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Christianity and Other Religions: From Confrontation to Encounter

The Storm of the Spirit

All the world's religions can profane the name of God. After 11 September, this is a concern not only for theologians, but for the world. Giving The Tablet Open Day lecture last week, the Belgian Jesuit Jacques Dupuis, professor at the Gregorian University in Rome, developed his theory that God has one plan for all humanity. The lecture The Tablet published in three instalments is given below.

The Theology of religions is a burning topic today. The events which took place in New York and Washington on 11 September and which have provoked a universal trauma around the world make the issue even more pressing. Religious and political leaders have wisely insisted that terrorism should not be identified with the religion of Islam. The fact remains, however, that in this case as in many instances through history, religion tends to become ideology and is used in pursuit of cruel and inhuman designs. Holy wars, it is said, are being fought in the name of God, and the men who perpetrate deeds of terrorism, which create thousands of innocent victims are considered holy martyrs.

The world seems unable to maintain peace between peoples, and the religions which ought to be a factor conducive to universal peace seem often to be used to foster conflicts and wars. Hans Küng once wrote: "There can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There can be no peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. There can be no dialogue between the religions without research into theological foundations".

An open and constructive theology of the religions of the world is a pressing need if we wish to foster an interreligious dialogue conducive to universal peace. It cannot be denied that Christianity has often through the centuries entertained a very negative appraisal of other religions, which in turn led to very prejudicial or even destructive attitudes. This is not the place to recall in detail this contentious past, of which however we need to be aware if we wish to evaluate honestly the events with which we are confronted today. The questions to be asked are: which new theological evaluation of the other religions must we entertain and promote today? And which concrete attitudes towards their followers must we ourselves put into practice and foster among others?

The recent doctrinal authority of the Church has insistently stressed the need and importance of interreligious dialogue as part of the Church's evangelising mission. In his Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) John Paul II wrote: "Dialogue does not originate from tactical concerns or self-interest, but is an activity with its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity. It is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills. Through dialogue the Church seeks to uncover the 'seeds of the Word', a 'ray of that Truth which enlightens everyone'; these are found in individuals and in the religious traditions of humankind" (n. 56).

More recently, in the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* at the beginning of the third millennium, the Pope wrote of "the great challenge of interreligious dialogue", and added: "In the climate of increased cultural and religious pluralism which is expected to mark the society of the new millennium, it is obvious that this dialogue will be specially important in establishing a sure basis for peace and warding off the dread spectre of those wars of religion which have so often bloodied human history. The name of the one God must become increasingly what it is: a name of peace and a summons to peace" (n. 55).

To what extent is true encounter and dialogue between the religions already a reality in the multi-religious world in which we are living? One may not overlook the difficulties of different kinds that the practice of dialogue must overcome. It is enough to remember the crimes against humankind which the 20th century has known. Often, the religious traditions were involved in the conflicts. It has been suggested that the last century has been the most cruel in human history.

A purification of the memory — and the memories — is required from all sides, if we wish to reach a renewed mutual attitude between the religious traditions and enjoy a genuine encounter. But purification of memories is not easily achieved. Peoples and religious groups cannot be asked simply to forget what they have suffered at the hands of the other religious traditions, including Christianity, if not by way of the extermination of populations, often at least by the destruction of their cultural and religious patrimony. To forget would amount to betrayal. The personal identity of a human group is built on the foundation of a historical past which cannot in any way be cancelled, even if we should desire to cancel it. But memory can be healed and purified by a common determination to initiate new and constructive mutual relations, built on dialogue, collaboration, and a true encounter.

It is in view of such mutual and general healing of memories that in his Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* Pope John Paul II proposed for the Jubilee Year 2000 an elaborate programme of asking and granting pardon. The Pope mentions explicitly, among other sins to be confessed by Christians and by the Church, "the acquiescence, especially in some centuries, in intolerant and even violent methods in the service of truth". In the solemn celebration of repentance which took place in St Peter's Basilica in Rome on the first Sunday of Lent during the jubilee year, it fell to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, to recognise publicly and to ask pardon for the fact that "church people also, in the name of faith and morals, have sometimes had recourse to methods contrary to the Gospel, on the pretext of defending truth". These discreet words hide many cruel and inhuman practices to which the Church's authority has had recourse. Purification of memories is required inside and outside the Church.

