



Christian Understanding of Other Religions (Part II)



III. CONCILIAR ATTITUDES TOWARD NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

The Second Vatican Council at least implicitly endorsed fulfillment theology. The Council acknowledged that non-Christian religions contain supernatural elements and saving faith. These religions not only possess supernatural elements, but also exercise a salutary function for the salvation of non-Christians. That is to say, they are not to be considered merely as natural religions. By accepting the plurality of religions and their salutary function, the Council went beyond the fulfillment theory and opened itself to a theology of dialogue in the inter-religious relationship.

A change in the attitude of the Church was set in motion by Pope John XXIII although many other factors contributed to this change. More than anything else, the Council's new approach was conditioned by the readiness to accept the new world situation, which is characterized by the emancipation of natural cultures and religions and their new self-assertion and commitment to other "Weltanschauungen". As a result, a religious pluralism by which the world moves towards a world culture -- demanding a peaceful and constructive co-operation of all forces -- has

become a definite feature in today's world. An acknowledgment of this motivating factor for the change in the Church's attitude is already expressed in the introduction to the Vatican's Declaration "Nostra Aetate." "In our time, when day to day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different people are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions." (NA 1) Cardinal Bea emphasized this point in speech, when he said,

Concerning these (non-Christian religions), it is, as far as I know, the first time in the history of the Church that a Council has laid down principles in such a solemn way. It is of great importance that we realize the great weight of the matter. It concerns the more than one billion people, who either have not yet come to the knowledge of Christ and his work of redemption, or do not acknowledge them. Nevertheless, they can be saved, if they obey the commands of their conscience. Yet, it is the very grave duty of the Church to enter into dialogue with them in this matter in every truly, every possible, way.

Moreover, the foundation of the Secretariate for the Non-Christian Religions, in 1964, is a clear example that expresses the readiness of the Church to reflect anew on her practices and attitudes in regard to non-Christian religions.

The Church's open attitude is found in many of the Council's documents. "Nostra Aetate" makes it clear that all goodness and beauty, all true holiness and grace outside Christianity are not things that new pagan saints can attain, as it were, against or in spite of their religion; but rather, they are things that are normally found in those religions, i.e., in social and institutional expressions of religious intentionality. For if God's offer of salvation as his effective will, to partake in the realization of salvation in the human dimension of time, is to be really universal, then it must be found, de facto, in the religious history of all mankind.

The change of attitude in the Church's relationship to the non-Christian world, as it is officially formulated or found scattered in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, can be expressed clearly as follows:

The earlier tendency to make the Church too readily co-terminous with the Kingdom of God has been played down. (Cf. LG. 5) The emphasis

is on the idea of the Church as the people of God that is still on the way. (Cf. LG. 8, 9, 14, 21) The erroneous or crude interpretations given in the past to the idea of "outside the Church, no salvation" have been made more precise. (Cf. AG. 7, GS. 22, 57; LG. S. 16, NA 1, etc.) Salvation is not the exclusive possession of the Church. The Catholic Church recognizes the authentically religious aspects of non-Christian religions (Cf. NA. 2, 4; LG. 16) and even the presence of that "newness" which characterises the Christian, in all men of good will. (Cf. GS. 22) God's saving will is more clearly recognized outside Israel and Christianity (Cf. DV. 3, 4; LG. 2, 16; AG. 7; NA. 1) with the result that it cannot strictly be denied that there are elements of revelation outside Israel and Christianity. There are elements of sanctification, grace and truth in the non-Christian religions. (Cf. LG. 8, 13, 17; AG. 9; NA 2) "Each branch of the human family possesses, in itself and in its worthiest traditions, some portion of the spiritual treasures entrusted by God to humanity". (GS 86) The Council has affirmed the saving presence of God and the working of the Holy Spirit in non-Christian religions. (Cf. GS. 22, 5; 26, 4, 38, 1; 39, 3) Here one can see that the Church breaks out of her self-enclosure and, concentrating less on herself, turns openly towards others.

More important than the many texts of the Council documents that propose or imply dialogue as a necessary consequence, are an ecclesiology and missiology that constitute their theological foundations. The image of the Church, drawn by the Council, is that of the "mystery," the "sacrament" the "instruments" of the universal salvific will of God. (Cf. LG 10; 15, 17, 48; GS 45; AG 1, 5, etc.) This salvific will, intimately present in the whole history of mankind (CF. GS 1), has taken concrete form in the incarnate Son of God, who is, therefore, although often in a veiled manner, the fulfilment of expectation that lives in the religion of all peoples. (Cf. AG 8, 13) Through the mission of the Holy Spirit, this salvific will is being carried on towards its fulfilment in the people of God (Cf. LG 1, 17; GS 23, 92), and the extension of God's love to the whole of mankind.

