

Research Notes

Do “Non-Christian” Religions Have a Role in God’s Salvific Plan?

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As elementary schoolkids, every year in October, we received in our school the visit of a missionary coming from a faraway place in Africa or Asia, to share with us some stories about their work and adventures in the mission field. They told us how they had been involved in “saving” the African or Asian souls from eternal damnation by baptizing them and receiving them into the Catholic Church, and how they had participated in the establishment of new commissions by erecting new church buildings. Nevertheless, the only thing we heard about other religions, was that they were all “pagan” religions. Since their missionary work was before the internet, it might have been very difficult for these well-meaning missionaries to stay updated with the *aggiornamento* wind blowing through the Church

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during and after the Second Vatican Council.

Most of us, except maybe for the younger ones, are indeed familiar with the centuries-old Christian adage “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.” Fortunately, much has changed in the Church teachings concerning the salvation of non-Christians, especially since Vatican II. Our ways of dealing with the world religions have also become much more respectful and even more informed and understanding, thanks to the increase in real contacts and sharing of life with bearers of other religious traditions. Still, the attitude of Christians toward other religions is not without problems, and differences keep initiating heated debates. Furthermore, in our postmodern age of globalization this has become a pressing issue as the world religions are not anymore just geographically localized but are found everywhere.

In this paper, I will look first into the postmodern situation that made the issue of dealing with non-Christian religions more important than ever. In the second section, I will deal with the evolution of the Catholic Church’s teachings and attitudes toward other religions. The third section will then bring forward some ideas and proposals from various theologians. Their contributions may help us outgrow or even transcend the present impasse in the debate (see p. 168, below).

Before moving to the first section, let me say a few words about the term “non-Christian.” In what follows, I will use, as much as possible, the terms “other religions” or “world religions” rather than “non-Christian religions.” Likewise, instead of “non-Christian,” I will use “religious other.” First of all, it is not respectful to speak about people in terms of what they are not. Most of us would not appreciate it if, for example, a Hindu scholar would lump our religion together with others and just call us “non-Hindu religions.” Secondly, the term “non-Christian religions” would install our

Christian or Catholic religion as “the Center”, as if we should be the reference point for the other religious traditions.

Relating with other religions: a pressing matter

Middle Ages and Modernity

During the Middle Ages, the known world was limited and the Church assumed that the Gospel had been spread to wherever it could be spread. Besides, the Church was also preoccupied with spotting and punishing whoever was deemed to be a heretic. When later the continents beyond Europe were “discovered,” missionaries followed in the tracks of the colonizers and of those involved in commerce, in order to “save souls” and “plant the Church and churches.” And they believed that it would take only a relatively limited time before most people would be converted to Christianity.

Modernity can be considered as both a historical period as well as the interrelated historical processes and cultural phenomena that arose in the wake of the Renaissance (14th and 15th centuries, with its increasing interest in history and in human beings and their achievements), the Reformation (14th and 15th centuries, which challenged Church teachings and actions of the clergy), the Global Explorations (15th to 17th centuries, with its consequences for trade and economy), and the Scientific Revolution and Age of the Enlightenment (17th and 18th centuries, with the widespread application of the ‘Scientific Method’ and the emphasis on reason).¹ It thus started in Europe but later on became more worldwide in influence.² Manfred B. Steger different-

¹Marvin Perry, et al., *A History of the World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989), 323.

²Anthony Giddens, *Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA:

iates between an “Early Modern Period” (1500 – 1750) and a “Modern Period” (1750 – 1970).³ These two eras have gradually led to tremendous changes: 1) from multiple technological innovations and the development of ‘objective’ science, to an extra-ordinary explosion of science and technology and faith in an inevitable progress; 2) from industrialization, rise of the metropolitan centers and of the nation state, urbanization, individualism, unlimited material accumulation, to the foundation of a capitalist world system based on a free market economy; 3) from exploration and colonization (followed later by de-colonization) of the non-Western world with development of new interregional markets and economic transactions, to an excessive liberalization of the world trade; 4) from proliferation of mass media and development of communication technology, to a rapidly shrinking world and the beginning of the era of globalization; 5) from the liberation of rationality from the irrationalities of myths and religion, to secularization; and 6) from the belief that destiny is controlled by laws that reside in natural and social life, to belief in the “perfectibility of humanity by humanity.”⁴ Such changes posed enormous challenge to the Church’s self-understanding and practices especially in relation to other religions.

Stanford University Press, 1991), 1.

³Manfred B. Steger, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 28-35.

⁴Ibid.; John C. Sivalon, *God’s Mission and Postmodern Culture: The Gift of Uncertainty* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2013), 26-28.

