

The theological foundations of the interfaith dialogue

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In the world nowadays, the religious plurality has become a fact. There is not one religion, but many religions. Communication and interdependence among various peoples and cultures have developed a greater consciousness of religious diversity, with the advantages and risks that this brings. Despite the crisis, religiosity has not disappeared. The Church asks all Christians to take a step towards the believers through the interfaith dialogue. This step could be realized on the every day life scale, through promoting common social projects among the believers of the different religions ,through the doctrinal speech and sharing religious experiences.

But what are the underlying theological reasons that the Catholic Church considers the interfaith dialogue as a part of its evangelist mission? The search for theological reasons is a necessary condition for a fruitful dialogue. The question can be put this way: How does the Church judge these religions from the theological point of view? ¹ What value does it give to religions? Are these religions a means of salvation for their followers? The relationship of Christians with other religions and the dialogue that results from it will depend on the answer to these questions. (*Document of the International Theological Commission, Christianity and Other Religions, CR.3*).

We have to consider at first the unity of all human beings in the creative and saving will of God. The redeeming will of God has been manifested in Jesus Christ. The Christ himself has given the Church a universal mandate. And the Church accomplishes this mission in a pluralistic world regarding the religions. That is what drives us to ask questions on the saving role of other religions.

1. One God, Creator and Saviour

There is only one God and he is the creator of all human beings ,whether they are Christians or Jews or Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists or coming from a tribal religion or any other religion. All are created in the image and likeness of God. This

¹ The principal theological positions regarding this question are Church-centeredness, Christ-centeredness and Theo-centrism. The Church-centeredness position denies the possibility of salvation for those who do not belong openly to the church, basing themselves on a certain theological system and on the erroneous understanding of the phrase "outside the Church , there is no salvation." The Christ-centeredness position accepts that, inside the other religions, there could be salvation, but these could not have salvific autonomy, due to the uniqueness and universality of salvation of Jesus Christ. (CR. 11). This is the most common position of Catholic theologians. Theo-centricism claims to be a development of Christ-centeredness, a change of perspective. It tries to recognise the riches of other religions and the testimony of their adherents, and, in the last analysis , wishes to facilitate the union among religions with the view of a common action in favour of world peace (CR.12).

means a capacity for a personal relationship with God, and, by the same token, a capacity for making a covenant (covenant with Noah, Abraham, Moses, New Covenant)².

In every human being, the nature is the same. God has gifted everyone of us with a body and a soul, an intelligence and a will, with feelings and aspirations and particularly a thirst for happiness that cannot be completely quenched. God has instilled in every person an insatiable desire for eternal happiness that in the end cannot be completed but in Him, in the face to face contemplation of what He is, in the beatitude of the eternal life. St. Augustine, after the ramblings of his youth, finally said: "You have created us for yourself and our heart lives in anguish until it rests in You". God, who for the same reason has created men and women at His image and resemblance wanted for every one the same end. The 2nd Vatican Council declared that God, who created and preserved everything by His word, presents for the whole world to see, a permanent testimony of himself. Without stopping, He showed His solicitude for all humans, to give eternal life for all those who seek salvation (Dei Verbum, 3).

During the universal days of prayer for the peace in Assisi in 1986, Pope John Paul II has synthesized these fundamental realities, that concern all human beings in the divine plan of creation and the final destiny of men. That is why there is only one divine testimony for every human beings in this world (Jn 1:9) one principle and one end, no matter the color of the skin, the historical horizon where he lives and acts, the culture where he has grown up and that he speaks. The differences are a minor element compared to the unity that is on the contrary, radical, determining, and fundamental³.

Thus we can understand why St. Paul wrote to his disciple Timothy that God wants all men to be saved and reach the truth, because God is unique as well as the mediator between God and humans, Jesus Christ who became a man himself, and who has sacrificed himself for our sake (1 Tm 2: 4-6) These words lead us into the second point of our reflection. One Saviour and, therefore, one salvation, one and identical for all people: a full configuration with Jesus and communion with him in the sharing of divine filiation.