After a thorough investigation of the Second Vatican Council's teachings on the theological significance of non-Christian religions, Kurien Kunnupuram sums up his study (Ways of Salvation, p. 91) with these words.

The Second Vatican Council recognizes that non-Christian religions possess many positive values such as truth and goodness, grace and holiness. It regards these values as a sort of secret



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presence of God; as the seeds of the Word and fruits of the Spirit. The Council realizes that these religions cannot be considered merely as natural religions, because they contain supernatural elements, even saving faith. Despite error, sin and human depravity, non-Christian religions are a preparation for the Gospel, as they have an innate tendency, an inner dynamism towards Christ and his Church. For those who have not yet been existentially confronted with Christianity, non-Christian religions can serve as ways of salvation, in the sense that God saves these men in and through the doctrines and practices of these religions .

One can question, however, the exegetical validity of the last sentence in its absolute terms.

By acknowledging the salvific function of non-Christian religions, and on the basis of it, and the necessity of dialogue for the Church, the Council sets its seal of approval on the Church for dialogue. It thereby ascribes to non-Christian religions, at least from some points of view, a basic equality of partnership, that is necessarily to be presupposed for any meaningful and genuine dialogue.

IV. IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW ATTITUDE

Churches in Africa and Asia, for example, in India, live in a growing and deeper contact with other religions. They are awakening to new experiences, and our Christian faith is acquiring new horizons. The encounter with world religions appears to be one of the signs of the times which no theologian can ignore. It is in this context that a theological reflection is challenged to articulate the implications of this new attitude.

A. Presence of the Mystery of Christ

The Church's new attitude has led the Christians to the discovery of religions. It has not only helped the Christians to discover aspects of the divine mystery hitherto unknown to them, but also made them capable of a wholly new penetration into the mystery of Christ. Participating in the community of believers, which is the Church, Christians experience Jesus Christ as the ineffable mystery which can never be adequately expressed. In their daily contact with their brothers and sisters of other religions, Christians are constantly called upon to recognize the striking resonance of the same ineffable mystery, which their religious experience embodies.

This is a far cry from ideas of Kraemer quoted earlier. As Christians seek to share their religious life, they are brought to a new realization of the complexities that faith in Christ is acquiring, as well as its astonishing dimensions. God's saving action is present to all men and all communities in His word made flesh, Jesus Christ. In Christ, we see the mystery of God realized as self-emptying creative love.

In Christ, God is beginning to make all things new. In Him, men are beginning to call God, Father. In His resurrection, God has shown the significance of Jesus as Christ, the sacrament of universal salvation, even though this universality remains itself involved in God's own mystery. In the resurrection of Christ, the Spirit of God, who has been working in the hearts of all men and their religions from the beginning of time, begins a new moment of His work of unfolding God's economy of salvation.

B. Work of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is present and active in every personal experience of God. In the order of divine-human relationships, the Holy Spirit is God becoming personally present to men. Hence, we can say that every genuine experience of God is an experience of the Spirit. Now God's universal salvific will and plan in Jesus Christ extends to all men, not only individuals but also to men grouped in communities. So religions, as the personal communitarian and institutional expressions of this God-experience, are manifestations, or signs, of the action of the Spirit of God in them.

We Christians, therefore, believe that a variety of religious experiences spring from the action of the Spirit, in spite of their inadequacies. The Spirit of God is mysteriously leading all those religions to an ever-growing realization of their inner dynamism and their inter-relationships. Thus, we can conclude that the self-manifestation of God is not confined exclusively to the Christian community, the Church and its scripture, but can be extended to every other religious community.

This, however, does not imply that God has revealed Himself in every religion in the same way. God reveals Himself in religions through a variety of signs and symbols, but His word in them is initially a hidden one. In His covenant with Israel, God reveals Himself in and through history; but His word is only a word of promise, directed towards

a fulfilment. In Jesus Christ, the Word becomes flesh, and this Christ is the ultimate and final Word. He is the term towards which the whole of human history is moving. This revelation in Jesus Christ is not an additional gift of God outside and above the common destiny of the entire human race, rather, it is the climactic manifestation of the one order of salvation that comprises all men, of all times, in all places. Christ is the one Lord through Whom the whole universe comes from God and returns to Him (I Cor. 8, 6). The whole universe has been reconciled to Him (Col. 1, 20). God wants to recapitulate all things in Christ (Eph. 1).