But, however important the purification of memories may be, it does not by itself suffice. A purification of theological language and thinking is also needed. Besides the often hostile attitudes maintained in the past towards people belonging to other religious traditions, we should recall the traditionally negative evaluations of their patrimony, cultural and religious, which have lasted through the centuries. The Christian theological evaluation of other religions has been traditionally negative and derogatory. The claim to be "the only true religion" has been expressed ideologically in the axiom, "Outside the Church, no salvation". The Church was considered the "only ark of salvation", outside of which people were irremediably lost. That such an axiom, understood in the most rigid manner, remained for centuries the official doctrine of the Church, is truly a matter of shame for which we need to ask pardon from peoples and from God.

The theological terminology used even today by many Christian preachers and theologians retains traces of ways of speaking about the "others" which are clearly pejorative. There is still talk about "pagans", even about "infidels" or "non-believers". "Infidels" to whom or to what, it can be asked. The very term "non-Christians" ought to be considered offensive. What would we think if the "others" were to consider us and call us "non-Hindus" or "non-Buddhists"? People must be named on the basis of the self-comprehension which they have of themselves, not of some foreign prejudicial estimation.

The pluri-ethnic, pluri-cultural and pluri-religious world of the present time requires, from all sides, a "qualitative leap", proportionate to the situation, if we wish to enjoy positive and open mutual relations characterised by dialogue and collaboration between the peoples, the cultures and the religions of the world: in a word, we must proceed through encounter rather than through the confrontation of the past. Nothing less than a true conversion of persons and religious groups will suffice to bring about peace between the religions of the world, without which, as has been recalled above, there can be no peace between peoples.

What then is meant by this mutual conversion? First of all it requires a true "sym-pathy" or "em-pathy", which will help us to understand the "others" as they understand themselves, not as we, often due to tenacious traditional prejudices, think that we know who they are. What is required is a welcome, without restriction, of the "others" in their difference, in their irreducible identity.

The challenge, but at the same time the grace, of interreligious dialogue consists in this welcome for the others in their difference. Interpersonal encounter takes place necessarily between persons who are different, and a richness of communion is built on the mutual complementarity between persons. The same thing holds true for religions: unity does not mean uniformity, nor does communion mean conformism. The grace of dialogue between religions consists in the possibility of a mutual enrichment.

History at a glance: three perspectives

Let us recall rapidly the different perspectives which through the centuries have marked the Christian theological evaluation of other religions. A first perspective, which lasted for more than 10 centuries, consisted in asking whether salvation in Jesus Christ was possible for people who did not profess faith in him and were not members of the Church. To this question a negative answer was given through the axiom "Outside the Church, no salvation", till such time as the discovery of the New World (1492) forced theologians to devise theories according to which explicit faith in Jesus Christ and church membership were no longer a *conditio sine qua non* for salvation. An "implicit faith", contained for instance in the sincere following of the personal conscience in the circumstances of each individual's life, could suffice.

This partially positive answer to the question of the possibility of salvation for outsiders remained common doctrine till the decades that preceded the Second Vatican Council: it became part of the doctrine of the Council of Trent. Only shortly before the Second Vatican Council did some theologians adopt a second and more open perspective. Going beyond a purely individual consideration of the possibility of salvation for individuals, they now spoke of positive values to be found not merely in the religious life of persons outside the Church but in the religious traditions to which those persons belonged.

This, however, could be and was understood in two vastly different ways. For some (Jean Daniélou, Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar) such values were natural endowments of human nature which enabled people to reach a valid natural knowledge of God that by itself was incapable of leading to salvation; for others, on the contrary (Karl Rahner is here the great protagonist), those values were in fact supernatural gifts of God, elements of "truth and of grace" inserted by God's gracious initiative into the various religious traditions of the world and conducive to human salvation.

As is well known, the Second Vatican Council adopted various expressions used by the earliest Christian tradition with regard to Greek philosophy and Asian wisdom, and applied them to the religious traditions. The Council thus spoke of the "seeds of the Word", of a "ray of that Truth which enlightens everyone", found in the religions, but without stating explicitly which precise meaning it meant to attribute to these expressions. The Council did not commit itself to stating that the other religions can be means or ways of salvation for their followers. Its open attitude notwithstanding, it left the question of the theological significance of the religions finally unanswered.

