourselves have formulated (although we totally make them our own), but requirements that today seem to us inspired by the Gospel itself: this is clear for the second requirement, that involving faithfulness to Christ, but the same applies to the first requirement - at least in the sense in which the Gospel, although it does not speak of religions as we do today, preconises clearly a refusal of violence and a radical attitude of respect as far as others are concerned. In attempting therefore a critical discernment of our history, we do not claim to judge this history from our own point of view, but to observe it with eyes enlightened by the light of the Gospel and allowing us to discover a subject to be "confessed" in the Augustinian sense of the word - the confession of sins of course, but also celebration for all testimony of truth and holiness, and this in the presence of others and also watched by God.

This task has already begun, as confirmed by the "declarations of repentance" seen during the last one or two decades and especially those addressing forms of anti-Semitism to which Christians succumbed in the course of history, or during the 20th Century, but also those that address all the forms of violence unleashed against other believers in the name of the "true religion". Acknowledging these forms of violence does not call into doubt the sincerity of Christians who wished to remain entirely faithful to Christ's Gospel to the extent of sacrificing their own lives, as happened during the Crusades; but it means acknowledging that the violence perpetrated against other believers, whatever the motivation, is objectively contrary to the Gospel's fundamental requirements, and the declarations of repentance have the merit of publicly acknowledging this and asking for pardon. Of course one must hope that other believers will do the same as regards their respective traditions: other religions too have used violence against Christianity in past centuries. But we cannot do this for them; what instead is our duty is to bear witness ourselves that we acknowledge Christianity's faults with regard to respect for other believers. And of course we must also recognise faults with regard to another requirement, that of faithfulness to Christ; it is however true that in the days known as those of "Christendom" (and no doubt unlike present times), it was not above all faith in Christ as the only Saviour that was lacking, but the problem consisted rather in the fact that in the name of this faith one did not back away from all kinds of violence against other believers.

We should however also not forget that a "confession" does not only concern the confession of sins. A critical discernment of our tradition should above all acknowledge all that, in past history, witnessed a correct attitude as regards to the Gospel: above all of course, faith in Jesus of Nazareth as the only Son of God, but also a certain manner of considering the destiny of others (paying attention to seriously address the Biblical revelation of a plan for universal salvation), and even an evangelical manner of behaving in relations with other believers (as revealed by the testimony of Francis of Assisi in his encounter with Muslims). Acknowledging this is also part of the "critical discernment" of our tradition. Perhaps we do not often emphasise this enough, running the risk of considering the past as a simple contrast for emphasising our current attitude (instead of finding there also encouragements or promises for our times), above all running the risk of sinning with ingratitude as regards to God and those who bore witness to Him following the Gospel.

Whether however it is a question of remembering mistakes made or those who bore testimony to Christ's Gospel, what matters is to understand that the task we are faced with is today demanded by the very requirements of the Second Vatican Council in *Nostra Aetate*. It is both faithfulness to

Christ and the imperative involving respect for other believers which oblige us to undertake this journey in memory. One should hope that addressing the past will contribute on one hand to our own purification, and on the other to reconciliation with believers of other religions (assuming, let us repeat, that they undertake the same task of addressing their own traditions). Accomplishing such a task already indicates certifying — through the mediation of an analysis of history — our devotion to the two requirements of faithfulness and respect.

But this mediation of an analysis of history is obviously not enough. It is today also that we must bear witness to faith in Christ, while respecting other believers — hence the second and third stages of our reflection, with the second being centred on the issue of Jesus Christ as "unique", and the third consisting in showing how witness borne to Jesus Christ does not exclude, but on the contrary implies, respect for other believers.

2) *The second stage therefore addresses the acknowledgment of Jesus Christ as "unique"*

In insisting on this point, I do not intend to address the development of a theology of the Holy Spirit that, if correctly understood, really helps to envisage God's communication within the world of religious traditions. But it is not precisely this theology of the Holy Spirit that is the problem today; it is rather the strictly Christological issue, and hence it is to this that we should initially address our reflections.

