

# THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

## Missiology, III: The world religions

AT THE 1974 Roman Synod on evangelization, it became apparent that the primary concern of the asian catholic bishops was the dialogue between the gospel and the non-christian world religions. We avoided this description 'non-christian' in our title. Many writers object to its pejorative connotations and its ecclesiocentricity. We must, as committed Christians ourselves, see other religions from our own viewpoint; we can do no other. But to use the label 'non-Christians' is to go beyond merely our own starting-point. The dialogue could well be between the Jews and the non-Jews, or between the Hindus and the non-Hindus. Why should we impose our viewpoint on others engaged in the dialogue? So we use the name 'world religions'. By this we intend to exclude the trivial and the aberrant, such as the Jones group that committed mass suicide in Guyana. 'World religions' is usually taken to refer to Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and other religious groups with significant membership and lengthy history. These are the asian religions upon which Christianity has made little or no impression. It is not easy to define what precisely constitutes an authentic religion rather than a sect. De Graeve<sup>1</sup> holds 'there has to be a basic "ultimate concern" for something that is not disqualified as an object of ultimate concern; in other words, there has to be an intentionality towards a Transcendence'. For our purposes here, we do not need to concern ourselves with any further precision. What we say of the religions we have named can be applied to others. We are concerned in missiology with the relationship between Christianity and these other religions, of which we have, in the past, been dismissive.

As we have said, the inter-faith dialogue is usually taken to be between Christians and Jews, Christians and Hindus, Christians and Moslems and so on. We shall show how the debate is not confined merely to some abstract theological concepts, nor merely to the spiritual, but must include the historical manifestations. For this reason, we ourselves would like to understand this debate as being extended also to the traditional african religions, religions of traditional african societies that are co-extensive with the socio-cultures. All the members of a given traditional african society will also be committed to the society's world-view. But for christian theologians who are european or north american, the discussion concerns itself with those major world religions encountered in the mission in Asia, and more and more nowadays encountered in Europe and North America.

Among catholic theologians, it is not a question as to whether a Hindu,

or a Moslem, or any member of another religion, can be saved, can have the love of God in him. Pope Alexander VII condemned the jansenist proposition that pagans, Jews, heretics and such received absolutely nothing of the grace of Jesus Christ (DS 2305) and in 1949 Pope Pius XII declared, against Leonard Feeney, that it was not always necessary for salvation that one be explicitly a member of the Catholic Church (DS 3866). As a consequence, Feeney found himself in a dilemma and subsequently retracted. Most of us have recognized that some individual of our acquaintance, maybe a Hindu, maybe a Jew, is a 'better Christian' than many so-called Christians. The official statements explicitly declare that the grace of Christ is at work outside of the Church. Among Catholics therefore we cannot ask: *can* the non-Christian be saved? He can. The debate is *how* is he saved? Is the good Hindu saved in spite of being a Hindu, or is he saved precisely through being a Hindu? What is the salvific efficacy of the non-christian religion as a social, institutional community?

There are christian missiologists who would hold that the non-christian religions are man-made, futile, meaningless and even, some would say, sinful attempts to create God in man's image. They would point to texts such as:

For of all the names in the world given to men this is the only one by which we can be saved (Acts 4,12).

Whoever refuses to believe is condemned already because he has refused to believe in the name of God's only Son (Jn 3,18).

There is only one God, and there is only one mediator between God and mankind, himself a man, Christ Jesus (1 Tim 2,5).

He who believes and is baptized will be saved; he who does not believe will be condemned (Mk 16,16).

They would conclude that explicit faith in Jesus as Lord is necessary for salvation and that this faith will find expression in baptism into the Church of Christ. There is a prayer attributed to St Francis Xavier that runs:

O Eternal God, creator of all things, remember that the souls of the heathen are the work of thy hands . . . behold, O Lord, how hell is being daily filled with them. Remember that Jesus Christ thy Son suffered a most cruel death for their salvation. Permit no longer that he should be despised by the heathen . . .

For such a position, Jesus is the unique revealer of God's grace and salvation. The christian Church is the exclusive institution of salvation.