The third perspective, which is that of my new book *Christianity and the Religions of the World: from confrontation to encounter* and its predecessor, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, is thus a recent post-conciliar development. Theologians today no longer simply ask whether salvation is possible for individuals outside the Church; nor whether positive values, either natural or even supernatural, can be found in the religious traditions. They ask whether Christian and Catholic theology can affirm that the religious traditions have in the eternal plan of God for humankind a positive significance and are for their followers ways, means and channels of salvation willed and devised by God. This is the question of the meaning, in God's own mind, of the religious pluralism in which we find ourselves in the present world; religious pluralism that exists not simply *de facto*, but "in principle".

Let us note in passing that the Declaration *Dominus Iesus* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in its introduction (n. 4), fails to make an essential distinction. It rejects any theological theory which supports religious pluralism as existing in principle. Such a position it considers doctrinal relativism. "The Church's constant missionary proclamation", the introduction says, "is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism, not only *de facto* but also *de iure* (or in principle)". According to the document, the truths which are considered superseded by such theories include the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as universal saviour.

The Declaration is, of course, right to reject any theory that, religious pluralism exists in principle which is founded on the rejection of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as universal saviour. It is wrong, however, in seeming to imply that any theological theory supporting religious pluralism in principle must be based on the denial of what is in fact the very core of the Christian faith. There is no lack of theologians today who seek to combine and hold together, even if in a fruitful tension, their unimpaired faith in Jesus Christ as universal saviour of humankind, on the one hand, and, on the other, a positive, salvific significance of the other religious traditions of the world for their followers, in accordance to the eternal plan of God for humanity. This is the challenge which faces the theology of religions today, and represents the core of the third perspective recently opened up after the Second Vatican Council.

God is always greater

If Jesus Christ is the unique saviour, how can other faiths too be ways of salvation? Fr Jacques Dupuis is sure that any new model must start and end with the central Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

I concluded last week that the Christian theology of religions is today challenged to find a new model in line with the perspective opened up after the Second Vatican Council. How can we show that it is possible to combine an unimpaired faith in Jesus Christ as universal saviour of humankind, on the one hand, with an acceptance on the other of the positive, salvific significance of the other religious traditions of the world for their followers, in accordance with the eternal plan of God for humanity? What model will do justice to a religious pluralism that exists in principle, not simply *de facto*?

In response to this challenge, I have proposed in my two most recent books, *Christianity and the Religions of the World: from confrontation to encounter* and *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, that we should develop a doctrine of Christ based on the Trinity and the Spirit. The interpersonal relationships between the Son and the Father, on the one hand, and the Son and the Spirit, on the other, are intrinsic to the mystery of Jesus Christ. These connections must be taken into account at every step of theological reflection if we want to avoid abstract considerations which fall short of and possibly distort the reality of the mystery of Jesus Christ.

The doctrine of Christ has, in the past, too often been made impersonal. Its concern was with the "God-man" and the "hypostatic union" of the two natures in the God-man. But the doctrine of Christ found in the New Testament is not neutral and abstract in this way, but is about the concrete mystery of the Word-of-God-made-flesh in Jesus of Nazareth.

How are we to describe the event of Jesus Christ? It comprises the Word of God becoming man, Jesus' entire life, his words and deeds, and finally the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection. All this must be seen, as God sees it, within the framework of God's gracious dealings with humankind throughout the history of the world starting with creation. From the very beginning — not just from Abraham — God has manifested himself to his human creatures in words and deeds, through his Word and his Spirit.

This universal involvement of God with his creatures through history is marked by different covenants with humanity, of which St Irenaeus in the 2nd century in a celebrated text distinguished four, as follows: "One, prior to the flood, under Adam; the second, after the flood, under Noah; the third — the giving of the law — under Moses; then comes the fourth, which renews humanity, and sums up all things in itself by means of the Gospel, raising and bearing human beings upon its wings into the heavenly kingdom".

The prologue of the Gospel according to John insists that God created all things through his Word, present with him from eternity (1:1-3); it adds that the Word of God has been throughout salvation history "the true light that, by coming into the world, enlightens everyone" (1:9). The coming into the world of the Word of God does not here refer to the mystery of the Incarnation, but to the coming into the world of the Word as the Lady Wisdom of which the First, or Jewish, Testament spoke. Similarly, the Holy Spirit has been universally present and operative in God's personal dealings with humankind through history.

Thus Yahweh (whom Jesus will call Father) reveals himself universally through his Word (known to the First Testament as the Wisdom of God) and through his Spirit. Both the First Testament and the Christian Testament testify to this trinitarian structure. The personal involvement of God with his creatures through history is everywhere marked with a trinitarian rhythm.