Of course, as I shall repeat later, the acknowledgment of Jesus Christ is part of a profession of faith that, as such, cannot be imposed on others. On the other hand, it is important to repeat that certain misunderstandings must be dispelled. Therefore, when we speak of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, it is Jesus Christ we are discussing and not at all Christianity that in this or that figure it has assumed in the course of history (this is an important point, because as previously mentioned, it happens that one denounces the affirmation of the uniqueness of Christ as a "western" affirmation; the confusion can no doubt be explained by the fact that, in the practices of western missionaries, the proclamation of Jesus Christ, the Lord and Saviour of all, was often mingled with certain pretexts western Christianity had in imposing itself in other continents; but this is precisely an induced confusion). One should also, to a certain extent, distinguish the affirmation of the oneness of Christ from an affirmation that would lead to the uniqueness of Christianity as such; or more exactly, if Christianity is to be acknowledged as unique among religions, it is precisely (from what is here our point of view) as the testimony of Jesus Christ who, himself, is "unique" in a totally radical sense.

Hence we once again return to this uniqueness of Christ with all misunderstandings dispelled. There is in this a crucial affirmation, which certainly could be expressed in other manners as well, but for which a Christian theology of religions cannot in any manner conceal or even diminish its importance. To understand this it is sufficient to start from the Gospel itself and the manner in which Jesus is revealed to us: He is not only unique in the sense that all human beings are unique, or even only in the sense that He is an eminent man among all men ("never before has anyone spoken like this one"¹⁰, shouted the guards notes the *Gospel according to John*); He is unique in a unique sense, as indicated by many famous expressions in the New Testament — for example the one in the *Gospel according to John* who speaks of the son as the "only Son" (*Monogenesis*), or the one in the *First Letter to Timothy* describing Jesus as the "one mediator between God and the human race", or the one in the *Letter to the Hebrews* presenting the Son as a great Priest who offered himself "one sacrifice for sins", and many more such expressions¹¹...

¹⁰ John 7,46.

¹¹ See John 1,18; 1 Tim 2,5; He 10.10; also see John 14.6; Ac 4,12; Ph 2.9 et 11; He 1,2; Ap 1,17 and 21,6.

Whatever the diversities in these expressions may be, a Christian theology of religions must in particular be attentive to the three fundamental mysteries through which the uniqueness of Christ is revealed to us. First of all the mystery of the Incarnation: it is important to show that this is not a simple manifestation of the divine (as has happened through men and women profoundly united to God), but instead the becoming-man of the only Son of God and therefore, as such, a unique event in the entire history of humankind. Then there is the mystery of the Cross: this is the Son of God Himself who offered His life to the very end and died for us and for all humankind. Finally there is the mystery of the Resurrection: an unprecedented event in history and one through which Jesus really became the "first-born among the dead". A Christian theology of religion has the duty of proving how each of these mysteries indicates in its own way the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. This partly involves a doctrinal comparison with other religions, a comparison which obviously is not addressed to deny the original and unique characteristics of this or that religious founding figure in other traditions, but to acknowledging the incomparable uniqueness of Jesus Christ. This on the other hand leads to a reflection on the history of the Christological dogma, allowing the acknowledgment in particular of the intense reflection of the Church Fathers between the 4th and the 7th Centuries, who certainly reflected within a very different situation (that of controversies with Arian, Nestorian and Monophysite positions), but who within this context made the effort to announce the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as true man and true God. This finally leads to a reflection analogous to the one developed by Saint Thomas Aquinas when, in yet another totally different context, he asked himself whether one single divine person could assume two human natures and whether the Son of God had to assume the human nature of all his creatures; let us simply mention that Thomas, although acknowledging that *God, per se*, could have assumed two human natures ("because the created could not pose limitations to the uncreated¹²"), strongly rejected the hypothesis according to which the Son of God might have assumed the human natures of all his creatures:

"...this would deviate from the dignity of the Son of God Incarnate who, in his human nature, is 'the first among many brothers', as He is, according to His divine nature, 'the first born among all creatures, all things being created in Him'. All men effectively have the same dignity. — Finally, one agrees that, if only one divine person is incarnated, only one human nature is assumed, so that unity is safeguarded by both sides¹³".