Postmodernity⁵

Our postmodern world is increasingly religiously pluralistic, being considered as the “age of religion”.⁶ As of today the world counts 2.1 billion Christians, 1.5 billion Muslims, 1.1 Secular/Non-religious/Agnostic/Atheist people, 900 million Hindus, 394 million people belonging to the Chinese traditional religions (which include Confucianism and Taoism among others), 375 million Buddhists, 300 million primal indigenous people, 100 million belonging to African traditional and diasporic religions, 14 million Jewish people, and 500 thousand people practicing Scientology.

These statistics also show that the Muslims increased with twice as many members as the Christians if we compare with the data of the same

⁵Postmodernity’ and ‘postmodernism’ are relatively contentious terms. Although sociologist Anthony Giddens prefers to speak about ‘beyond modernity,’ he still differentiates ‘postmodernism’ as pertaining to aesthetic reflection in the fields of art and architecture, from ‘postmodernity’ in the sense of social development away from modernity: Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990) 45-54. Indeed, postmodernism became first noticeable among the artistic avant-garde starting around 1945, whereas postmodernity developed only later among the academics. Ideas were gradually exported from France to England, Germany and the U.S. But even those who consider themselves as ‘postmodernists’ show different interests: Jean-François Lyotard for example speaks about the ‘postmodern condition’ as incredulity toward metanarratives. Jean Baudrillard considers our media-dominated world in which everything has become illusions or ‘simulacra,’ as unreal as in Plato’s world. And as a Marxist, Fredric Jameson writes about late capitalism: J.-F. Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne: Report Sur Le Savoir* (Paris: Les Editions De Minuit, 1979); J. Baudrillard, *Simulacres Et Simulation* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1981); F. Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998).

⁶Edgar G. Javier, “Religion, Dialogue, and Spirituality— *Nostra Aetate* (in Our Time),” *Missio Inter Gentes* v.2, no.1 (2016): 55.

website in 2004.⁷

We should also bear in mind that postmodernism, rejects metanarratives as authoritarian and oppressive, and prefers instead particularity, diversity, localism and relativism.⁸ This is one of the reasons why a multitude of smaller groups or sects like for instance the Charismatic Movement, El Shaddai, and World Social Buddhism, to name but a few, are developing at a relatively fast pace.

Globalization

Arguably the most distinctive feature of post-modernity is the process of “globalization.” As of today, there is no agreed-upon definition of globalization in the academe⁹, but according to Richard Bliese, a consensus about its elements is beginning to be formed among sociologists, philosophers and theologians: (1) it is a continuation and expansion of the modernization

⁷<http://www.adherents.com> / accessed 20 June 2018.

⁸Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne*, 54-68; Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press and Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 6-7.

⁹Manfred B. Steger compares this situation with the ancient Buddhist parable of the blind scholars and the elephant. Each scholar has to describe the elephant by touching it, but each can only describe one part of the animal depending on his or her position: M.B. Steger, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11-12. And so, a sociologist for example would see globalization as “a concept [that] refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole”: Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: SAGE Publications, 1992), 8. Or, a professor of international relations would say that “Globalization compresses the time and space aspects of social relations”: J. H. Mittelman (ed.), *Globalization: Critical Reflections*, International Political Economy Yearbook, Vol. 9 (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1997), 3.

process in the West which is based in a capitalistic economy; (2) the recent developments in the fields of technology, communication and commerce have accelerated this process which leads to an always increasing interconnectedness of the whole world and to the formation of a uniform global culture; (3) but, as modernization has been exported outside the West, it has also been affected by the receiving cultures so that the West is also changed in the process; (4) and, as the homogenizing force of globalization is destroying local values, it also brings about the reaction of reassertion and revitalization of local cultures.¹⁰

Keywords for our present topic are: “increasing interconnectedness of the whole world,” “formation of a uniform global culture,” but on the other hand also “changing of the West[ern culture] by the receiving cultures,” and “reaction of reassertion and revitalization of local cultures.” It is thus clear that globalization is fostering cultural pluralism in the whole world. The world has become a “global village,” with all kinds of cultures constantly “rubbing elbows” with one another, whether electronically or physically.

According to Pio Estepa, sociologists have noticed several “megatrends” in this era of globalization: (1) mega-migration, (2) mega-urbanization, and (3) mega-mediatization.¹¹ Migration¹² means either internal

¹⁰Richard H. Bliese, “Globalization,” in Karl Müller, Theo Sundermeier, Stephen B. Bevans, and Richard H. Bliese, eds., *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspectives* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 172-178.