The Christ-event — made up of the entire human life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ — marks the apex and the summit of these divine manifestations of God through his Word and his Spirit. God's self-revelation and self-gift to human beings in Jesus Christ is the centre of history and the key for interpreting the entire process of salvation. Jesus Christ is constitutive of universal salvation; he is truly the Saviour of the world.

By being raised from the dead by the Father, the human existence of Jesus, the Word incarnate, is no longer subject to conditioning by time and space. It is this real transformation of the human being of Jesus through his resurrection which confers upon his human existence, and in particular upon the paschal mystery of his

death and resurrection, universal salvific value. Through it the Christ-event, which constitutes human salvation, is inclusively present and remains in force throughout time and space.

The unique significance of the event of Jesus Christ, as constitutive of universal salvation, must be clearly established on its true theological foundation. In the last analysis, it needs to be based on the personal identity of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. No other consideration will do. Through the mystery of the Incarnation the Word of God has inserted himself personally, once and for all, in the human reality and in the history of the world. In him God has established a bond of union with the entire human race which can never be broken. The Christ-event is the sacrament of that decisive and everlasting covenant: the Incarnation represents the deepest and most immanent possible manner of God's personal involvement with humankind in history. The event of Jesus Christ is therefore unique and irreplaceable in the history of salvation for all mankind.

Yet the historical event of Jesus Christ is necessarily particular and circumscribed by the limits imposed upon it by time and space. The human story of Jesus belongs to a precise historical period. The mystery of the resurrection itself is also located in human history, even though it introduces the human being of Jesus into a condition that extends beyond history. In and through the glorified state of the Risen One, the historical event of salvation becomes and remains present for all times and places; yet it is equally true that even that event does not exhaust — and cannot exhaust — the revealing and saving power of the Word of God. While no separation can be admitted between the human being of Jesus and the person of the Word of God — as John Paul II has rightly insisted in his Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (n. 6) — nor can they be identified, for the two natures of Jesus Christ remain distinct in their very personal union.

The Word has been manifested in Jesus Christ in the deepest human way that may ever be conceived, and hence in the way best adapted to our human condition. But, paradoxically, this most human way of self-manifestation involves in itself and by its very nature its own limitations. The Word of God reaches beyond whatever the human being of Jesus, assumed by him personally, is capable of manifesting and revealing. Jesus Christ is in his humanity the universal sacrament of the mystery of salvation offered by God to the whole of humankind through his Word and his Spirit; but the God who saves through him remains beyond the human being of Jesus, even in his glorified state. Jesus Christ risen and glorified does not substitute for the Father; nor does his glorified human existence take the place of the Word himself, who could never be fully revealed through any historical manifestation.

I mentioned earlier, with reference to the prologue of the Gospel according to John, that the Word of God, who exists eternally in the mystery of God's divine life, and through whom God created all things — and keeps them today in existence — was present and active throughout history *before* the Incarnation as "the true light that, coming into the world enlightens everyone" (1:9). And this universal enlightening and saving activity of the Word as such perdures *after* the Incarnation of the Word and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is possible, therefore, to speak of an enduring, enlightening and saving activity of the Word of God as such, distinct from his saving activity through the risen human existence of Jesus. That is in line with St Leo the Great's remark that while becoming man, the "Word does not lose the glory which is his in equality with the Father". If so, that must mean that the Word of God keeps exercising, in union with the Father, the actions which belong to him by reason of his specific character in the divine mystery: mediation in creation (Jn 1:3), a universal enlightening action with regard to human beings (Jn 1:9), even the communication to them of the power to become children of God (Jn 1:12).

The Christ-event, however inclusively present, does not exhaust the power of the Word of God, who became flesh in Jesus Christ. And, if the Word remains God, he continues to act as God, beyond his own human action. The action of the Word as such exceeds that of the Word incarnate in his glorified humanity.

One can understand then how "elements of truth and grace" (Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*, n. 9) can be found in the other religious traditions of the world, and how these serve, for their followers, as "paths" or "ways" to salvation. It is the Word of God who went sowing his seeds in the religious traditions. Nor must these seeds be understood as representing merely natural human endowments awaiting an eventual divine manifestation. They represent an actual divine self-manifestation and self-gift of God through his Word, however incomplete it may be.