Christianity's dialogue with other religions leads us therefore to once again address, following the various paths suggested here, the crucial issue concerning Christ's identity. It is a question today — as it was yesterday, albeit in a new context — of acknowledging what we have received from the Scriptures: the faith according to which Jesus Christ is not a man like others - he was eminent —, but a unique man among all others because He was God's presence amidst us and who, crucified one day in time, rose from the dead. Here I have only addressed the fundamental enunciations of the Incarnation and the paschal mystery, but one really should complete this with other affirmations also left to us in the New Testament and developed by the Church's great tradition — from John's meditation on the Word present in God to the eschatological subjects of Christ's parousia at the end of history.

Hence one observes the incidences of this reflection on the problem of "dual belonging". If this is understood to mean that the Christian may continue to follow certain ancestral traditions (not only cultural but strictly religious), the issue is to see whether these traditions are compatible, or not, with adhesion to the only Saviour, Jesus Christ; if so there is nothing to fear, and one should even rejoice that conversion to Christ allows the acknowledgment of this legacy (thereby endowing it with a new meaning); but in such a case why use the expression "dual belonging" which is

¹² *Somme theologique*, I^{ia}, qu. 3, art. 7, *resp.* French translation Ch.-V. Heris, "Revue des jeunes", 1927, p. 151).

¹³ *Ibid.*, I^{ia}, qu. 4, art. 5, *resp.* *{loc. cit.}*, p. 184).

ambiguous? If on the contrary, the fact of remaining attached to these traditions prevents a real adhesion to Christ, this form of "dual belonging" becomes incompatible with what is required in professing the Christian faith¹⁴.

This is therefore the second stage of a Christian theology of religions:

acknowledge, also within the debate with religions, the incomparable uniqueness of Jesus confessed as the Christ as far as Christian communities are concerned.

How can this task be honoured while respecting other believers who do not share this faith?

3) We will now address the third stage, inseparable from the second: it consists in proving how bearing witness to Jesus Christ does not exclude, but on the contrary implies, respect for the beliefs of others

It is easy to formulate a first reflection: effectively, and unlike what took place in the past, bearing witness to the unique Christ cannot be imposed on those who have other beliefs, neither by force obviously, nor by subtle attempts to oblige these believers to accept our faith. This point has become too obvious to linger excessively on it. We will simply express two considerations: on the one hand the claim to wish to impose on others our affirmations about Christ would not respect the statute of these affirmations, which are the result of an act of faith and as such require the consent of human free will; on the other hand, it would not respect the manner in which Jesus of Nazareth spoke of relations with others and therefore He Himself spoke to all those he met on his path - now the quality of the testimony born to Christ is not only linked to the justness of what is said about him, but also the manner in which it is said. Such a testimony is not therefore incompatible with a respectful attitude with regard to those of other beliefs - it is in fact required.

The question however returns, and in the radical form: if it is true that it is possible to bear witness to Jesus Christ without expecting to impose one's faith, but rather feeling profound respect for others, won't this respect necessarily be limited by the unprecedented affirmation according to which Jesus Christ is the Only Son of God, the only Mediator between God and humankind, and the world's Saviour? One observes the seriousness of the issue, not only addressing the Church's real behaviour towards those with other beliefs, but addressing the "claim" linked to the very acknowledgment of Jesus Christ as radically unique.