¹¹Pio Estepa, “The Asian Mission Landscape of the 21st Century,” *SEDOS Bulletin* 43, no. 5/6 (May-June 2011): 115-126; Edgar G. Javier, “The Missionary amidst Different Cultures and Religious Traditions: Re-imaging the Missionary Identity in Contemporary Times,” *Religious Life Asia* 13/3 (July-September 2011): 52.

¹²For more information on a) Migration: Brian Keeley, *International Migration: The human face of globalization* (OECD

migration from the rural areas to the cities, or external migration to other countries, usually for economic reasons or as refugees from war zones. Urbanization refers to the flight to the city, for most people also in search of “greener pastures.” Both these megatrends cause the mixing up of different cultures in a same geographical area. But also mediatization and an always increasing use of IT technology bring people from “all walks of life” into contact with one another. This cultural pluralism brings about religious pluralism¹³ as religion is probably the most important part of a culture, or even its “heart.”¹⁴

Lived reality of cultural and religious pluralism

Asia has always been “the” continent of cultural and religious pluralism, as it has given birth to all the largest world religions. Even Christianity was originally born in Asia although it spread first toward the West, so that the European missionaries, later on, brought the Christian faith back to the Asian continent. One cannot help but wonder how it could have been different

Publishing, 2009); Fabio Baggio and Agnes M. Brazal (eds.), *Faith on the Move: Toward a Theology of Migration in Asia* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2008); Susanne Snyder, Joshua Ralston, and Agnes M. Brazal (eds.) *Church in an age of global migration: A moving body* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016); b) Urbanization: George Martin, Gordon McGranahan, Mark Montgomery and Rogelio Fernández-Castilla (eds.), *The New Global Frontier: Urbanization, Poverty and Environment in the 21st Century* (London: Earthscan, 2008); c) Mediatization: Stig Hjarvard, *The Mediatization of Culture and Society* (NewYork: Routledge, 2013); Andreas Hepp, *Cultures of Mediatization* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

¹³Karl Rahner, “Toward a Fundamental Interpretation of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 40 (1979): 716-727; Peter C. Phan, “Doing Theology in the Context of Cultural and Religious Pluralism: An Asian Perspective,” *Louvain Studies* 27/1 (Spring 2002): 39-40.

¹⁴Its core which is most resistant to change. (Ed.)

(especially what concerns religious pluralism) if it had gone the other way around.... Despite all the efforts of generations of missionaries, Christianity remains a minority religion in Asia, so that in terms of world religions and of religious pluralism this continent has a lot of experience and knowledge to share with the rest of the world (see, the second and third sections of this paper, below).

The experience of living with other cultures and religions came later in the West. According to Robert Schreiter, it was only in 1965 that the Immigration Act “opened the doors of the United States to newcomers in an unprecedented way.”¹⁵ This development continued till the 1990s, and brought about not only multiculturalism, but also religious pluralism. Although Europe originally did not have a lot of contact or experience with religions other than Christianity and the Jewish faith, it is slowly “catching up,” as during the recent years it has been confronted with continuous waves of refugees originating from Syria and Iraq as well as from other war-stricken countries, most of whom are Muslim.

It has thus become a “fact on the ground” that wherever people are, there will always be close contacts with individuals belonging to other religions. If all have to work together for the betterment of our world, there is an urgent need to get to know not only each other’s cultures but also each other’s religions (it being the “heart” of one’s culture). Interfaith and interreligious dialogue¹⁶ become so an urgent need. The Christian Churches have therefore to face the challenge and task

¹⁵Robert Schreiter, “The Church of Tomorrow: Multiculturalism and Globalization,” *Origins* 32/22 (2002): 366-367.

¹⁶“Interreligious Dialogue” takes place among religious traditions or systems, while “Interfaith Dialogue” happens among the followers of religious traditions or systems.

of reviewing and improving their attitudes toward other religions so that dialogue and cooperation between religions will become possible and really contribute to justice, peace, and harmony in the world.

Dealing with other religions: a difficult matter for our catholic church

The Logos Theology

The three Church Fathers Justin, Irenaeus, and Clement were the proponents of different versions of a “Logos Theology,” which was called *Logos spermatikos* for Justin, *Logos emphutos* for Irenaeus, and *Logos protreptikos* for Clement. In all three it refers to “a manifestation of God in the Logos before the incarnation of the Word,”¹⁷ which means from creation all throughout human history. All three also state that the manifestation of God in the Logos culminates in God’s becoming human in Jesus Christ. This “seeds of the Word” theory is important today, as it leads to a positive approach to other religions. These “seeds” would indeed function as a preparation for the message of Jesus Christ.