The individual attains salvation only through explicit membership in the Church. The aim of the mission will be church growth, to use Donald McGavran's terminology (McGavran maintains that if the mission in a particular area does not bring about numerical increase in church membership then one should move on to another place where this is achieved). The christian Church will be seen as standing over against the world and over against other religions from which it has nothing to learn. However friendly the spirit in which the dialogue is conducted, the ultimate aim will be that those who possess the truth (the Christians) should persuade those in error (the non-Christians) to abandon their error and join the christian Church. Dialogue is only a technique to be used to gain the other's confidence. In the Frankfurt Declaration of 1971, a group of evangelical theologians stated: 'we challenge all non-Christians who belong to God on the basis of creation, to believe in him (Jesus Christ) and to be baptized in his name, for in him alone is eternal salvation promised to them . . . we reject the false teaching that the non-christian religions and world-views are also ways of salvation similar to belief in Christ'.<sup>2</sup> The Lausanne Covenant was put together by a number of the participants at the International Congress on World Evangelization held at Lausanne in July 1974. It stated: 'we affirm there is only one Saviour and only one gospel . . . we recognize that men have some knowledge of God through his general revelation, but we deny that this can save . . . Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and man. There is no other name by which we must be saved. Those who reject Christ repudiate the joy of salvation and condemn themselves to eternal separation from God'.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Daniélou held that Jesus Christ alone saves, and he is to be encountered only within the christian Church. The non-christian religions are stumbling blocks where, at best, is to be found only actual grace and not supernatural grace. There may be found ascetic effort within them, but no efficacy of the cross.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Hacker<sup>5</sup> held that the 'day of salvation' is grounded in God's providence and is therefore not a process in time. There is divine objective redemption which is reflected in one objective gospel, and this is subjectively appropriated by man in time. And this appropriation is the only historical aspect and the only variable. We have referred to this a-historical understanding of the gospel in our first article on the necessity of an incarnate Christianity. For Hacker, the possible salvation of an individual non-Christian is a mystery hidden in the mind of God about which we can say nothing. We would see this as abandoning the theological task. In practice then, both Daniélou and Hacker would see the mission as preaching the need to become members of the Church as the one way to salvation that we can know of.

Rahner's article on 'Christianity and the non-christian religions'<sup>6</sup> is published significantly immediately following one on 'History of the world

and salvation history'. His first thesis is that Christianity understands itself as the absolute religion intended for all men and women. Valid and lawful religion is God's action on people, God's free self-revelation. This relationship of God to man is the same for all men and women because it rests on the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Word of God, all of which took place in time and in history. There was assuredly a time before Christ during which Christianity was not the necessary way of salvation, at least not in any historically tangible ecclesio-social form. Christianity has a temporal and a spatial starting point. In other words, the demand that Christianity makes on all people does not come about at chronologically the same moment for all. Instead of holding, as Daniélou and Hacker, that after the apostolic age there was one objective obligation for all, Rahner suggests that the demand of Christianity could be seen as coming for different people at different times. When the spanish conquistadores were in South America, the theologian Francisco de Vittoria held that the historical witness of so many of the conquistadores was such that no Indian could have rightly accepted Christianity. The actual form presented was so defective. Salvation *could* not come through this historical form which was repugnant and meaningless to the Indians who experienced the spanish oppression, often in the name of Christ.

Similarly salvation cannot come nowadays through Christianity for the majority of the human race who do not and will not hear of Christ. In fact, more people have died, in the history of the human race, as non-Christians than as Christians. And this state of affairs will continue. If God does indeed will that all people shall be saved (1 Tim 2,4) and if his will is efficacious, which it must be, then most people are saved in some non-christian way. Some would say that the grace that saves them comes to them nonetheless through the Church; others would say this is not necessary, but it is yet the grace of Christ. Rahner holds that, since man is a social being, and since God reveals himself in and through our way-of-being-in-the-world, then, at least until the gospel makes an existential demand nullifying any other way, the non-Christian religion must be a valid and lawful religion, for it must contain supernatural elements arising out of the grace given to humanity on account of Christ. For this reason he called the followers of these religions 'anonymous Christians', a name that was attacked by many but which he kept to for want of a better. For Rahner we live in a graced world because of Christ.