To answer this question, it is not sufficient to remember the very clear affirmations in the New Testament about what we today call the uniqueness of Christ; as previously mentioned; we have instead the task of showing how these affirmations do not exclude, but on the contrary imply, respect for those who believe in other religions. Nor is it sufficient to answer this question by stating that Christians have the right to acknowledge Jesus Christ as radically unique, because consequently one would acknowledge Muslims or Buddhists the right to profess their own beliefs and doctrines; such an answer would be insufficient because the Christian affirmation is, in this sense, far more radical than that of Islam (which considers Muhammad only a prophet, even if he is the greatest of prophets) and far more radical than that of Buddhism (which originally saw in Gautama the Buddha only a man, although this eminent man achieved Awakening). Stating that Jesus Christ is the Only Son of God, that He gave his life for humankind and that He is the world's Saviour, certainly does not mean that one must impose one's faith on other believers, but it does

¹⁴ An analogous discernment should be undertaken when reflecting on the experience of prayer with believers of other religions: is it a manner of expressing our desire for communion, in the full awareness of what separates us, but also sharing our spiritual research and our attachment to the values of justice and peace? Or is this a manner for relativising our confession of faith in Jesus Christ believing that all paths are equivalent and therefore indifferent?

mean, to say the least, that one acknowledges that this faith has an absolutely universal scope, in the sense that each human being is concerned by Christ in the very depths of his destiny. Now how can such a faith claim the right to the respect requested in relations with those who have other beliefs? And furthermore how can it allow itself to intrinsically establish the need for such respect? This is precisely what a Christian theology of religions must try to prove today.

The faith can above all do this by remembering that according to the great tradition, the acknowledgment of the unique Christ can never be separated from another affirmation: the call to believers to become the brothers of Christ, God's "adoptive children" - or also, expressed in another manner, "other christs". This does not obviously deny or relativise the filiation of the "Monogenic" and His human-divine destiny in all they have that is unique: He is the only one procreated for all eternity and who, having become a man, delivered Himself "once and for all" for the whole of humankind. He is the "First-born of all the dead". He is the Alpha and the Omega. All the same, in spite of such a uniqueness that is constitutive of His person, *or rather due to this uniqueness.*, He has the power to communicate to all what He has received from His Father¹⁵ - according to the well-known saying: "God became man that man might become God". While the Christian faith professes the uniqueness of the Son of God, it also states — to repeat the words of the Pauline Hymn — this Son-did not jealously retain the rank that made Him equal to God¹⁶, and that in this sense His uniqueness is not to be understood as an exclusive uniqueness, but in the sense, instead, of rendering possible communication to everyone, through the Holy Spirit, of the holiness that the Son Himself received from His Father;

Having reached this point, we already understand that faith in Christ as "the way, the truth and the life", does not prevent the acknowledgment of what is "true and holy" in other religions, not only in the sense in which the Fathers of the Church developed their theology of the Word of God existing before the coming of Christ, and already at work in the world of nations, but also in the sense that the Gift made by the Father to His Son, understood as the very condition for a universal communication of the Holy Spirit, theologically founds the existence of these testimonies of truth and holiness rendered by other believers in history after the coming of Christ — whether through certain forms of prayer or the quality of their behaviour towards others (bearing in mind that counter-testimonies may also be present, each time the religion itself is used as a guarantee or pretext for unchaining hatred or violence).

One must however also add that the relation between the Son of God and humankind falls under the sign of a grain of wheat fallen on the ground. One should remember Chapter 12 in *John's Gospel*: some Greeks have come to visit Philip and say to him "Sir, we would like to see Jesus", Philip told Andrew and together they told Jesus; now to this question posed by both the Greek and the Jews — both no doubt hoping for an immediate revelation of Jesus as the Lord of everyone —, Jesus answered with these famous words: "unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life" (John 12, 24-25). Jesus, however, did not attempt to be seen by all; His Lordship was not to occur except through the paradoxical path of His own death, and it was only in this manner that He was not to remain alone, but was to bring abundant fruit; and there would also be Christians who were not to follow the Lord except by accepting to die too, and through this path bringing many fruits. Within the framework of our reflection, this means that it is not enough to present the gift of God to His Son as "non exclusive" in the sense previously mentioned (the sense according to which He Himself is the founder of all testimonies of truth and holiness here and there in the world — through, let us

¹⁵ Safeguarding the fact once again that He received this *for all eternity* — because this belongs to Him —; it is however important to understand that this very uniqueness provides an opportunity for universal communication.

