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TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

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J. ガヴ・ブラフト師 (洋心会) のこの論文は、諸宗教の神学の樹立を目指す企てとして序説的なものである。

当初は、同師は、諸宗教の神学という主题に対する困惑と難だしいを率直に表現する。強い要請にかかわらず、問題の難しさを実感したからである。しかも、諸宗教の神学とは、今日の新しい探究の対象である。

歴史的に見ると、現代は諸宗教が相互間の遭遇を体験しつつある時代に当たる。キリスト教の絶対的な優位性という過去の主張は、重複され改められたものとなった。にもかかわらず、諸宗教の神学は未成熟のままである。だが、それは学問的な課題である前に、宣教師にとって実は実存的な課題と言るべきではないか。決して、キリスト教以外の大宗教との接触を締めつけるべきではないからである。他方、第二バチカン公会議以来の宗教の言語は、諸宗教の神学といった全てに必ずしも良好とも言いにくい。しかし、私たちは諸宗教の遭遇という新しい歴史的状況を踏まえて、何らかの解答が示されていることだけは否めない。

つまり、宗教の多様性は、その中にキリスト教をも包括している。それは、キリスト教だけが唯一の正当な宗教だという従来の立場への挑戦を意味する。私たちは、この立場を反省してみなければならない。

その際、キリスト教以外の諸宗教も、明確な整合性を示さず、自己の絶対性に固執している実情も考慮すべきではないであろう。それ故、イスラム教やヒンドゥー教なども他宗教をどう見るかという問いを無視するわけにはいかない。結局、キリスト教も他宗教同様、事実上一つの個別的宗教である。現代世界のマスコミなどの発達は、西欧文化の絶対的強権という過去の理解を非絶対化に至らした。キリスト教は、自己の中に普遍性の要求を見、他方、それが個別的宗教であるという事実を無視できないため、一種のジェノサイド、一体背反的状態を感じている。ここでは、その両極の一方を徹底的に保持しやすい、実のところ、両方を共に議することは必要であろう。もっとも、ここから生まれ来る問いは、キリスト教者として「公義」を追求せねばならぬ我々の使命を生み出す。求められているのは、「謙」と言うべきか。

そこで、第一に、諸宗教の神学は、他宗教の人々の積極的な関わりを模索する、と主張せねばならぬ。諸宗教の対立抵抗が人類の存続の基礎であってはならぬからである。恐らく、この神学は、この
Introduction

Under the title, "Mission Countries: Death of a Movement," in the National Catholic Reporter of September 9, 1983, I found the following remarkable sentence: "If the task of inculturation of the faith is properly the work of indigenous Christians, if liberation of the oppressed is better done by themselves than by outside agents, if God saves Buddhists and Hindus precisely through their own religions, then what - if anything - is the agenda for missionaries of the future?"1 The phrase may sound a bit lapidary, but the problem it points to is one that we missionaries have been living with for many years and that at times may have threatened to undermine our very raison d'être and personal motivation. I have the definite impression, however, that the period of panic is behind us and that some light has become visible at the other end of the tunnel; in other words, that we regained confidence to look at the future, with engaged but objective manner, the part of truth in its premises - or again in related pronouncements like: "What is happening is the death of a movement, and of a theology which accompanied and justified it. And simultaneously the birth pangs of a new theology."2

2 Ibid.

In what follows I would like to reflect aloud on the last of the three perspectives on our missionary life opened up by the initial quotation: the reality of the religions on whose turf we work, and the meaning of the new appreciation which the Church is showing them since Vatican II. So far, this sounds harmless enough and perfectly legitimate for a missionary, especially one who happens to be specializing in dialogue. Still, I must confess that I started writing this piece with considerable trepidation and most probably would not have unscrewed my pen, were it not for the kind but rather formidable insistence of the editor of the JMB. My misgivings are the following.

1. Thinking aloud on these questions tends - legitimately enough, as I acknowledge in my title - to be called theology; atqui, I am no accredited theologian. Far worse, it came to be called Theology of Religions, a tractatus that did not encumber our seminary programs and probably does not do so even today in most hotbeds for missionaries. This means that professional help is scarce for the amateur and hard to come by. Nor is this surprising. The newness of the situation, or at least of our perception of the situation, is such that there has been precious little time for the theologians to do the necessary spadework and to come up with transmittable answers. We shall have to come back, I fear, several times on this newness theme, but let me provisionally introduce it with the help of a quote from the Chicago theologian, Langdon Gilkey:

"Let us settle for the fact that it feels as if we were reaching the end of a historical era (that of the Enlightenment)... The final element of the watershed... is the present close encounter of religions... What is new about this encounter is the equality among religions that characterizes it, equality, one might say, of truth and of grace, of illuminating and of healing power. Like individuals in Enlightenment social theory, each religion now appears as a substantial individual, characterized by inherent and equal powers, privileges, and rights; the former developmental hierarchy of religions, with Christianity at the top, has quite vanished."3

"The situation is therefore quite new. It represents a veritable uncharted sea for theology, where neither the menacing rocks nor the clear channels are known."3

It is then clear that the time is not ripe yet for an elaborated theology of religions, and quite evident that such is not intended in these pages. But the problem is that, for us in the field, these questions are not academic questions, but existential and spiritual ones. It may be an exaggeration to say with S.J. Samartha (then) of the WCC: "Many Christians urgently desire to be supported by a clear theology of dialogue;"4 but I tend to believe that at least most missionaries working in the midst of the Great Religions find this desire in their hearts. While a clear Theology of Religions (one that would neatly solve all our problems) is more than we deserve or can hope for at present, it does not look unreasonable or superfluous to try to bring some order in our ideas in view of our spiritual health and for the sake of orthopraxis as missionaries. The present scribblings would then like to be the chiquenaude that sets a common reflection in motion in that desired direction.