The work of the Potter

The metaphor of God the Father as the Potter is helpful for the theology of religions. The work of his two hands, the Word and the Spirit, is eternally directed towards and culminates in the revelation of Jesus Christ, but is unlimited in its extent.

When the Word of God became man in Jesus Christ, God's self-communication to humanity reached its height. Here is the unsurpassed — and unsurpassable — key to the history of salvation. But the permanent presence and action of God's Word remain unrestricted by the particular historical event of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ as I explained in my article last week.

The same applies to God's Spirit, whose universal presence has been stressed in recent pronouncements of the Catholic teaching authority. The Spirit is present not only in persons but in the faiths they hold. In his Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* John Paul II wrote: "The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions. Indeed, the Spirit is at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history".

The Spirit of God was and is universally present and active, before and after the event of Jesus Christ (that event, as I explained last week, comprises the Incarnation in which the Word of God became man, the life of Jesus on earth, his words and deeds, his paschal death, and his resurrection which means that his existence is no longer subject to conditioning by time and space). The Christ-event is both the culminating point and the universal sacrament of the one plan of salvation. But the God who saves is Three Persons; each of the three is distinct and remains active in a distinctive way. God the Father saves "with two hands", the Word and the Spirit, St Irenaeus wrote in the 2nd century.

After the Christ-event, are the communication of the Spirit and his active presence in the world realised exclusively through the glorified humanity of Jesus Christ, or, on the contrary, do they go beyond such limits? Has the Spirit of God become to such an extent the "Spirit of Christ" as to be able no longer to be present and operative in any other way? Is the action of the Spirit henceforth circumscribed by the action of the risen Christ, and in this sense limited?

In the New Testament, and particularly in Paul, the Spirit is called either "Spirit of God" or "Spirit of Christ". The expression "Spirit of Christ" (Rom 8:9) seems to refer to the communication of the Spirit by the risen Christ, which corresponds to Jesus' promise to the Disciples in the Gospel of John that he would send them the Spirit after his death as the Comforter (Jn 15:26; 16:5-15) and to its realisation at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). It also means that the work of the Spirit establishes between human persons and the Lord Jesus Christ a personal relation by which they are incorporated into him: "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him" (Rom 8:9).

The fact remains, however, that the Spirit is more often called the "Spirit of God". Thus Paul says, "The Spirit of God dwells in you" (Rom 8:9). Again, "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you" (Rom 8:11); "All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (Rom 8:14); cf. also 1 Cor 2:11; 2:14; 3:16; 6:11; 12:3; 2 Cor 3:3. The Spirit which is communicated to us is fundamentally the "Spirit of God". Taking into account these biblical data, one may ask whether after the Christ-event there can be a saving action of the Holy Spirit beyond that which takes place through the risen humanity of Jesus, just as there was a saving action of the Spirit before the historical event of the Incarnation, when the humanity of Jesus did not yet exist.

The metaphor used by St Irenaeus of the "two hands" of God may help to clarify the distinct activity of the Spirit arising from his personal identity. In the background of that metaphor is probably the image of God as a potter (cf. Is 64:6-7) who with two hands produces a single work — that is, here, the one plan of salvation. The two hands of God, the Word and the Spirit — we may add — are conjoined hands. While being united and inseparable, they are also distinct and complementary. The work of each is distinct from that of the other; it is in fact the combination of them which produces the salvific effect of God. Neither can be reduced to a mere "function" in relation to the other; in the light of this metaphor it becomes perhaps easier to conceive that the communication of the Spirit by the risen Christ does not necessarily exhaust the work of the Spirit after the Christ-event.

The Oriental and Orthodox tradition has often accused the Western tradition of holding and promoting a theological view which so emphasises the place of Jesus Christ as to reduce the Holy Spirit to a mere "function" of Christ. The French Dominican theologian Yves Congar, though considering the accusation exaggerated, admitted that it was not altogether without foundation. Western theology should reflect on the inadequacy of its doctrine of the Spirit. While we must not build up the Spirit as though he were "autonomous", separated from the Son incarnate, it is also true that the Spirit may not be reduced to a "function" of the risen Christ, of which he would then be, so to speak, the "vicar". The Spirit would then lose the fullness of his personal saving action. Now, a subtle form that such a reduction may take consists precisely in claiming that after the Incarnation the saving and vivifying action of the Spirit can take place only through the communication which the risen Lord makes to us of his Spirit.