According to Dupuis, there are still some questions concerning whether this Logos refers to the Word in the Prologue of John, or to the immanent “reason” of the Stoa and Philo of Alexandria, or to an integration of these two. If it is to John, then it refers to a “literary personification” of the Word of God (*Dabar*) which corresponds to God in the Old Testament, as God manifests Godself in words and deeds.¹⁸

Biblical scholar Roland E. Murphy on the other hand

¹⁷Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 70-77.

¹⁸Ibid.

reminds us of the Wisdom background of John 1:1-18.¹⁹ Indeed in the Old Testament's wisdom literature "wisdom" is personified as a woman: Lady Wisdom. Most of her attributes were later transferred to Jesus (the Word) in John's prologue: both were in the beginning with God, they were co-creators with God, they provided light, they were also in the world, rejected by their own, and received by the faithful. Wisdom was even like Christ "the door and the good shepherd," as well as "the way." In her research on Sophia, Joyce Rupp noticed that Philo as a Jew knew Lady Wisdom/Sophia, and that he taught that Yahweh had first created Sophia and then the Logos (the Word) as they were envisioned to work "together in shaping creation: Sophia, the feminine or creating vessel, and Logos, the masculine or active doer." Eventually, Philo was not able to keep the two separated so that he only kept the male Logos.²⁰ This history of the Logos shows us the interconnectedness and mutual "borrowing" of different religions and philosophies.

"Extra ecclesiam nulla salus" and reaction

Walter Kasper relates how this axiom was first explicitly mentioned in Origen's Joshua homilies, as well as by Cyprian of Carthage.²¹ But for both, the context was not the other religions, but those who had been baptized and were in danger of leaving again the Church. Augustine's pupil Fulgentius of Ruspe on the

¹⁹Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 146.

²⁰Joyce Rupp, "Desperately Seeking Sophia," *U.S.Catholic*. <http://www.uscatholic.org/church/scripture-and-theology/2008/07/desperately-seeking-sophia/> accessed June 21, 2018.

²¹Walter Kasper, *The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality and Mission* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 115-116.

other hand understood it as pertaining to the non-salvation of non-believers or non-baptized. In 1215 the fourth Lateran Council also took it in this way. Pope Boniface VIII applied it even to all those who did not subject themselves to the pope! The Council of Florence in 1442 finally stated that “no heathen, unbeliever or one separated from the unity could attain eternal life but was condemned to the eternal fire.”²²

Later, especially during its opposition to Jansenius, the Church maintained on the other hand that “Jesus Christ had died for all people,” and they rejected that there was no grace outside the Church. Like Thomas Aquinas, and even before him the Church Father Ambrose, the Council of Trent adopted the theory of justification through the “baptism of desire.” This desire did not even have to be explicit, as it could be an unconscious desire.²³ From then on the Church recognized the possibility for people outside the Church to be saved!

The Fulfillment Theory

This theory, proposed by predominantly French theologians like Jean Daniélou and Henri de Lubac, considers the religions outside the Judeo-Christian tradition to be part of the “prehistory” of salvation. They are a “preparation” or “stepping stones” for the Gospel. They are to be considered as belonging to the order of natural reason and as part of the cosmic covenant with Noah, symbolized by the rainbow. Their knowledge of God is also obtained through the order of nature (the world or personal conscience), not through the grace of God. These religions are made up of both truth and falsehood, right conduct and evil ways. They contain

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

traces of God (seeds of the Word) and traces of sin. Christianity will unveil their positive values: “by assuming them, it purifies and transforms them.”²⁴ The religions themselves play no role in salvation. It is the mystery of Christ that reaches the members of these religions in response to the human desire for God. This theology underlies several of the Vatican II documents.

Anonymous Christians

This theory of “anonymous Christianity” developed by Karl Rahner is already an improvement on the fulfillment theory: it is “the hidden, unknown operative presence of the mystery of Christ in other religious traditions.”²⁵ This means that “Christian salvation reaches them, anonymously, through these traditions.”²⁶ So, there are supernatural elements of grace in these religions. The members of these religions live this anonymous Christianity through the sincere practice of their own traditions. “The anonymous Christian is a Christian unaware.” But Rahner also mentions that this anonymous Christianity remains “a fragmentary, incomplete, radically crippled reality.”²⁷ With the debate between the fulfillment theory and anonymous Christianity, the “theology of religions” was born.

²⁴Jean Daniélou, *The Lord of History: Reflections on the Inner Meaning of History* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1958); Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: A Study of Dogma in Relation to the Corporate Destiny of Mankind* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958); de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998); Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 138.

²⁵Karl Rahner, “Anonymous Christians,” in *Theological Investigations* 6 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1969), 390-398; Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 143-149.