But at this point my second misgiving raises its head. I have been speaking


of this reflection as of a new endeavor, made necessary by a new inter-religious situation and a new attitude of the Church originating in (or at least crystallized by) Vatican II. But—if I may be very frank now—I have the distinct impression that, even on some levels of authority, strong forces are at work that want to deny all novelty to Vatican II and to our times as well. In that presupposition, of course, our little efforts can be nothing but the whipping of a dead horse, and anything we can say that is not to be found in the approved handbooks must ipso facto fall under suspicion. So, if I stick my neck out all the same, I want it to be known from the outset that it is not for the love of any novelty but simply in response to a need as I see and feel it.

Status Questionis

In this first installment we cannot do anything more than making a first round of inspection of our problem. In our younger days we were told that a problem is already half solved if one succeeds in asking the right question. We would do well to keep that dictum in mind, since it is undoubtedly true. However, at the beginning of our enquiry—when the laws of exposition would require me to produce a clear status questionis—it is not of much help for, by the same token, I cannot produce the right question unless I have already half solved the problem (which I have not). So, I propose that, instead, we skate around the problem and approach it from a few angles (among the many possible ones), in order to get a first feel of it.

Theology of Religions evidently means a doctrine or logos on the religions in the light of revelation and faith. The plural s, however, seems to be the problem child here, for Christian theology has long since tackled and given (more or less satisfactorily) answers to the question: What is Religion? This time, however, the name itself of our tractatus presupposes the recognition not only of the fact of religious pluralism but also of its theological relevance—in other words, a recognition of the “need to come to terms with it conceptually and spiritually.”

The fact that our question was never treated, for itself and at length, in the Christian theological tradition, might make us wonder whether we in our generation are the first to be in a position to see and recognize religious pluralism. For now, however, it is more important to note that we could have found already one formulation of our problem: What could be in God’s Eye (and Plan) the meaning of that irreducible historical fact, the plurality of religious communities and traditions?

If now we could read the title of our tractatus: Theology of the other Religions, we might at least be able to keep the problem at arm’s length and on the level of academic curiosity. This, however, is impossible: The fact of the plurality of religions, once taken seriously, necessarily affects and involves Christianity itself. For one thing, no matter how ardently one might desire to put Christianity apart from the group of religions, there are no objective grounds to do it on; and secondly, the non-singularity of religion appears to militate against Christianity’s traditional claim to be itself de jure the only religion, universally valid for the whole of mankind. In other words, Christianity necessarily takes its place (be it a very special one) among the religions as object of our investigation, which from this point could also be called a study of “the significance of other religious traditions and ways for Christian self-understanding.”

Before going any further with our analysis, it may be good to remind ourselves that Christianity is not, of course, the only religion for whom the factual plurality of religions constitutes a problem. It could be said that all World Religions (over against archaic or tribal religions which limit their viewpoint to the own tribe) have this problem in common, since they all inherently contain the problem of univocality. This statement calls for more nuanced treatment which, however, we cannot give it. I only want to indicate here that it might be of interest for us to know in how far the other religions have been aware of the problem and how they tackled it in their theology. For example, Islam appears to have been very conscious of religious plurality from its very beginnings. “Islam partly took shape at the point of its very genesis by both adopting certain important ideas from Judaism and Christianity and criticizing others. Indeed, Islam’s self-definition is partly the result of its attitude to these two religions and their communities.”

Thus, even its very Holy Writ, the Qur’an, ponders the theological problem of religious plurality:

“For each one of you (several communities) We have appointed a Law and a Way of conduct... If God had so willed, He would have made all of you one community, but (He has not done so) that He may test you in what He has given you; so, compete in goodness. To God shall you return and He will tell you the Truth about what you have been disputing.” (V, 47)

And, by the way, the fundamental religious position on the subject has been developed as follows: “Humanity does not need to be Jewish, but God needs Jews and Judaism to achieve the divine purposes with humanity.”

To take up our thread again, Christianity, its claim to universality notwithstanding, is de facto particularized as one religion among many on the world scene. This fact has been brought home forcefully to our awareness by the world-wide communication media, which do not permit different parts of the world to ignore one another any longer, and by the new balance of world powers that put an end to the dream of the all-conquering superiority of Western culture. It is then no longer realistic to view religious pluralism as a rapidly disappearing transition phenomenon. To all appearance and for better or worse, this particular guest has settled with us for good.