¹⁶ Cf. Ph 2,6.

remember, the universal work of the Holy Spirit -), but that this bond between the Son of God and humankind is not at all a bond of domination and that in fact it occurs through the humble grain of wheat fallen to the ground — or if one prefers to use a different word — *kenosis*.

This is the extent one must go to, in fully answering the question posed earlier: faith in Christ as "the way, the truth and the life" in no way affects respect for other believers because the Son of God does not attempt to impose Himself, however, even if attempting to acknowledge Him as the Lord, the need for radical humility comes first. Christians will obviously not use this as a pretext for relativising the universal scope of what God accomplished through His Son, but will at least understand that this universal scope is not necessarily made manifest in a visible manner; they will understand that this is however impeded wherever interreligious violence gains the upper hand (because the Kingdom of Christ, cannot be imposed with force); they will furthermore understand that it runs the risk of being distorted by a certain idea of the Christian mission, when this mission is not exercised in the manner in which Christ Himself lived - like a grain of wheat fallen to the ground.

4) This last consideration introduces the fourth stage of our route: it is the task of a Christian theology of religions to specify the meaning and the role of the Church in times of interreligious dialogue and to reflect in particular on the mission that remains hers among other believers

I previously mentioned the difficulties often encountered in modern times: generally speaking, mercifully, one is no longer tempted by a strict interpretation of the saying "no salvation outside the Church" (as often happened in the past), one instead questions the opposite, what mission can one still acknowledge for the Church in a situation in which one has a far more positive view of this or that religion, and when acknowledging other believers' right to salvation within their own respective traditions.

Now the answer to this contemporary difficulty must above all be coherent with what has been developed in the second and third stages of our reflection: bearing witness to Christ and what He has that is unique *and* showing respect for other believers. This means that the Church cannot be allowed - due to her profession of faith in the unique Christ - to permit any form of intolerance and *a fortiori* of violence with regard to other believers; this also means, in the opposite sense, that the need for respect cannot be used as an alibi for mitigating the scope of her profession of faith in Jesus Christ as the Only Son of God and Saviour of the world.

The perspective defined is faithful to the two basic orientations we have received - from the New Testament: one of these attracts attention to the particularity of the group that received the revelation of the only Christ; the other presents the need to announce the Gospel to all nations.

To illustrate the first orientation, I shall mention here the dialogue of Judas (not the Iscariot) with Jesus in Chapter 14 of *John's Gospel*. Judas asks Jesus: "Master, how does it come about that you will reveal yourself to us and not to the world?"; and Jesus answered: "whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him; and we will come back to him and make our dwelling with him" (John 14,22-23). This passage first of all indicates that the revelation of the unique Christ is given to some, but not to all; of course one cannot use this particularity as a pretext for saying that Christ is not really unique, however, the fact remains that only the disciples — and more broadly speaking the members of the Christian community — received this revelation. It is precisely this that caused Judas to ask: "Master, how does it come about that you will reveal yourself to us and not to the world?" But it is remarkable that Jesus did not answer this question directly but rather formulated a requirement for the disciples themselves: "whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him". This was the second lesson in this episode, and one sees the importance

for our proposals: if some members of the Church share the astonishment of Judas and worry that the revelation of Christ was only provided for some, they must not see in this an obstacle to their faith (as if to be acknowledged the uniqueness of Christ demanded that the revelation should now instantly be communicated to all), but should instead understand their obligation to love Christ and abide by His word — an obligation imposed upon them for the very reason they have been touched by the announcement of the Gospel.