2. Jesus Christ⁴, the universal saviour⁵.

The divine and redeeming will, unique and final, meant for all humans, has Jesus Christ in its centre. God has so much loved the world, that He has given His only

² The New Covenant is that of the Spirit, a new and universal covenant, an alliance of the universality of the Spirit (CR. 52)

³ Talk to the Cardinals and the Roman Curia on the 22 December 1986 Assisi: The world Day of Prayer for Peace, Pontifical Council, Justice and Peace 1987 p.149)

⁴ In the name of Christ is understood the one who anoints, the Father, the one who is anointed, the Son, and the anointing, which is the Holy Spirit (St. Irenaeus) (CR. 54) "The whole Christ", these are the Christians anointed with the Spirit and the Church. The whole Christ includes in some way every person, because Christ is united to all people (GS 22) (CR. 55)

⁵ "Universal": *versus unum*, toward one.

son so that all who believe in Him, would never be lost and gain the eternal life. (Jn 3: 16) Because of His love for us, and for our salvation, He descended from Heaven (Credo)

The 2nd Vatican Council teaches us that the son of God, by His incarnation⁶, has been united in a certain way, to every human being. (GS. 22; Redemptoris Missio, RM. 6 and others). The idea is often repeatedly found in the writings of the Fathers of the Church, who got their inspiration from some texts of the New Testament, for example the parable of the lost sheep. (Cf. Mt. 18:12-24; Lk. 15:1-7); this is identified with the lost human race which Jesus came to search (CR. 46). Assuming human nature, the Son of God has carried on his shoulders the whole of humankind to present it to the Father. (CR. 46). The grace of God acts invisibly in man. Given that Christ has died for us, and that the last vocation of man is unique even divine, we have to know that the Holy Spirit offers us, in ways that only God knows, the possibility to be associated to the Paschal mystery. (Gaudium et Spes, 22) that means the participation to the mystery of the sufferings, the death and the resurrection of Christ. It will be more difficult to determine how people who do not know Jesus Christ and how these religions enter in relationship with him, but it is necessary to refer to the mysterious ways of the Spirit, which gives to all the possibility of being associated to the paschal mystery (GS. 22) and whose action cannot be but referred to Christ (RM. 29). The question of the salvific value of the religions as such can be considered in the context of the universal action of Christ (CR.49).

That means that we find only in Jesus Christ the path, the truth and the life. (cf Jn 14: 6) our complete religious being⁷. Only in Christ God reconciled in him everything (2 Cor 5: 18-19). Only in Christ, can we find the answer to the enigma of hurt and death (GS. 22) to the fundamental questions on the origins of man, his life on earth, and his life after death. St Peter and St John declared courageously before the Jewish Supreme Council, after they have been arrested, that Jesus Christ is the universal savior, because there is no other name given to men, and through which we will be saved. (Ac 4: 12) Jesus died for all of us, and He really is, as the Samaritans say, the savior of the world (Jn 4: 42).

Everyone who wins Heaven is thus saved by the grace that Jesus Christ Himself obtained for us. Men and women can only be saved in Jesus. Christianity, therefore, has a clear universal claim. "All who are saved, take part, though differently in the mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ through His spirit. The Christians are aware of this thanks to their faith, whereas the others ignore that Jesus Christ is the source of their salvation. Nevertheless the mystery of salvation reaches them ,through ways only God knows, thanks to the spirit of Christ. Concretely, through the sincere practice of what is right in their religious traditions, and following the directives of their conscience the members of other religions respond positively to the call of God and receive the

⁶ In Jesus there is the full appearance of the Word (CR. 49)

⁷ According to Vatican Council II (GS 41, 22, 38, 45) Jesus is the perfect person from whom each person becomes more fully a person (CR 47)

salvation of Jesus Christ even if they do not recognize Him as their savior" (cf Ad Gentes n° 3, 9, 11) (Dialogue et Annonce, 29).

3. The mission of the church

The Christ has established the Church as a universal sacrament of salvation, as a sign of the salvation that God offers to all humanity. Jesus, when teaching the necessity of faith and baptism, affirmed in the same time the necessity of the Church (LG. 14). This is the special place of the action of the Holy Spirit (CR. 56).