In this way, a new map of world religions has presented itself to our eyes, and we are not sure yet whether our eyes are rightly focused to see it in its real shape, and whether our memories of the old map are not superimposing themselves on our visual image. At any rate, the concepts required to express that new vision and the consequences to be drawn from it—cannot be expected to emerge that quickly; and the intellectual frameworks forged

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8 As quoted by Fazlur Rahman, ibid.
9 Eugene B. Borowitz, in: D. G. Dawe and J. B. Carmen, o.c., p. 61.
in the meantime must all fall under the suspicion of being "not quite . . . ," no matter how much the effort involved is to be appreciated. As the already quoted L. Gilkey says: "There is no recognized tradition of responsible reflection to succor us, and the few brave would-be-pilots in our time who have sailed forth into the unknown . . . are to be congratulated for their courage than for their felicitous results."19

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These words apply in the first place, of course, to the would-be-pilot writing jumping to unwarranted conclusions is very great in this matter and, as far as the solutions to our problem offered until now. Indeed, the temptation of In the past, it seems to have made theologians simply shut their eyes to the particularity of Christianity, and nowadays to lure many into cavalierly denying Christianity any universality. The Anglican bishop, John V. Taylor, warns us that not to force the issue in this way: "It takes a high degree of maturity to let that sense, it has been called already "the kōan of Christians." A kōan must all fall under the suspicion of being "not quite . . . ," no matter how much the effort involved is to be appreciated. As the already quoted L. Gilkey says: "There is no recognized tradition of responsible reflection to succor us, and the few brave would-be-pilots in our time who have sailed forth into the unknown . . . are to be congratulated for their courage than for their felicitous results."19

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12 W. C. Smith in: D. G. Dawe and J. B. Carmen, o.c.c., p. 143.
13 Metropolitan George Khodr in: S. J. Samantha, o.c.c., p. 131.

Further Considerations

This leads us back to the consideration that ours is not a problem of mathematical logic, but one of life and human values. Langdon Gilkey captures this living quality beautifully in the way he formulates the question: "What happens when one recognizes, and not grudgingly but willingly so, the truth and grace, the spiritual power of another faith (for example, Buddhism) - which we all now have to do? How does such a recognition, necessary for one's own honesty as well as for dialogue, feed back on our theological understanding of our faith?"14 We shall have ample occasion to come back to this point, so that here I can content myself with summarily indicating three existential angles of our question.

"Since the end of the second World War we have been living out a process of planetary unification to which the various religions in their diversity constitute a major obstacle."15 With these words Metropolitan George Khodr indicates that Theology of Religions has to do with the survival of the human race. I do not have to belabor the point that in a world where technology is doing away with distances and frontiers world community becomes a necessity; nor the point that it is necessary, for that, to do away with many negative attitudes from group to group and to find, instead, a strong basis for human cohesion. From this point of view, Theology of Religions is dealt the task of making a positive relationship (of people) of other faiths possible, and could possibly be defined as "the intellectual condition and concommitant of a necessary conversion of the Christian re his attitude to others." In that way, it may be expected to contribute much to the task which W. C. Smith envisages for religion: "the task of constructing even that minimum of world fellowship that will be necessary for man to survive at all is far too great to be accomplished on any other than a religious basis."16

Our second angle has already been introduced above: we, missionaries, need a sound Theology of Religions for our motivation and as a directive for our work. Traditionally, the attitude of the Church towards the non-Christians was described by the word mission. Recently, a new word has made its appearance besides mission, namely dialogue. This brings along the very delicate question of the relationship between the two. From this point, we could define Theology of Religions as "the study of the theological implications of the dialogue" (to begin with, the issue of the idea of mission). We can only hope that our future reflections will bring some clarity here, but in the meantime I would like to introduce a text which (the later cardinal) Jean Daniélou wrote as early as 1946:

"If for some people Buddhism and for others Islam can be a way to find God, what need is there to pull them away from their error and to bring them the Gospel? ... Would not this diminish the urgency of the missionary apostolate? In fact, the question is wrongly put from the beginning. The source of the apostolate is not a necessity but an exigency of love. What must provoke in us the missionary vocation is not in the first place the need of the souls which we want to save, but the love of God that prompts us to desire that He be known and loved."17

In this text the missionary motivation is pried loose from the need of the non-Christians for salvation (through the missionary activity) - a disjunction which might prove to be of capital importance.

A third consideration brings us, I believe, to the core of the question: not a doctrine, but the person of Jesus Christ. Minor Rogers shows a delicate touch when he formulates our problem as the question of "how loyalty to Jesus Christ and his lordship is to be conceived in a religiously plural world."18

14 L. Gilkey, o.c.c, p. 13.
15 Metropolitan George Khodr, ibid.
18 Minor Rogers in: D. G. Dawe and J. B. Carmen, o.c.c, p. 7.
Indeed, if a positive evaluation of the other religions may sometimes look problematical to us, is this not, fundamentally, because it appears, at first sight, to diminish and relativize the person of Jesus, and to take away from his lordship? Here must lie for us the touchstone of any Theology of Religions, and we can only hope that a closer look will permit us to see that our initial fears were unfounded.

I would like to end this introductory part with two random thoughts. The other day, I found a text by Watsuji Tetsuro (1889-1960), one of Japan’s foremost modern intellectual, a text that impressed me very much and looked to me like a kind of test case for Theology of Religions. This is why I want to introduce it here, although it is rather long. The question is: What could we possibly answer him?

"Even when we interpret in a purely symbolic way those realities which were the object of Paul's basic intuition, we still sense therein an infinite depth. (myself cannot believe in a physical voice of God coming down from the clouds, but I think I can understand that 'The Unknown', which is the object of Prayer, is a personal Being, i.e., is individual while being absolute; and is a Being that stands over against me while enveloping me. Consequently, I can also believe that this Being divinely elevated a human being in the Spirit, and that this exalted man became our wisdom, our justice, our sanctity, and our atonement."

However, in all this, the faith in Christ as the sole savior is clearly lost. Christ is humbled to being a man. Besides Christ, many other sacred figures with a Christ-like meaning are recognized. For example, in Shinran too, we feel inclined to recognize one mediator elevated by the Holy Spirit. God who makes his voice heard from the clouds and Amida Buddha throning in the Pure Land: They show enormous differences in their intuited shapes, but are extremely close in the common intuition that God is Love. We cannot bring ourselves to reject Shinran on account of believing in Christ.