The Second Vatican Council affirms very clearly (*Ad Gentes*, n. 4), and the teaching authority of the Church has recently repeated with insistence (cf. in particular the Encyclical Letter *Dominum et Vivificantem*, n. 53), that the Spirit was already present and operative before the glorification of Christ, even before the Christ event, throughout the whole of history, from creation onwards.

If before the Christ-event the Spirit was acting in the world and in history without being communicated through the risen humanity of Jesus, which did not yet exist, why after the Christ event should the action of the Spirit be so bound to the risen humanity of Christ as to be limited by it? Certainly both before and after the historical Incarnation, the outpouring of the Spirit is always related to this event, which is the culmination of the unfolding through history of the divine plan of salvation. In that sense one may and must say that the gift of the Spirit before the Incarnation is made "in view of" the Christ-event. But this does not justify saying that no action of the Spirit as such is conceivable after the event of the Incarnation — though it needs to be seen as related to that event. In the same way it is possible, as shown above, to affirm an action of the Word as such which endures after the Christ-event. The Word is that light "that enlightens everyone" (Jn 1:9); as for the Spirit, he "blows where he wills" (Jn 3:8).

We must always take into account, then, the central place of the event of Jesus Christ in the one divine plan. One may not speak of two distinct plans of salvation devised by God: salvation in Jesus Christ for Christians, and through the Word of God as such for the others; or else, salvation in Jesus Christ for Christians, and through the action of the Spirit as such for the others. But it is one thing to allege two separate plans for salvation; it is quite another to distinguish, without separating them, complementary aspects in one plan of salvation willed by God for humankind.

Elements of "truth and grace" (*Ad Gentes*, n. 9) are thus present in human cultures and religions, due to the combined action of God's Word and his Spirit. From here it is only a short step to the recognition of a mediatory function of those religions in conveying to their adherents God's offer of grace and salvation and in expressing their positive response to God's gracious gift of self. The Word and the Spirit — the "two hands" of God — through their universal action combine in endowing the religious life of individuals with truth and grace and in impressing "saving values" upon the religious traditions to which they belong.

A Trinitarian approach to the doctrine of Christ can help us see how two apparently contradictory affirmations can be combined: on the one hand, the event of Jesus Christ constitutes salvation for the whole of humanity; on the other, the "paths" proposed by the other religious traditions have authentic saving value for their followers.

Within the one divine plan for humankind, salvation reaches people in the concrete circumstances of their life through three complementary and convergent aspects. First, there is the event of Jesus Christ, which has lasting actuality and universal efficacy, notwithstanding its historical particularity; secondly, there is the universal operative presence of the Word of God, whose action is not restricted by the human existence assumed by him in the mystery of the Incarnation; thirdly, there is the equally universal action of the Spirit of God, which is neither limited nor exhausted by its communication through the risen and glorified Christ.

One must, however, always remember that it is not the religious traditions that save people, but God himself through his Word and his Spirit. The diverse "paths" are conducive to salvation because they have been traced by God in his search for people and peoples; even though not all have the same meaning or represent the same depth of divine involvement, yet all converge in the one plan designed by God eternally. The hidden manifestation of the Word of God through the seers of other religions and through the traditions which have found their origin in them, the inspiring breath of the Spirit on their prophets and their message, as well as the historical coming of the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit

through him at Pentecost to which the Christian community testifies: all combine in the overall ensemble of a unique divine plan.

If God has taken at every step of the history of salvation the initiative in coming to meet people and peoples, one can and must say that the religious traditions of the world are "paths" or "ways" of salvation for their followers. It is possible, then, to speak of a religious pluralism that does not just arise *de facto*, but is intended and willed by God in his eternal design for humankind. The principle of the plurality of religions finds its foundation in the superabundant richness and variety of the self-manifestations of God to humankind. A principled religious pluralism is based on the immensity of a God who is Love and communicates that love.

A "qualitative leap" is required in the Christian and Catholic theology of religions if we wish to develop a deeper theological appreciation of the religious traditions and entertain more open and fruitful relations with their followers. We must shun ways of "defending the faith" which turn out to have the opposite effect, because they make it appear restrictive and narrow. A broader outlook and a more positive attitude, provided they be theologically well founded, will help Christians themselves to discover to their own surprise in the Christian message a new breadth and a new depth.

Ref.: *The Tablet*, 20, 27 October and 3 November 2001.