²⁶Edgar G. Javier, *Dialogue: Our Mission Today* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2006), 164.

²⁷Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 146.

Vatican II

The aim of this Council concerning the other religions, was predominantly to foster better relationships, understanding, dialogue and cooperation.²⁸ The important documents pertaining to this include: *Lumen Gentium* (16-17), *Nostra Aetate* (2), and *Ad Gentes* (3, 9, 11). There are three major questions here. The first one is about the salvation of people outside the Church. Since that was already considered as a possibility before Vatican II, the Council only affirmed this. The second question is about the positive values in other religions. Here also the answer was positive as can be noticed in the 1984 document published by the Secretariat for Non-Christians. The terminology they used shows this very clearly: “elements which are true and good” (LG 16), “seeds of contemplation” (AG 18), “elements of truth and grace” (AG 9), “seeds of the Word” (AG 11, 15), and “rays of that Truth which illumines all humankind” (NA 2). The third question is the most critical as it concerns the role of the religions in salvation. In other words, was Vatican II able to transcend the fulfillment theory? Although the elements of “truth and grace” found “as a sort of secret presence of God” (AG 9) seem to suggest this, the Council did not explicitly acknowledge the role of the other religions in salvation.²⁹

Paul VI

Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* was published during Vatican II in 1964. Noteworthy is the appearance of the word “dialogue,” as it promoted the dialogue of the Church with (1) the entire world, (2) members of other religions, (3) with other Christian

²⁸Ibid., 158-170.

²⁹Ibid.

Churches, and (4) within the Church. Although we find in this document also a respect for the moral and spiritual values of other religions, the stress on the exclusiveness of Christianity as the “one true religion” (ES 655) is very clear.³⁰ Likewise, in his 1975 encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, written in response to the 1974 Synod of Catholic Bishops on Evangelization in the Modern World, the pope expresses his strong suspicion of religious pluralism and reminds us again that Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation “which other religions cannot achieve” (EN 53). Besides, no word is said about interreligious dialogue. This negativity toward other religions was certainly not corresponding with many opinions expressed during the Synod according to Dupuis.³¹

John Paul II

What can be considered as a major contribution from Pope John Paul II is his emphasis on the presence of God’s Spirit in the religious life of the “religious others” as well as in the religions to which they belong. This is especially the case in his encyclicals *Dominum et Vivificantem* of 1986, and in *Redemptoris Missio* of 1990. We find here expressions as “action of the Holy Spirit even before Christ” (DV 53) and “the wind blows where it wills” (DV 53). He also seems to be open to “participated forms of mediation,” although these only acquire meaning from Christ’s own mediation. But then, in his apostolic exhortation *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* of 1994, he resumes using the fulfillment theory.³²

³⁰Ibid., 170-172.

³¹Jonathan Y. Tan, *Christian Mission Among the Peoples of Asia* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2014), 73. Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 172.

³²Tan, *Christian Mission*, 73-74. Dupuis, *Toward a Christian*

“Dialogue and Proclamation”

This document, jointly published in 1991 by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples is the first to affirm that “it will be in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious tradition and by following the dictates of their conscience that the members of other religions respond positively to God’s invitation and receive salvation in Jesus Christ, even while they do not recognize or acknowledge him as their Savior” (DP 29). This is the farthest that any Church document had yet gone.³³

The problem and the deadlocked debate

Religious Pluralism can be understood as either a reality (*de facto*), or a principle (*de principio, de iure*). Pluralism as a reality is what the Asian Church has been used to all throughout history. That is why they see the value and urgent necessity of interreligious dialogue. The Western Church on the other hand sees Religious Pluralism as a principle, more specifically the belief that the other religions have been positively wanted and intended by God, and so can be considered as ways of salvation. Presented like that, the other religions would then also be a variety of God’s self-manifestations (and so “revelation”) to humanity, and not only a natural human searching for the Divine.³⁴ This of course brings us right away into the debate between the positions of “exclusivism,” “inclusivism,” and “pluralism,”³⁵ which usually correspond with three

Theology, 177-178.

³³Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 178.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 386.

³⁵Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the*

perspectives: “ecclesiocentric,” “Christocentric,” and “theocentric.” The first position/perspective pair means that it is the Church that saves, and that there is no salvation possible outside the Church. The second pair indicates that it is Christ who saves, while the third pair speaks about the fact that it is God who saves.