We cannot but recognize a number of religions as true. All of them are forever divine in that they have the same roots; in other words, together reveal the Absolute. But precisely because we recognize all these faiths equally, we cannot belong to any of them. We are on a new quest for God. Viewing Christ's God, Shinran's Buddha, and the like as symbolic expressions, we seek the God who in each of these symbols is expressed but never can find full expression. (For myself this is the 'Unknown'.)

For Christ his God, like for Shinran his Buddha, however, was not a 'symbol' in the sense we have in mind here. In the intuited form they believed (to see) the reality of God and Buddha, while we cannot but sense their 'particular forms'.

For me, the lesson emerging from these considerations is that religious truth cannot be revealed except in particular forms. All religions are realities crystallized around a particular personality that obtained an intuition of the absolute Truth, while attracting untold numbers of hearts longing for that Truth and painting that Truth with the particular colors of its own age. Even supposing that the Truth intuited and craved for is absolute, that crystallization cannot avoid being particular, as long as the human heart is not a whole in itself but is particularized by the characteristics of the age and the individual character of its personality."

I take the liberty of submitting to your criticism a short provisional answer to Watsuji which I tried out for myself, but which does not try to match all the implications of this rich text: "The circumstances of your life made you heir to several traditions, without making you identify with any one of them. In this you probably prefigure the situation of more and more people in the future. As such your position is absolutely right, and you cannot be expected toudge from it except by a personal encounter with and call by Jesus Christ. Only this can change the relative and particular position of Christ into an absolute one for you. But even that - as we came to realize recently, but no Christian contemporary of yours would have conceded - must not take away from you the possibility of recognizing in Shinran a particular revelation of the Absolute. I believe with you that "religious truth can only be revealed in particular forms," and therefore God's revelation to humankind took on many forms, in each of which God appears in a shape different from Himself. But I further believe that God found a way to overcome these limitations and to reveal Himself by Himself, by particularizing Himself totally, by becoming Himself the form of his self-revelation - in the man Jesus Christ."

My last remark concerns the spirit in which I hope Theology of Religions will be conducted. Since the Enlightenment, Christianity has been engaged in what was often felt like "rearguard battles of a retreating army" against the spirit of Enlightenment itself and against the claims of science, evolution, socialism, etc., because all of these things were felt to impinge upon the inalienable birthright of Christendom. It looks as if Theology of Religions too might be practiced in some quarters in a spirit of battle against the encroaching religions. Fortunately, the spirit of dialogue has set the stage of many places for a Theology of Religions experienced instead as a liberation from shackles that hampered the free flow of the fundamental tendencies of our Christian faith and as a widening of the horizons of our faith beyond the parochial confines of Christendom, i.e., beyond the socially and culturally defined form of Christianity.

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS (III)

J. Ván Phráťa (1968) has, albeit, in a volume 1: 2 published by the Catholic University of Leuven, attempted to put forward a vision of the unity of religions in their religious diversity. This attempt is, however, based upon a premise that the unity of religions is a necessary condition for the development of a theology of religions. In this paper, I will attempt to challenge this premise and to propose an alternative perspective on the unity of religions.

I. Preparatory Theses (looking for the right grip, angle, methodology)

II. Central Theses (providing the contents)

Part I. Preparatory Theses

Thesis I. The subject-matter of the theology of religions is both a theoretical and a moral-spiritual one. Its conceptual basis, however, can only be resolved by a combination of an intellectual effort and a spiritual change or conversion. In this manner, systematic theology and spiritual theology must never be allowed to part company.

The most fitting motto for this part of our reflections might be a sentence by the Benedictine monk, David Steinrich-Rast: "On its deepest level the question of relating our Christian faith to the religious experience in other traditions is a question addressed to your own heart (that tap root of our being where intellect, will, and emotions are still one and undivided)." Our problem is intimately related to the dark shadow that hangs over great parts of our Christian history: the arrogant intolerance shown to other religions, and the cultural destruction wrought and the human blood shed in the name of the doctrine of love. It is hard to live that part of our history down, and the others will always remind us of it when we ourselves try to forget it. Indeed, Christianity has more than its part in "the deadly fallout of destructive hatred and mutual animosities" that accompanies "the great power of human faith and devotion," throughout the history of religion. This obliges us to recognize the historical presence of a deep dividedness in the "Christian soul," and entitles us to suggest that the overcoming of that dividedness is what the theology of religions is all about. Wilfrid Cantwell Smith, Canadian specialist in comparative religion and theologian in his own right, articulates these points for us:

"The thesis essentially is this: that the emergence of the new world situation has brought to light a lack of integration in one area of Christian awareness, namely between the moral and the intellectual facets of our relations with our fellow men.

I begin with the affirmation that there are moral as well as conceptual implications of revealed truth. If we take seriously the revelation of God in Christ... then two kinds of things follow, two orders of inference. On the moral level, there follows an imperative towards reconciliation, unity, harmony, and brotherhood. At this level, all men are included: we strive to break down barriers, to close up gulfs; we recognize all men as neighbors, as fellows, as sons of the universal father...

On the other hand, there is another level, the intellectual, the order of ideas... At this level, the doctrines that Christians have traditionally derived have tended to affirm a Christian exclusivism, a separation between those who believe and those who do not, a division of mankind into a 'we' and a 'they', a gulf between Christendom and the rest of the world: a gulf profound, ultimate, cosmic...".