Following this teaching, the delegates from India at the Synod of Bishops, in 1974, articulated this theology in one of the interventions on behalf of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI).

The Risen Lord, who is the only mediator between God and men, and in whose name alone men can find salvation, is, through His Spirit, present and operative, not only in the minds and hearts of those who may never have heard His name, but also finds expression in the concrete manifestations through His Spirit, present and operative within the framework of their religious traditions and in the midst of their religious communities. To affirm that the religious practices of others, their sacred books and sacramental practices, provide channels through which the Risen Christ reaches out to them, in no way threatens the uniqueness of Christ and His message. Rather, our theology will make clear that the uniqueness of Christianity lies in this, that it excludes no religion and it embraces them all. These other religions -- in which Christ is present but hidden, His Spirit secretly at work within them -- are destined to find their fulfilment in the explicit recognition of him who is the Lord of History.

C. An Open Community

This new appreciation of religions is possible only when approached from inside and not from outside, and in the context of a living and experienced dialogue. This means that the Christian community can speak increasingly of other religions, and dialogue with them, only in so far as its experience of itself is no longer that of a closed group, but of a community that is open and that is moving toward the formation of an ever-new and wider community that should be as wide as God's universal economy of salvation.

This dialogue, however, does not overlook differences. The differences can be signs of the riches of an underlying mystery. They can be complementary, mutually enriching and point to the goal beyond. The Church, as the living community of faith, must open itself more and celebrate the universal economy of the Spirit, who is bringing peoples of diverse ways to the eschatological realization of fellowship in God and the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation. The Church, then, is constantly seeking to share, in some respect, in the religious riches of all peoples and to grow towards the fullness of life which is God's future for mankind.

V. NEW PROBLEMS, METHODS, DIFFICULTIES

A. Problems

In this new situation, several issues -- sometimes barely raised in earlier discussions owing to the narrow perspectives from which they were approached -- present themselves. A few are briefly mentioned:

- 1) All commentators, including H. Kraemer, have affirmed that God inculcates his positive witness and testimony in the life of non-Christians. But the nature and content of that testimony, especially its communitarian aspects and the role of religions as such, is the object of study today.
- 2) "The profound desire of certain men to enter into personal communion with God," so evident in several non-Christian religions, was never taken as a point of departure for an inter-religious study on account of Dialectical theology's refusal to construct a theology starting with common religious experience. Dismissal of all mystical experience as irrelevant to inter-faith studies is a consequence of this negative attitude.
- 3) The great influence of the Western theology of Karl Barth and of his Radical Biblical Realism, with its emphasis on God-man vertical relation, stood in the way of a proper appreciation of the humanity of Jesus and of his continuity with all that is authentically human in World Religions. Chenchiak, a convert to Christianity from Hinduism, pointed out, "Jesus is the first fruit of the new creation; Hinduism is the final fruits of the old creation." What could be the relationship? Similarly, the Holy Spirit, who raised Jesus to life and unites Him as head of all humanity, should play a decisive role in any inter-faith theology. Inter-faith relationship has not been discussed from the point of view of the glorified humanity of

Christ, and the unifying work of the Spirit.

- 4) The discussion of inter-faith relations in the context of anthropological solidarity and historical convergence was always held against the background of a Western dualistic concept of social forces, and the Western concept of history, without any consideration that Eastern religions had their own unique concept of society and history.

Inter-faith dialogue, therefore, has remained mostly a matter of one-way traffic -- an almost entirely Christian affair to which generous souls from other religions have given marginal co-operation.

B. New Methods

We need a new method and a new study of religions of which the first step, and the point of departure, must be scientific analysis of religion and religious dialogue both from Western and Eastern perspectives. An earnest attempt must be made to formulate a new open model or a comprehensive model that, without destroying the identity and diversity of every particular religious experience, incorporates all positive dimensions of every religious experience, whether Christian, Buddhist, Hindu or any other.