As for the 2nd Vatican Council, The Church is related to the whole humanity. "All men are called to this catholic unity of the people of God, this unity that announce and promote the universal peace, and to this unity are related in many ways, the catholic believers, the others who have faith in Jesus Christ, and finally all men who are called to be saved by the grace of God (LG. 13).

When mentioning those who are not Christians, the last Council distinguishes them in 4 groups, that are related in different ways to the people of God, and thus concerned by the saving will of God :the Jews, the Muslims, and those who, by no mistake of theirs, do not know the Gospel nor the Church, but nevertheless seek God sincerely, and try to accomplish in their acts His will that they know through the directives of their conscience. (LG. 16). And finally, those who have not reached the final knowledge of God and try to live in righteousness (LG. 16).

The affirmation of the belonging of these four groups of non Christian to the people of God, is based on the fact that the universal call for salvation, conceals in itself the call to the catholicity of the unique people of God (LG. 13). All this is based on the Christ, the unique mediator who is present for us in His body which is the Church (the International Theological Commission: Christianity and the religions, 64-70).

That is why the Church conceives her mission as the one that the Christ himself has assigned her, that is to carry the good news of salvation to every man. If a person receives the Gospel by his own will, and confesses his faith in Jesus Christ, this person could receive the baptism and thus become a member of the Church. The good news of God is always proposed but never imposed. If a person came to know the Church but is convinced by another religion and does not want to become Christian the Church is nevertheless still convinced that she has the obligation to promote, regarding this person, the mutual comprehension and collaboration, for the previously mentioned reasons, that means because of the unity of the whole humanity, in the plan of God of salvation, of redemption and of the final destiny wanted for every man and every woman.

This explains why Pope John Paul II, in the 5th chapter of his encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio*, mentioned the testimony, the proclamation, the conversion and baptism, the formation of local Churches, the interfaith dialogue, the promotion of charity towards the ones who are in need, as the ways of the mission, that means the evangelization. The interfaith dialogue is thus a part of the evangelical mission of the Church (RM. 55). Not only this is not opposed to the announcement of Christ, but on the contrary, these elements are related, and complete one another, while being distinct :not identical, not interchangeable. The dialogue is requested by the profound respect that we should have toward all that the spirit “that blows where it wants” has operated in man (RM. 56). In certain places around the world, the practice of the dialogue is the only testimony that we could give about Christ and the generous service toward the believers of other religions.

4. The Church is confronted to the fact of the religious plurality

The Church gives testimony of Jesus Christ in a pluralistic world from a religious point of view. The Catholics represent around 18% of the humanity. The rest of the Christians represent 15%. The Muslims are 17%, the Hindus 13%, the Buddhists 7%. But these number are only general estimations. There are a lot of other believers: the Jews, those who follow the traditional or tribal religions, the Chinese local religions, the Chamanists, the Sikhs, the Jains, the Parsis, the Mandeens, and the Baha'is⁸.

For centuries, these religions have governed the life of millions of men and women. They have taught whole generations how to live, how to pray and also how to prepare oneself for another life in Heaven.

These religions are not isolated, there have always been relations among men of different beliefs. But nowadays, thanks to the modern ways of transport, to the communication technologies, and the movements of population, caused by the economical, political or cultural conditions, the communications among men of different religions, culture and languages, has improved a lot and intensified.

Every time, the Church strives to establish the testimony of Christ that is adapted to the given circumstances. She tries in every situation to be the sacrament, the sign or even the instrument of the union between God and the world, and the unity among peoples (LG. 1). The Church is award to be the servant of Christ, the King of kings, to whom the 3 wise men have presented their offerings. They represent the world, the nations and the cultures, that would find their end and their plenitude in the Christ. That is why, in contact of these religions that influence the peoples, the nations and the cultures, the Church teaches us to respect all that is righteous, noble, true and saint in them. She manages also to purify what should be purified, and rejects all that contradicts the Gospel. When such persons coming from these cultural and religious

⁸ Cfr. D. Barret world Christian encyclopedia, Nairobi 1982, p 6.

contexts take up the Gospel, the Church knows that it is her duty to promote a good understanding so that all that is good and that is concealed in the heart and the soul of men, or in the special ritual and the special civilizations of peoples, not only do not perish, but furthermore is purified, brought to perfection for the glory of God, the shame of the demon, and the happiness of man (AG. 9).