The reader will excuse the length of this quotation but it says things so much better than I could ever do it. When I first read this text, I was reminded of how shocked I was to hear, as a young boy, that in Holland (where, differently from my own all-Catholic place, Protestants and Catholics lived together) children were forbidden to play with their neighbor's kids because they were Protestants. Even apart from this, I suspect that we all know well enough what Professor Smith is talking about from our own missionary experience, and it entitles us to...
he did not console his Japanese converts by a doctrine of salvation from hell for their ancestors who died without baptism. There is, of course, ample evidence that this accusation of heartlessness is completely out of place and that S. Francis went to heroic lengths in his missionary endeavors in the line of love for souls. "... all our hearts, our intentions, and our desires, which are manifest to Him, are free to the souls for which more than fifteen hundred years have been captive to Lucifer." But it is true that the theological interpretations of his time did not permit his intellect to realize the inter-human aspect of the souls which for him died in his unbelief; nor can we be good to him after his death by recommending him to God, since his soul is in hell.

Most important for us is that even a S. Francis, who was concerned with the welfare of the non-Christians to an extreme degree, who appreciated the natural virtues of the Japanese very much ("the people with whom we have thus far conversed are the best that we have yet discovered..."). They are a race of very fine manners and generally good and not malicious, a people of an astonishingly great sense of honor...", and who had great hopes for them even in the line of salvation ("this island of Japan is greatly disposed for the great increase of our holy faith..."), was kept by his theological ideas from respecting the non-Christians in their concrete religiosity, and induced to put up a wall between himself and them: "... this land is full of idolatries and enemies of Him who created heaven and earth." No matter how objective and sympathetic his view on all things human, the pre-conception that all other religion is error and the work of the enemy, satan, does not permit him to embrace the religious expressions of the Japanese people in that love-informed judgment. On that precise point there was room only for the same sentiment that pervades much of Christian history: "a hostility to error which amounted almost to hatred" — in other words, "the strange notion of a truth divorced from love."

Taking our lead from this last quotation, we might reformulate W.C. Smith's thesis as follows: We cannot but recognize in great parts of our Christian tradition an ominous divorce of truth from love. This formulation, however, confronts us immediately with the following questions: When, how, and why did this divorce occur? Can love for truth be genuine if it does not lead to love of neighbor? And can truth (especially Christian truth) be fully truth without love?

In *Ecclesiam Suam*, Pope Paul VI says: "In the dialogue... truth is wedded to charity and understanding to love." And Pietro Rossano echoes these words when he writes: "Dialogue... for Christians means basically approaching others with the respect, love, concern, and understanding which Jesus showed to all people."

Indeed, it is that simple; dialogue is this and nothing but this. Only, if so, why did Christians not see and feel that way for many centuries? Why did they not find it so simple to add the clause: "except in matters of truth, religion?" Since this question is important enough to merit special treatment later — after all, the real change in attitude of the Church towards the other religions requires more than opportunistic reasons — we can leave it open here, to devote a few more lines to the intriguing problem of the relationship of truth and love. We have felt all along, I believe, that in the question of our Christian attitude to other religions nothing less is at stake than the nature itself of truth, together with the nature of Christian love.

One way of grasping the question in all its width and depth would be for us to ponder what the same D. Steindl-Rast could mean when he presents his vision on the inter-religious dialogue as follows: "Trusting faith in the one truth that unites us will give us the courage to die to the partial truths that separate us." It is clear that such a statement resonates under *spiritual theology*, and that the notion of truth it presents is one that can only be *lived* and finds its full application only in the religious sphere. It teaches us that, in reflecting on our theme, we should never forget that religious truth is *sui generis*, and is never to be simply equated with the truth of mathematical formulas, where alone the law of contradiction reigns in all its abstract splendor, or even (more generally) with the truth of propositional language which lends itself to objective comparison. Religious truth, no matter how *objective*, is always existential truth, somebody’s truth. It is always relevant here to know who says it and to whom. In the realm of religious truth it makes sense to say: "While truth and falsity are often felt in modern times to be properties or functions of statements or propositions", there is "much to be gained by seeing them rather, or anyway by seeing them also, and primarily, as properties or functions of persons."

One of the main tasks of all future theology of religions will undoubtedly be a more thoroughgoing analysis of these questions than space and competence permit here. For the moment, we must be satisfied, it appears, with some rather negative and not yet fully demonstrable conclusions:

1. Christian truth cannot be thought or be judged apart from its *love potential*. We may feel that the following sentence by W.C. Smith is liable to wrong interpretations, but we cannot simply deny it.

   "But except at the cost of insensitivity or delinquency, it is morally not possible actually to go out into the world and say to devout, intelligent, fellow human beings: ‘We believe that we know God, and we are right; you believe that you know God, and you are totally wrong’. This is intolerable from merely human standards. It is doubly so from Christian ones. Any position that antagonizes and alienates rather than recognizes, that is arrogant rather than humble, that promotes segregation rather than brotherhood, that is unlovely, is *ipsa facto* un-Christian."13

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6 Ibid., p. 82.

7 Ibid., p. 86.

8 Ibid., p. 91.


13 Wilfred C. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 130.
This question is not unrelated to the one S. Thomas treats: that of the contribution of the will in adhesion to truth and especially in the decision to believe. And the necessity for reason and spirituality to tackle our problem becomes more clear pragmatically by pointing to the danger of forgetting that the will, together with the heart, can be made clear more pragmatically by pointing to the danger of forgetting that the will, together with the heart, contribute to the self-centeredness in these matters. When our own faith confronts other faiths, our sense of identity and the need to maintain our security, not to say our pride, are apt to feel threatened and to bring our self-protective mechanisms into play under the noble guise of love for truth.