- 1) Totality from the beginning to the end: The Eastern approach takes for granted, and starts from the totality, and within it identifies and understands the various aspects and dimensions, the differences and diversities. In it, reality is understood as wholeness of the universe; the wholeness of mankind and the wholeness of self. The reality of God himself is at the core of it, and this reality is all-pervading. This global vision will give not only unity and universality in perspective, approach and content, but also the right attitude for understanding other faiths and religions in their inter-relationships from within. A comparative study of religions could be either an approach from outside, in an attitude of odious comparison, polemics or confrontation, or it could be an approach of inner and progressive discovery of similarities, and with an effort towards convergence in other areas -- all this within a perspective of the whole.
- 2) Not only a book knowledge, but a living knowledge: In all religions, intuitions and experiences count a good deal: experience of the world and man; experience of oneself and experience of the transcendent and the ineffable; the experience of God's mystery and experience of community and persons. Most scholars

know about other religions from books. But inter-faith or inter-religious study implies, by its very nature, existential and experiential knowledge of living religions as understood and interpreted today; as renewed and updated in the challenge of modern sciences and in the confrontation of technological cultures. Above all, a living knowledge of religion as practised and lived by followers of other religions is an absolute necessity today. Vital and personal contact with other religions in their own life-milieu and with the communities of their followers is an indispensable source of study and research.

The evolution of inter-faith dialogue in India has, logically, led to "live-ins" -- where men of different beliefs and faiths, live, pray and reflect together for several days.

- 3) Studies of other religions as presented and interpreted by their exponents: Some studies about other religions -- studies chiefly done in the earlier centuries and in the first half of this century -- are distortions of what religions are and claim to be. Today, more than ever, the study of another religion implies understanding and appreciating that religion, as interpreted by its exponents and experts. These interpretations may have evolved over the centuries at various stages, in different contexts and different milieux .
- 4) Inter-faith studies within inter-religious dialogues: If experience is the core of every religion, and if only inter-religious dialogue can permit or facilitate sharing of experience in a proper atmosphere and with proper attitudes, inter-faith study should be situated in a living dialogue and should emerge from it. It is within such a dialogue that studies can give a correct understanding and interpretation of religions and faith.
- 5) Mystical dimension: Today, all sections of people, especially youth, and even the most affluent societies and materialistic civilizations, yearn for mystical experiences, and are awakened and sensitive to a higher level of consciousness beyond the rational and the scientific.

On the other hand, Christianity has for its source the Easter experience of the Apostles, the personal and living encounter with the Risen Lord and the communications of the Spirit. And, Christianity is expected to lead man to this experience again and again. Everything else should be interpreted beginning from this experience. On the other hand, most of the world religions have mystical traditions and consider

mystical experiences as the core of religious practice.

So we cannot proceed far in inter-faith dialogue unless we have and share such mystical experience.

C. New Difficulties

It is to be expected that inter-faith dialogue, which is "the response of Christian faith to God's saving presence in the religious traditions of mankind," meets with difficulties. We list a few of these:

- 1) There is an anxiety that the duty of proclaiming the Good News should not be watered down in our efforts for dialogue. We are told that the commitment of the Church to dialogue must be carried out "without detriment to her duty of witnessing to the fullness of the revelation addressed by God to all men in Jesus Christ". (NA 2, 5; GS 28)

The World Council of Churches offers similar advice. "We are all agreed that the Great Commission of Jesus Christ, which asks us to go out into all the world and make disciples of all nations, and to baptize them in the Triune name, should not be abandoned or betrayed, disobeyed or compromised, neither should



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it be misused. Dialogue is both a matter of hearing and understanding the faith of others, and also of witnessing to the Gospel of Jesus Christ." The anxiety of some Christians, that dialogue is getting in the way of preaching the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ, has often found expression in leaflets and writings in Christian periodicals in India.

Although directly involved in the organisation of many multi-religious dialogues, live-ins, deep sharing sessions of two or three days, it is but natural for some Church leaders to express their concern that this commitment to dialogue, in the long run, would prove to be an obstacle to our evangelization task. Here is a comment from a missionary in the field, "Is dialogue going to diminish the missionary spirit? Something should be said to answer this question for the sake of the missionaries in the field. Those who are fully taken up with dialogue hardly believe or esteem the conversion-oriented missionary activity."

A letter dated June 29, 1977, from Sergio Cardinal Pignedoli, president of the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions, described dialogue as "an activity distinct from mission, although not foreign to it."

The difficulty of reconciling the two activities of dialogue and mission proper is gaining more and more urgency with the opening of more and more centres of dialogue by the Christian communities.

The relation of the Church to the followers of other religions can be expressed either in dialogue or in evangelisation, expressed in Vatican II's documents, Nostra Aetate and Ad Gentes. In dialogue, the Church, as God's pilgrim people, shares in the longings of all men to come closer to the Father. In evangelization, the Church, as God's eschatological people, proclaims Jesus Christ to all men and calls them to faith through conversion. In dialogue, God's revelation to all men in various ways is underlined; while in evangelization, God's final revelation in Christ is highlighted. Each Christian, by his baptism, is a member of both the pilgrim and eschatological Church and a recipient of both forms of revelation. Therefore dialogue and evangelization are two functions of the Christian existence.