5. The saving value of the other religions

Now we can also ask ourselves, what is the saving value of the other religions. Do they play a role in the salvation of their adepts? Till what point, can we recognize this role? And if their adepts reach salvation in the particular religious, cultural and historical contexts where they live, how can they be not influenced or determined by their religions?

The theologian who seeks an answer to these questions, has for this aim the instruments of the catholic faith and the doctrine. God wants the salvation of all. Jesus Christ is the only and unique savior of the whole humanity. The Holy Spirit can operate in the hearts of men, and even in the different rituals and different religions. Every authentic prayer is influenced by the Holy Spirit. God can dispense His Grace much farther THAN the visible frontiers of the Church. And the religions conceal in them the germ of the Word as well as some elements of truth and grace.

The theological question nowadays is not to know whether these men who do not belong to the visible Catholic Church can or cannot be saved. Theologically it is certain that in some conditions, the answer is positive (for example when they are not responsible if they do not know the Church, and do not belong to her, when they are permeable to the work of God in them, and when they act according to their conscience and realize the will of God, (we should never forget that God is the only judge to these conditions). The religious plurality, the permanent deepening nowadays of the knowledge of the Christians about these religions, the limits of the propagation of the Church in time and space, and the certainty of the saving will of God towards the whole humanity, encourage the theologians to pursue their reflection on the advent of the will of God in other believers.

The sacred books of some religions contain some impressive passages. Some try explicitly to establish the relation between man and God, and the absolute and transcendent. Other prescribe fast, the sharing of some exercises of repentance and of spiritual discipline. The theologian cannot but ask himself whether some of these elements are not the work of God.

But at this stage, some precautions are necessary. Whatever the action or the presence of the Holy Spirit is in these religions, we cannot compare it in any case to its particular presence in the Church. Furthermore, even if the theologian distinguished a saving value in other religions, this does not mean that everything in this religion is

redeeming or positive. As written in "Dialogue et Annonce" to affirm that the other religious traditions contain some elements of grace, does not mean that everything in it is the fruit of grace. The sin is at work in the world, and thus the other religious traditions, in spite of their positive value, are also the reflect of the limitation of the human spirit, that is sometime inclined to choose the Wrong. An open and positive approach of the other religious traditions do not allow us to close our eyes on the contradictions that may exist between them and the Christian revelation. Where it is necessary we have to recognize that there is an incompatibility between some essential elements of the Christian religion and some aspects of these traditions. (Dialogue et Annonce, 31)

When doing researches, the catholic theologians should not consider on an equal standing, the role of other religions, and that of the Old Testament and should not consider their founding fathers as prophets sent by God like Moses and Isaiah.

Everything is not clear. There are still a lot of studies to do. But we know sufficiently to confirm, either the necessity of the mediation of the Church or the liberty with which God gives salvation to whom He wants.

It is evident that the Church, convinced that other believers can obtain the salvation, can also see the necessity to share with them the integrality of the message of the Gospel that is given and received freely. Aware of the difficulties ahead to stay in the right line of the religious vision, and loyal to the moral truth, considering the activity of the devil and the weaknesses of man as a fruit of the original sin, and to promote the glory of God and the salvation of all these men, the Church remembers the commandment of our Lord who said : preach the Gospel to every creature (Mc 16: 15) she strives with solicitude to develop the missions (LG. 16).

Conclusion

The theology of world religions has not yet reached a well defined epistemological statute. Many of the questions remain open, and as a result, they need to be clarified through studies, reflections and more discussions (CR. 3).

Is it necessary to insist on the importance of prayer for dialogue? Prayer, understood as a living and personal relationship with God, as a mysterious encounter, is the condition for dialogue and a fruit of the same.⁹ In the measure in which one lives dialogue in a state of prayer, one is docile to the movement of the Spirit who works in the hearts of the two persons in dialogue (CR. 111).¹⁰

⁹ John Paul II, Ut unum sint, 33

¹⁰ This text takes into account a lecture of Cardinal Arinze, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue delivered in Beirut, in May 1999, at the University of the Holy Spirit (Kasik). It is also based on the document of the International Theological Commission entitled "Christianity and Religions" (1997).