2. In our question, we must be careful not to jump to conclusions simply because, on paper, a proposition looks good (rational), or, on the other end, hopeless (contradictory). This is another way of saying that our problem may require a different logic from the everyday or scientific ones, because it is not simply an objective problem. Raimundo Panikkar hints at this possibility when he writes: "[Confronted with two different claims of absoluteness], 'you' cannot believe at the same time in both claims, but 'you' and 'we' can believe in the respective claims without contradiction — unless beliefs are totally objectifiable propositions having nothing to do with the believer."

Our caveat could also be expressed as follows: we must not become the dupes of ways of reasoning the sciences have accustomed us to, for, in view of the difference in subject-matter, it would be rather miraculous if they would apply as such in our case. This reminds me of the Indian philosopher, Charles Hartshorne, complaining about "(a Western) technique of reasoning which will not allow the religious idea even to be expressed." Our problem here could also be expressed as follows: To the question, "Is the Qur'an the Word of God?" is there an alternative answer to the 'yes' of the Muslims and the traditional 'no' of the Christians?

3. The minimum that can be expected from a theology of religions is critical appraisal of actual praxis, together with guidance towards right praxis, in our relations with other religions. The question then becomes: In how far do this appraisal and guidance presuppose theoretical knowledge? In other words, do we need to know what the others are, in order to know what our Christian attitude to them should be? I submit that the general trend of Christian (and especially Catholic) moral and spiritual theology points in the direction of a positive answer, for in these fields the usual requirement seems to be that our attitudes should be informed by knowledge, and certainly not simply swayed by pragmatic considerations.

But do we have any positive and direct knowledge of what the others are, what their status is in God's plan, and how this status relates to ours? Here the presumption is rather negative, for there does not seem to be any direct revelation about the others in Scripture-cum-tradition (which appears to restrict itself practically to the special covenants with Israel, old and new). It would then follow that the knowledge which can be incorporated into a theology of religions will have to be of the negative and indirect kinds. Of the negative variety — which is extremely practical since it can keep us away from many unfounded judgments found in history — S. Augustin offers a good example: "As to the manner and time, however, in which anything that pertains to the one salvation common to all believers and pious persons is brought to pass, let us ascribe wisdom to God, and for our part submit ourselves to His will." Indirect knowledge would consist of inferences from revealed doctrines, say, on the nature of God, Christian love, the need for faith, etc. Here I would only like to comment that this indirect knowledge is, of course, very valuable and important, but might not often permit definite and confident stands on theoretical questions.

In our preparatory soundings into the hopeful "remarriage of truth and love" in the Christian attitude toward our non-Christian fellow humans, we can now turn to the pole of love. It gives us a chance to come down from the Olympian heights of speculation to the plains of our daily reality: mission, this vanguard of the Church's dealings with other religions. It is not necessary to quote Matthew 25 or I Corinthians 13 in order to establish theoretically that in Christianity the norm of everything must be love. It is not so sure, however, that we have accepted the evident consequence thereof in practice: that the yardstick to measure our missionary activity by is not the success of the enterprise but the quality and purity of the love that is embodied and displayed in it. But what I really want to stress here is the idea that there is a sure way to understand and judge the importance which nowadays is attached to dialogue in the mission context. It is to investigate whether, through it, our missionary work comes nearer to a genuine labor of love — or at least gets a better chance to approximate that evangelical ideal. Without pretending that we fully grasp that ideal, we can still give the paradoxes of love a moment's attention.

1. Love takes its object as it is and appreciates it for what it is. It wants to know everything of the partner and can afford to be realistic in recognizing the partner's foibles as well as the points wherein he surpasses oneself. In St. Francis' case we have already remarked how the old theological view made this realistic recognition of the non-Christian qua non-Christian impossible. And the story is told of the travellers coming back from India to Europe with the miyage-banashi that they had met there truly holy men. The supposition is then that their Christian listeners would rejoice on hearing this and thank the Lord for his activity among alien peoples. But the factual reaction was quite different: "That must be trickery, you have been fooled." The Christian listeners could not lend these good tidings an ear.

When we take S. Thomas Aquinas' beautiful theory seriously, that it is the duty and privilege of the (Christian) human to give vicarious praise to God for everything in creation, we can then consider that we are the first generation that can include in that praise not only the beauties of nature and human culture, but also the good in the other religions.

But love combines a deep idealism with its realism: it wants the partner to succeed but the quality and purity of the love that is embodied and displayed in it. But what I really want to stress here is the idea that there is a sure way to understand and judge the importance which nowadays is attached to dialogue in the mission context. It is to investigate whether, through it, our missionary work comes nearer to a genuine labor of love — or at least gets a better chance to approximate that evangelical ideal. Without pretending that we fully grasp that ideal, we can still give the paradoxes of love a moment's attention.

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But love combines a deep idealism with its realism: it wants the partner to grow in perfection (to convert). This yearning was certainly abundantly pres-
ent in our mission ideas. But again, love cannot imagine that by all its growth its object would become something different from what it is. It only wants the partner to become more truly himself. Here we can recognize that it is the new dialogue idea that has opened this perspective for us.