- 2) Members from other religions, in the moments of shared reflection in the live-in sessions, expressed their long-concealed fear and suspicion about Christian attitudes in going ahead with the dialogue-activity, and they felt that this

was another way of preaching the Gospel, of conversion or proselytization. How can one, committed and duty-bound to proclaim the Gospel, and making others disciples of Christ, enter into sincere dialogue with those of other faiths? A well-known Hindu writer, Shri Guru Dutt, made these comments in a review of a book on dialogue. "This anxiety for dialogue is not to be found in other religions, which are content to live and let live." For them, the Christian's solicitude in this behalf is understandable. It may be doubted if it is at all possible for the sincere adherents of any religion to appreciate the nuances and values of another religion from the inside... It looks as if the old missionary zeal, now deprived of a direct outlet, is seeking another chance under the guise of dialogue. The underlying technique is simple -- to represent all desirable (in the Christian sense) transformations occurring within non-Christian religions as being informed by the Spirit of the Hidden Christ."

- This attitude of suspicion about the motives of the Christians may not be shared by all or even by the majority of our Hindu, Muslim and other brethren. But to them also, it is not very clear why the Christians are opening dialogue-centres and initiating various kinds of dialogues. Naturally they link this new kind of activity with traditional "mission" work.
- 3) In a dialogue session, the Christian, who was not all disturbed until now by any question about the participation of people of other religions in the same liturgical fellowship, finds himself participating in the Eucharistic celebration sitting alongside Hindus or Muslims. This may lead to delicate situations. For example, during a multi-religious retreat organized by the CBCI Dialogue Commission, many Hindus were present at the Eucharistic service. But after the service, two Catholic young men had this question, "Now that we have been living together for two days in such deep intimacy of prayer in the same house, why couldn't we invite our non-Christian friends to our Holy Communion?"
 - 4) Again, what would be the understanding of the Hindus, Muslims and others, of all that goes on in this service? A Hindu friend was heard explaining to his daughter during one such service at Communion time, that they -- the Christians -- are sharing the Divine. The only way one understands the religious experience of another community is by comparing it with one's own rituals or samskaras. So Hindu friends may still find it difficult to understand why Christians, who may not hesitate to receive prasada from them, denies something similar to the Hindus.

- 5) Dialogue-situation takes the participants to the authentic experiences and expressions of their religions which they share with one another. How does it affect one's future relationship with his own religion?

This is the discovery of many Hindus and Muslims who would very much like to be called Christians although they may not become members of this or that Christian fellowship through Baptism. A pilot study, conducted in Madras City during 1976, by Dr. Devie and his team from Gurukul Theological College -- a study in which businessmen, educationists, doctors, administrators and ordinary people took part on a random selection basis -- revealed that 10 percent of the Hindus regarded Christ as "the only true God."

Attention was drawn to the agonizing choice presented to these non-baptized Christians: Acceptance of Christ "the only true God" and rejection by their own kith and kin, and to be stigmatized by every one. But what struck the strongest note was the testimony of Mr. T.A.K., a Muslim graduate from Calicut. Mr. K. had accepted Christ as the only redeemer. He had stopped going to the mosques and is not practicing the Islamic religion. He preferred to remain non-baptized, not because he was afraid of suffering or persecution or rejection. He said he was ready to go to any length for Christ. But he felt deeply no need for receiving Baptism for salvation, for these reasons: i) He was not convinced of the need of receiving baptism for salvation; ii) By accepting baptism he would cut himself away from his community, from their fellowship, thereby making it impossible for him to witness to Christ to his community; iii) If he was baptised there would be no hope for him of being accepted into the Christian fellowship on an equal footing -- rather there was every likelihood of receiving second-class citizen treatment.

There is every sign that the number of non-baptized believers are on the increase. Along with this, there is a growing attitude of the acceptance of this situation by baptized believers. In a situation wherein baptism appear to them as a change of culture, this attitude is understandable. There are people who publicly accept and confess Christ as the Lord of their lives and express their freedom and joy in this confession. The experiment of Rejamundry Ashram, in Madras, where hundreds of pilgrim Hindus and Muslims gather for night-long prayers and hymns to Christ, is one illustration. What, then, should be our attitude to these non-baptized Christians?

These are only a few of the many new situations which arise as a result of a new relationship to living religions today.