The Church which is very afraid of relativism and any affirmation of the equality of all religions, has been extremely cautious in attributing to the other religions any salvific role. This despite the fact, that according to Paul Knitter, pluralist theologians affirm the plurality and “mutuality” of the religions, not their “equality.”³⁶ Furthermore, the Church is also very concerned about “theocentrism,” as this could take Christ “out of the picture,” whereas for Christianity, Christ is the unique and universal savior!

This fear and the ensuing deadlock in the debate can, for example, be perceived indirectly in the following: First, in April – May 1998, there was what could be called a “clash” during the Roman Synod on Asia, between the Asian Bishops’ Conferences and the Vatican concerning the salvation of other religions. The Asian Bishops continuously requested for a rethinking of the relationship between Christianity and the other religions, to which John Paul II only responded by reiterating the fact of the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ for salvation (in his apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*).³⁷ Secondly, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF) headed by Cardinal Ratzinger issued the document *Dominus Iesus* in 2000, which according to Aloysius Pieris seemed again to imply that outside the Roman Catholic Church there is no

Christian Theology of Religions (London: S.C.M., 1983).

³⁶Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 117-118.

³⁷Tan, *Christian Mission*, 81-89.

salvation possible.³⁸ Finally, several great theologians (Tony de Mello, Jacques Dupuis, Roger Haight, Jon Sobrino, Tissa Balasuriya, Peter Phan, and others) were investigated by the CDF because of issues related to the theology of religions.

How Can the Present Impasse be Transcended?

To break the deadlock and be able to grow toward genuine dialogue with the “religious other” and his or her religion, paradigm shifts have to be made in our understanding, and that in several different areas:

Methodology

Peter Phan, in his *The Joy of Religious Pluralism*, explains how the CDF’s methodology differs from his own. The CDF follows John Paul II’s encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (no. 65) that states that there are two acts in the proper theological method: (1) “hearing the faith”: getting to know the revelation expounded in Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture and the Church’s living Magisterium, and (2) “understanding the faith”: responding through speculative inquiry. Phan’s method on the other hand follows the one recommended by the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC),

³⁸Aloysius Pieris, “The Roman Catholic Perception of Other Churches and Other Religions after the Vatican’s *Dominus Iesus*,” *East Asian Pastoral Review* 38/3 (2001): 211. Reflecting on postmodern culture, John C. Sivalon suggest that this document was caused by the fear of the church officials toward some changes (lack of belief in metanarratives, stress on relativity, etc.), brought about by postmodernism, which were being perceived as a threat. He calls this reaction a “romantic conservatism” which hearkens “back to an earlier period that is romanticized or idealized”: J.C. Sivalon, *God’s Mission and Postmodern Culture: The Gift of Uncertainty* (Quezon City: Claretian Publication, 2013), 32.

which starts from the contextual realities of life.³⁹ In other words, it is only by knowing and living with “religious others” and their religions, that we can say something meaningful about them. It is no wonder that it is precisely those who know religious pluralism from experience (the Asian bishops and theologians), those who know the millions of good and selfless people who became so thanks to (and not despite!) their other religions, who push for a “rethinking” of the relationship between Christianity and other religions. Unfortunately, if the hierarchical magisterium keeps on starting from the faith of the Church instead of from the “signs of the time” to write its theology, it will get more and more alienated from the reality and its people, on so many different issues, and the Galileo mistake will be repeated over and over again.

Pneumatology

When Phan writes about the presence of the Spirit in other religions, he refers back to the metaphor of Irenaeus: the “two hands of the Father,” Jesus and the Holy Spirit, through which the Father is active in history. Again influenced by the FABC approach, he reviews how the Spirit is at work in the various religious-cultural realities in Asia, and concludes that “Divine Spirit is actively present in non-Christian religions in and through the Holy Spirit and that to this extent these religions may be regarded as ‘ways of salvation’.”⁴⁰ It is interesting to note that the FABC’s Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) itself mentions that “We value pluralism as a great gift of the Spirit . . . People encounter the Spirit within their context, which is

³⁹Peter C. Phan, *The Joy of Religious Pluralism: A Personal Journey* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017), 21-49.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 51-74.

pluralistic in terms of religions, cultures and world-views. In this light, we affirm a stance of receptive pluralism.”⁴¹

Going back to the “two hands of the Father,” Phan mentions how the three divine persons are mutually dependent, but also how they have a “certain autonomy in being and acting.” This means that the Holy Spirit is active outside Jesus, before and after the incarnation, and outside Christianity, in other religions. Thus, the other religions have salvific value and function and are not merely “stepping stones” toward, or “fulfilled” by Christianity.⁴²

Christology

Phan addresses also the “uniqueness” and “universality” of Christ. He distinguishes between the Word (Logos) of God before incarnation, and the Word (Logos) of God after incarnation as Jesus of Nazareth. The first one is one of the “two hands of the Father,” and is actively present in history outside and without Jesus of Nazareth, unrestricted by place and time. Jesus of Nazareth was on the other hand limited in time and space, so that he could not have a salvific function for those who lived before him. The activities of the un-incarnated Word go beyond the earthly Jesus’ activities, before, during, and after the incarnation. This means again that God’s saving presence is not limited to the Judaeo-Christian history but is extended to the whole of human history. It also means that Logos and Spirit (the two hands) play both a unique and universal role in salvation. And they carry out this role in Christianity as

⁴¹Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences. Documents from 1997 to 2002*, vol.3 (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2002), 321.