This does not however mean that the Church should not desire the communication of this Gospel beyond its own borders. So we come to the second orientation previously mentioned: the New Testament above all emphasises the need to announce the Gospel to all nations. One should bear in mind all the texts in the Gospel involving mission, but my objective leads me above all to privilege Paul's famous passage in Chapter 10 of the *Letter to the Romans*: "there is no distinction between Jew and Greek: the same Lord is Lord of all, enriching all those who call upon him. *Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*. But how can they call on him in whom they do not believe? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach? And how can people preach unless they are sent?" (Rom 10,12-15). What is important here is to understand that there is not a contradiction between the fact that Christ was announced to some and the need for an announcement to all. On the contrary they mutually call on each other, precisely because the Church does not coincide with the world and a large space is thereby opened for the announcement of the Gospel. We must certainly believe and profoundly hope that men and women are redeemed by God even within their own religious traditions, but in no way does this affect the request made to the ecclesial community to bear witness to the uniqueness of Christ.

These two orientations we receive from the New Testament become one in reality in the mystery of election, if at least not understood as the exclusive privilege of the particular, but a condition for opening to the universal. The same applies to the election of Israel in the Bible: a particular people are chosen, but their election must be beneficial to all. The same applies to the Church, not at all in the sense that she should replace Israel (we are well aware of the serious ambiguities resulting from this idea, and the manner in which it has at times been used to legitimise forms of antisemitism), but in the sense that the Christian community is itself a particular community, in the sense that it was chosen by grace to bear witness to Christ, and not for itself but for the benefit of the whole of humankind. It is with an awareness of this mission that the need to announce the Gospel everywhere and always takes root, and this also in the multi-religious situation we are experiencing — as long as we express this hope "with gentleness and reverence", according to the famous expression in *Peter's first letter* (1 P 3,15-16). A Christian theology of religions must however show the foundation for this acknowledgment of the Church's evangelising role and work in this context that is ours, taking care to specify the conditions and needs of an ecclesial mission that must be, also in its form, as coherent as possible with the words and actions of Jesus in his encounters with the men and women of his time.

The four stages in this route we have proposed are obviously not exhaustive, and I do not claim to provide immediate answers to all the questions raised today within the framework of the theology of religions. I hope I have at least suggested routes it is possible to follow, benefiting from the intense work carried out after the Second Vatican Council, but also concerned with overcoming the difficulties encountered here and there. I hope I have also shown that in this very task, paragraph 2 of *Nostra Aetate* provides us with crucial reference points; a Christian theology of religions will always have to assess closely the manner in which it will, or will not, consider the two requirements analysed in this paper: acknowledging what is true and holy in other religions and announcing the Christ who is "the way, the truth and the life". Even more, I have attempted to emphasise that such a theology should also consider the relation between these two requirements, that of course appear as

two needs in tension with each other, but with regard to which one should rather state that they refer to the constitutive paradox of the Christian mystery - the paradox of a God wanting salvation for all human beings, who within this perspective gave us His Only Son Jesus Christ, and for whom the Holy Spirit is at work with "what is true and holy" in the religious traditions of humankind. One should add that this theology, as such, has not the power to prevent the reawakening of violence, that always risks marking religions and relations between religions; it has at least the vocation to denounce such violence, and to beg at all times for dialogue and peace. However, where these conditions are achieved, where believers in different religions accept to meet and speak in an atmosphere of mutual esteem and respect, Christian theology has the mission to listen to what other believers say about their own religions, and hence bear witness to the faith in Jesus Christ. It is no longer a time for thinking, in the name of the "true religion", of believing one should impose the Christian faith on other believers; the need now is for respect, for mutual welcoming and enriching. But in this situation today, and also within the framework of the dialogue with those believing in other religions, it is always up to the Christian community to answer the famous question Jesus one day posed to his disciples: "But who do you say that I am?" (Mt 16,15).

ⁱ This paper was originally presented in French.