As we have pointed out, the argument is not about the salvation of individual non-Christians, it is about the validity, lawfulness, and salvific efficacy of the non-christian religions. It is about the nature of the social institution that is Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and so on. For Hacker the unique special revelation in Christ is such that there is a special social organization and specific kinds of social behaviour essential to Christianity, distinguishing it from all pre-christian religions. This is akin to van

Ruler who holds that since European and North American cultures are Christian, the mission involves spreading these cultural forms to other peoples. Whilst not going this far, Daniélou maintains that salvation comes sacramentally through the social institution of Christianity, through the historical form of Christianity that is instituted by God to this end. Historical Christianity has a positive part to play in God's saving activity unless we reduce salvation to a 'subjective and ultimately transcendental interiority.'<sup>7</sup> Christianity is sacramental in God's saving activity, it is an effective symbol. Since he must hold that non-Christians can be saved, and since he holds that their religions cannot be salvific, he must be holding that non-Christians are saved in an ontologically different way to Christians, namely in some interior, non-social, purely spiritual manner. This seems to us to be holding that the salvation of non-Christians is *ad hoc* for each individual non-Christian. In their case, God would then be acting in a particular and non-sacramental way. This would be to go against man's normal experience.

Rahner's contention that the non-Christian religions can be, at least conditionally, efficaciously salvific, is supported by Vatican II. *Gaudium et spes* teaches that there are 'authentic signs of God's presence in the happenings, needs and desires of humanity' (no 11). *Nostra aetate* recognizes the possibility of truth and holiness being found in the non-Christian religions (no 2), and *Lumen gentium* says that 'God is not remote from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God since he gives to all men life and breath and all things' (no 16). We would hold that revelation and grace must come historically and socially for all people. Thus it follows that such religions are authentically revelatory and effectively salvific. We do not engage in dialogue in order to bring Christ to the non-Christian, but rather in order to listen to Christ who is already present.

Such a position is similar to that set out in the conclusions to the 1964 Bombay conference on 'Christian revelation and non-Christian religions' held among a group of Catholic theologians under the auspices of the Eucharistic Congress. They concluded that the meaning of the world religions in the plan of salvation cannot be fully understood by considering them only from an ecclesio-centric point of view. They have to be seen from a theo-centric view; the whole of mankind is embraced in the one salvific plan of God. For somebody who is not confronted in an existential way with the gospel of Jesus Christ, the world religions can be the channel of Christ's saving grace. Consequently, as a continuation of the Incarnation, the mission must assume all created values, especially in the religious field.

Such a position appears to create problems in two areas of the Christian tradition, namely the doctrine of the Incarnation and, as Daniélou complained, the command to mission. If we claim that in Jesus alone is

there any genuine knowledge of God, then the non-Christian religions are merely human fabrications. There are those who will refuse to pray in any way with non-Christians, claiming that the only true prayer must be prayer through Christ. There can then be no genuine dialogue. However, we could also see in Jesus the definitive focus of God's activity and presence in our world, and this would offer less of a barrier to open dialogue. If the mission is an expansionist drive towards numerical growth demanding conversion from error to the unique truth of Christianity then dialogue is closed. But perhaps we can see mission in another light.

We start from our belief in the efficacious universal salvific will of God. God wills effectively that all people be saved. The Spirit who breathed over the primeval waters is the Spirit who is poured out on all flesh, the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead, who was poured out on the Apostles. Our world is grace-filled. There is no salvation vacuum outside the limits of what is known as special revelation. And this salvation, spread throughout the world, is seen by us Christians as the same salvation that we know within the Christian revelation.

Here we are in the patristic tradition that spoke of the 'Church from Abel', that recognized the Word of God sown as a seed throughout all of creation and all of history. The Fathers wrote of a movement of the whole cosmos, of the whole of humanity towards Christ. God never, at any time, deserted his creation which was intended for Christ, so that wherever people looked for God 'with a sincere heart', there was true religion. As St Augustine wrote:

The reality which is now called Christian existed among the ancients and was never wanting from the birth of the human race right up to the time that Christ came in the flesh. From that time, the true religion, which already existed, began to be called Christian (PL 34,128).