⁴²Phan, *The Joy of Religious Pluralism*, 72-73.

well as in other religions.⁴³

Soteriology

Another area one could look into is the definition of “salvation.” Several authors have proposed that salvation might not mean the same thing in all religions. This made Phan propose a “multisalvational” theology of religion, whereas S. Mark Heim argues for a “true religious pluralism, in which the distinctiveness of various religious ends is acknowledged.”⁴⁴ But even in our official documents concerning interreligious dialogue there is often confusion. Philip Cunningham, in his review of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews’ document, *The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable*, mentions that the word “salvation” is used forty-two times without stating anywhere which of the several possible meanings are being used.⁴⁵

Hermeneutics

S. Wesley Ariarajah makes us aware of the danger of “proof-texting.” Sometimes theologians just base their theories on a few verses taken from the Bible, instead of on the whole biblical message. But what they forget is the fact that it is often possible to find other verses that say exactly the opposite. What concerns salvation, one of the verses that is often used is Jn 14:6: “Jesus said to him, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one

⁴³Ibid., 75-124.

⁴⁴Peter C. Phan, “Universal Salvation, Christian Identity, Church Mission,” in *Japan Mission Journal* 64/1 (Spring 2010): 9-10. S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995) 7.

⁴⁵Philip A. Cunningham, “Gifts and Calling: Coming to Terms with Jews as Covenantal Partners,” in *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 12, no.1 (2017): 3-6.

comes to the Father except through me.” An example of the opposite would be Acts 10:34-35: “³⁴Then Peter began to speak to them: ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.’” Another example would be Mark 10 where a man asks Jesus what he should do to inherit eternal life. The answer is direct: “sell everything you have and give it to the poor.” Nothing is said about being baptized or joining the followers of Jesus.⁴⁶ Related with this is the complaint of biblical scholars that Church documents often show a lack of interpretative skills, for example when they are completely devoid of historical criticism which would have taken into consideration the historical and socio-cultural background of texts. For instance, what concerns our topic of salvation, it is known that almost all the “exclusive” saying in the New Testament were written in the context of some kind of polemical situation!⁴⁷ They might thus not be the best basis to build universal claims on...

Women’s Voices

Although not many feminists have ventured into the field of religious pluralism, those who did can provide us with yet untrodden directions and challenges. Five of them will be briefly reviewed: three Christians and two “religious others.” Well known author Rosemary Radford Ruether states that as all religions have a history of androcentrism and patriarchy, none of them has allowed the divine to be experienced in ways defined

⁴⁶S. Wesley Ariarajah, “Interpreting John 14:6 in a Religiously Plural Society” in *Voices From the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 355-370.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 365.

by women. Interreligious dialogue between feminists therefore can correct that past marginalization of women as well as recover women's experiences of the divine.⁴⁸

Claremont's Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki neither agrees with exclusivism and inclusivism, nor with relativism. Influenced by process theology she sees creation as a continuous 'call and response' which requires pluralism in order to witness God's creative work with the whole world. When God's call is taken into the becoming world, God is 'radically incarnated' in this world which means that God is at work within all the different cultural, historical and religious contexts. God adapts God's revelation to our human conditions: it is not needed to use the same method of salvation for all. The internal love of God as Trinity is expressed outwardly through calling into being that which is most 'other' to God: the creature. Called to be image of God we too must learn to love beyond ourselves, to love the diversity of religious pluralism, the 'other.' And we should not forget that a mark of God's reign is our treatment of the 'stranger within our gates.'⁴⁹

Jeannine Hill Fletcher from the Fordham University draws on the rich insights of feminist theory when she claims that the categories of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism all fail because they assume the existence of exclusive and internally consistent religious identities, while other traditions are judged in terms of their sameness 'or' differences with these identities. In

⁴⁸Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Feminism and Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Particularism and Universalism in the Search for Religious Truth," in Paul Knitter and John Hick (eds.), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1987), 137-148.