2. While it does not seek itself, but unselfishly wants to do everything for the partner (without hidden motives, ohne Wurum), love essentially intends mutuality. The objective observer cannot but recognize that the history of the Christian mission abounds in magnificent examples of self-forgetting generosity. But even here we are left with a lingering feeling of ambiguity. Did not our theological ideas tend to instill into our most unselfish service a hidden motive, a collective selfishness: our cause?

As for mutuality, we could circumscribe this by saying that love, while presupposing equality at the same time brings it about. Here lies the delicacy of this way. It cannot be done unless one is in a real sense with the poor and conscious of receiving more than one gives. While in the old relationship with non-Christians it was practically impossible to have this kind of consciousness, it sometimes looks to me as if the whole idea of dialogue is essentially directed at the attainment of it. And it may be precisely in this point that the dialogal attitude brings the clearest plus to true evangelization: from somebody who on his side thankfully receives many things from you it becomes possible to receive the message of Christ without loss of self-respect.

3. Finally, there is the paradox of God's love: universal love which, at the same time, is a love of pre-dilection. Indeed, "the Bible knows no universal God who does not at the same time radically participate in the election and chosenness of particular covenant partners." This paradox is terribly hard to accept for universalistic-minded Easterners (who prefer to unilaterally stress Matthew 5, 45: "He makes his sun rise on the evil and the good and he pours rain upon the just and the unjust"), and it may even be the final ground of our difficulties with the theology of religions. But we must never forget that if anything makes our God a living God and not an abstraction, the God of Jesus and his life, the God of the Church - even when a few exceptions were taken into consideration - the love of pre-dilection was stressed all too one-sidedly, with the effect that God appeared as a rather arbitrary despot, and the universality of His love did not become concrete at all.

Next, I think, we must have a careful look at some of the qualities which a theology of religions should possess in order to be viable. Or, on second thoughts, it might be better to use negative language here: We want to investigate for a moment the traits which a theology of religions should not show, if it wants to avoid the dead-ends and pitfalls which apparently are plenty in this landscape. I do not dream of being exhaustive here but will present only these points which struck me already as important. And I want it to be remembered that we are still in the outer precincts of the sanctuary, as yet only treating the more external and methodological problems.

**Thesis II.** Theology of Religions cannot simply be a "Christian theology." It must be a "theology in the presence of the others," together with the others. It must not be a theology by Christians (subject) about the others (object), but, ideally, a theology by us all about us all.

From the quotations it will soon become apparent that here, more even than in my first thesis, I owe much of my inspiration and even some of my formulations to Wilfred Cantwell Smith. But what set me thinking first in this direction is Karl Rahner's well-known "anonymous Christians" theory. Since Karl Rahner is, after all, one of our best living theologians, we shall have to give this theory due consideration; but this is not the place for it. Here I refer only to the fact that I never dared to bring this theory up in a dialogue with Buddhists, for fear that they would feel insulted by it. This, I think, offers us the problem in a nutshell: Am I a coward, unworthy of those worthy men of yore who dared to tell the others to their faces that their path led straight to damnation, or is the anonymous Christians' theory false because it cannot be told to the others? There must, of course, be alternative explanations, and what occurred to me first was that there is an ambiguity in the term Christian: while for us it is the name for the highest possible attribute that de jure transcends all divisions, for non-Christians, on the other hand, it denotes the name of a particular and rivalling religion. But now it looks to me as if a real answer to our question would imply a full-grown theology of religions. And, since we do not want to embark on a circulus vitiosus, we must limit ourselves in this preliminary thesis to an investigation of the perimeters of this question.

We may now first listen to W.C. Smith:

"A Christian theology of the religions is an inherently inadequate concept": "There cannot legitimately be a Christian theology of other religions...in the sense of a we-they interpretation from within a boundaried and self-sufficient Christian position looking out over the world's other communities of faith as objects or even people upon whom to make pronouncements, however generous." This demand for a theology that should not be only Christian is certainly a novel, and at first sight, shocking one. I, for one, have never heard it made in any other context. But is not the whole sense of theology that it be Christian? Smith hastens to point out that he does not want it to be anything less than Christian - by which I gather him to understand, among others, that as in all theology so also here the criterium must be the light of the Gospel - by saying: "Without being a Christian theology it would be invalid if it were not Christian, plus." To which he adds: "It would be invalid also if it were not Islamic, plus..." Why does Smith make such a demand? I do not think I betray him if I summarize his reasoning as follows: While the rest of theology takes as its object us, Christians, in our relationship with God, the object of the theology of religions is Christians and the others in their mutual relationship within

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17 Eugene Borowitz, "A Jewish Response," D.G. Dawe and J.B. Carman eds., o.c.c., p. 64.


19 Ibid., p. 125.
the one plan of God with humanity. *Atqui*, in sound theology, the object is supposed to become at the same time subject; in other words, a satisfactory theology of whatever object can never be obtained without borrowing the light that is present in the object. While I am writing this ponderous sentence, I am of a sudden see before my eyes a rotund canon (or it could be me) in his armchair, writing a theology of women. This cosmic strip is welcome, since it may help us to approach the unfamiliar via the better known. We have all become convinced that the Church can never come to a sound theology of the laity if lay people are not involved in its elaboration; or of the poor, if poor people themselves do not participate in it from out of their inner experience of poverty. To strengthen the analogy with our present problem, we can further refer to the experience of the ecumenical movement. One of the results of this experience seems to be that, while formerly a Catholic theologian could put the Lutherans in their place (a very dark corner, indeed), all by himself, it has now become understood that theological pronouncements on the Lutherans can be made only (in some real sense) "together with the Lutherans." This would imply that only a Lutheran can really tell what it is to be a Lutheran, and (something which is somehow the same and still different) that this self-communication has theological validity since the Spirit is at work also among the Lutherans. I could suggest here that Smith's assertion, "a Christian theology of the religions is an inherently inadequate concept," is only an extension, to the wider oikumene, of the Christian-ecumenical "a Catholic theology of Lutheranism is an inherently inadequate concept."