The Scholastics, accepting that Christ came to redeem mankind from sin, asked if he would have been incarnate had there been no sin. Scotus held that he would. He pointed to texts such as 'He is the image of the unseen God and the first-born of all creation, for in him were created all things . . . all things were created through him and for him' (Col 1,15-16) and 'Before the world was made, he chose us, chose us in Christ . . . to live through love in his presence' (Eph 1,4). Such texts imply that God intended from the beginning that the whole of creation should find its fulfilment in Christ. In other words, from the beginning of all time, the whole of creation is already in Christ and for Christ. And, at the Incarnation, Christ joined himself to the whole of creation.

But the historical man Jesus cannot be totally revelatory, in his humanity, of the fullness of Godhead. His historical factuality must be

limited. He can, though, be disclosive of this fullness. Similarly, the Church in its historical corporateness has never fully grasped this fullness, never, at any moment in its history ever realized its potential wholeness, *ecclesia semper reformanda*. The Church points towards the kingdom, it is not the kingdom. The historical man Jesus points towards the fullness of truth in God. Hence, I should not be surprised to discover aspects of this truth revealed to me from outside my tradition. They will be aspects that I will recognize from my own commitment. Christianity reveals the truth without exhausting all truth.

The absoluteness of Christianity would refer to its absolute claim on the one who perceives it as ultimately meaningful for him. Its absoluteness would manifest itself in its disclosive power for the Christian. And we would, as Christians, claim that it would enlighten every man and woman. But this process of enlightenment will not be a process of *Aufhebung* as though the non-Christian religion must be totally abandoned with the full arrival of Christianity. Rather there will be a mutual growing towards the fullness of truth in God. Christianity cannot abrogate what is valid. Rather, the christian revelation is a truthful insight that is disclosive of meaning for all life. Evangelization becomes a response to man's expectation. Revelation is not closed with Christ, but disclosed.

We begin from our belief in God's universal salvific will which we hold to be genuinely effective in a historical and social way so that salvation history and profane history become co-terminous. God is at all times and among all peoples bringing about salvation through his Spirit. Thus the encounter between the Christian and those of other faiths is a dialogue of listening to the Spirit speaking in both participants to the dialogue. We look for God revealing himself. Christ possesses the Church and leads it out to meet other expressions of himself in other peoples. Together with them we grow to grasp more fully the riches of Christ.

Missionary activity is the manifestation of God's plan (*Ad gentes*, no 9). It is directed towards the epiphany and glorification of God. But we cannot determine *a priori* where God intends to work his plan nor limit where his glory is to be made known. The Church must witness to the reality of Christ present in the whole of creation. This is why we asked that the inter-faith dialogue should not be confined to the major world religions but should consider also the traditional african religions. The proclamation of the christian message must bring about meaning in and through the way-of-being-in-the-world of the hearer.

The mission is not to bring the truth but to listen to the truth in dialogue, whilst we witness to the truth that we understand. The mission is not so much a call away from one's religious commitment as a conversion towards a deeper understanding and commitment (though this may well demand, for some, a change in commitment). The mission is the task of the whole people of God called to witness to the christian

fullness of all life. The mission is not exclusively, nor even principally, a spiritual matter. It is a witness to Christ in the depths of all life. The mission is not merely to individuals. It is to the whole of society, to the manifestation of the glory of God in this world, and the witnessing to the kingdom already among us and not yet present.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> De Graeve, F.: 'Eleven theses towards a christian theology of inter-religious encounter' in *Louvain Studies*, 7(1979)4; 315-325.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Frankfort Declaration', in *Christ to the World*, 16 (1971); 72-78.

<sup>3</sup> 'The Lausanne Covenant', in *International Review of Mission*, 63 (1974) 252; 570-574.

<sup>4</sup> Daniélou, J.: 'A propos de l'évangélisation et du salut des non-chrétiens', in *Le Christ au Monde*, 10 (1965) 2; 379-384.

<sup>5</sup> Hacker, P.: *Theological foundations of evangelization* (St Augustin, Steyler Verlag, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> Rahner, K.: 'Christianity and the non-christian religions' in *Theological investigations*, V (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966) 115-134.

<sup>7</sup> Rahner, K.: *Foundations of christian faith* (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978) 345.