⁴⁹Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *Divinity and Diversity: A Christian Affirmation of Religious Pluralism* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003).

fact the encounter with the 'religious other' is more often an encounter of 'both' sameness and difference. Here the author brings in the idea of Christian identity as multiple and hybrid. Indeed identities are not constructed on a singular feature (like gender or religion), but people belong to 'multiple spaces,' all 'aspects of identity' which are 'mutually informing.' So the identity of being a woman will be intersected by race, ethnicity, class, education, sexual orientation, age, religion, etc. 'Each element of identity and past experience combines with others in my own person and shapes my understanding and experience of Christian identity.' It is this fact of multiple and hybrid identity that allows us in interreligious encounters to honor differences and forge new solidarities.⁵⁰

The Christian-turned-Buddhist scholar Rita M. Gross gives us some pertinent questions to reflect on: 1) Why is it that precisely the two religions (Islam and Christianity) that acquired empires early in their existence are the ones that are most confident about their claims of universal relevance? 2) Why is that these religions that claim exclusive and universal truth for themselves are the ones that have caused so much harm and suffering? 3) Why don't we shift from looking for the 'truth' of a religion to looking for their 'morality,' their treatment of others, and their ability to bring about meaningful transformation toward kindness and compassion in their members?⁵¹

Jewish feminist Judith Plaskow discusses the relationship between sexism and the concept of

⁵⁰Jeannine Hill Fletcher, "Shifting Identity: The Contribution of Feminist Thought to Theologies of Religious Pluralism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 19/2 (Fall 2003): 5-24.

⁵¹Rita M. Gross, "Excuse Me, but What's the Question?" in Paul F. Knitter (ed.), *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 75-87.

'chosenness' in Judaism, as she believes that the affirmation of 'chosenness' always implies some degree of superiority. Like the male is normative and superior in Judaism vis-à-vis the female, so is the Jew in comparison with the non-Jew. Indeed, in Judaism, differences are always understood in terms of a 'hierarchical gradient.' What needs therefore to be done is the 'reconceptualization of the way that difference is understood and portrayed.' This will permit Jewish men and women, and Jews and non-Jews, to live in acceptance and equality.⁵²

Humility

But perhaps what our Church lacks most is "humility." We want to contain God and all of reality in our theologies and doctrines. Maybe it is also this "need to control," because it makes us feel good and safe to control Reality within the boundaries of our theories. But God is mystery and freedom, and is not exhaustively known by any religion or by any person. As Elizabeth Johnson shares: "As different paths to salvation, the religions belong to the overflowing communication of the triune God, who speaks 'in many and diverse ways.'" And this "rests on the magnificent, superabundant generosity of God who is Love."⁵³

Conclusion

This paper tackled the issue of salvation for the religious 'other' and the salvific role of his or her religion. First it was shown how cultural and religious

⁵²Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).

⁵³Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 178.

pluralism brought about by globalization and migration, have made this issue very pressing for our present times. Secondly, the evolution in our Church's teachings concerning other religions and salvation was reviewed. It is obvious that due to its fear of relativism, our hierarchical magisterium has been very reluctant to explicitly attribute any salvific role to the other religions. This has stifled the debate on religious pluralism and rendered interreligious dialogue more difficult and slow, almost reducing the relationship with other religious traditions to mere "tolerance." Thirdly, it was proposed that what is needed is a paradigm change in our understanding in different theological fields: (1) What concerns methodology, Western theology should adopt the way the Asian Bishops always start from the contextual realities rather than from the faith of the Church; (2) Both Irenaeus' "two hands of the Father," and the equally ancient Logos theory can be of help to show how both the Spirit and the Logos are at work in other religions even before the incarnation and so how both play a unique and universal role in salvation through these other religions; (3) There is a need to look into what "salvation" means for every religion, and to be clear in the meaning we give to the term in our own Church documents related to dialogue with other religions; (4) Our Church documents must also show enough updated hermeneutical skills⁵⁴ and avoid simple proof texting; (5) Our Church needs to listen to the wisdom embedded in so-often-marginalized women's voices; and, (6) Above all, our Church needs to become a

⁵⁴Hermeneutics is not limited to rules, tools, and skills in analysis and interpretation; hermeneutics, especially for the churches, must also involve the conscious espousal of a certain perspective—the perspective of Jesus who brought hope to the poor of his time when he announced and lived out his message of inclusion of the poor in his central message of the Reign of God. (Ed.)

humble Church that can recognize the mystery of God at work outside Christianity. God is indeed greater than our hearts.

Finally, the following passage from Mk 9:38-41 might summarize a bit the spirit of this paper:

³⁸John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." ³⁹But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward." (NRSV)