In these pronouncements we can hear walls crumble and see horizons open wider: the consciousness of being Catholic widens to the consciousness of being Christians together, and the consciousness of being Catholic widens to the consciousness of being a member of the human-religious race. This widening of consciousness is certainly what W. C. Smith is aiming at and which he sees as necessary for the survival of humankind. "For, ultimately, the only community there is, the one to which I know that I truly belong, is the community, world-wide and history-long, of humankind."

In each of these widening, the original community keeps its validity and irreplaceable role but comes, at the same time, to be seen as a *privatio* insofar as it shuts us off from the wider community, or from the *ui omnes unum sint* of Christ's dream. When we spell this out: "being a Christian is at the same time a *privatio*," it may look shocking again. Would it be relevant, and lessen the shock, if we refer to the deprivation of intense personal love involved in the sublime vocation to the monastic life?

The necessity of a "theology with the others" can also be indicated in a negative way: A one-sided Christian theology about the others would defeat its own purpose. Theology of religions owes its incipient existence to a new awareness of the reality and presence of the others, and reflects the first stirrings of a we-consciousness beyond confessional lines. As such it must be expected, in line with Christian charity, to help break down the we-they barriers. But what can a theology by us about them do but reinforce these barriers?

It is time, however, to ask ourselves what the rather vague expression, "theologizing with the others," could mean in concrete, at least to the extent of assuring ourselves that we are not simply producing air bubbles when we use it. For one thing is clear enough: the real content of the term cannot be determined a priori; it must take shape in the doing.

If I were pressed to say in one sentence what I mean by "theology together with the others," I might answer: A theology carried by the hope that God intends to give us light about the others (and thus about ourselves) through the others. In a more analytical vein, the following elements may provisionally be considered:

1. A theology with a new sense of incompleteness by itself and, therefore, with a felt need for the truly other.21 This sense of incompleteness has to do with our Christian condition *in statu viae*: as long as we walk this earth we do not possess the full truth and are forever God-seekers. This idea is so important to it. Let us here only remark that, in our times, the consciousness of our separation from the other religions has added itself to the other painful reminders of our pilgrims' status. This awareness of our own theological incompleteness will make us look for God also in the beyond of the religiously other, and can refrain us from "the urge to confront and 'contain' the other as part of one's theological existence."22

2. A theology continuously conscious of the effect its pronouncements will have upon the others. — On a first level this can be interpreted as a requirement of courtesy — not therefore to be despised, since after all courtesy has earlier, it could turn out not to be unrelated to truth. That this requirement should not make us timid or secretive, however, is beautifully indicated by the Anglican bishop, John V. Taylor: "We have got to expose to one another the ways in which, within our separate households of faith, we wrestle with the questions that other religions put to us. To be overheard as we face up to these disconcerting questions will make us very vulnerable to one another."23 We may add that, on this point, missionaries are in a privileged position: if we are all sensitive, we cannot but be conscious of the others all the time, since we are living in their midst. For theologians in the West, however, our rule still proves very hard to live up to.

3. A theology with an added test for its validity: the people of other religions. — I have argued this earlier by, for one thing, a comparison with a theology of the laity. If not actually involved in the writing, the laity become at least an important criterium for the validity of such a theology, by their ability or inability to recognize themselves in it. From a slightly different angle W. C. Smith argues the same thing: "Islamic theology may, within its Own terms, be substantially true; Islamic faith may be cosmically valid; yet even so, any interpretation of Christian or Hindu faith within strictly Islamic terms is still a misinterpretation."24 And he adds a consideration that may be typical this time...


22 Ibid., p. 18.


for the theology of religions and its role: "Part of the newness of our problem is that the significance of any proposed solution has to do with its contribution towards a shareable vision." Could we speak here of the Spirit at work in the other religions as of an added locus theologicus?

4. A theology that takes the "theology" of the others into account. By "theology" of the others here is meant the reflective doctrine of their religion, even when it does not center around theos. This demand may seem to put an impossible burden on our hard-working theologians, but nobody says that any man must go it alone, and collaboration with theologians of other religions can bring the task within the limits of the humanly possible.

5. Ideally, a theology "which should be acceptable to, even cogent for all mankind." This is the ideal expressed in the title of W.C. Smith's latest book: "Towards a World Theology" and, as with every ideal, it is to be foreseen that we shall never fully reach it this side of the parousia. That however does not in the least invalidate it as an ideal; we need this pole star to set our course by.

To give Professor Smith the absolutely last word: "History has brought us to a point where we can see... that it is now possible to have a theology of religions in a sense more closely approaching that of a subjective genitive: a theology for which 'the religions' are the subject, not the object; a theology that emerges out of all the religions of the world." 27

"The Christian does not possess Christ; he seeks Christ..." (Donald K. Swearer)

In a previous article, I formulated already two preparatory theses, which can be recapitulated as follows: 1. Theology of religions is, indivisibly, a question of love-and-truth; or, to say it with Paul Löffler: "The focus of all theological reflection is the ethos of our relations to people of other religions, rather than our conception of them." 1.2. Theology of religions must be a "theology with the others" and "vis-a-vis the others": "... as one religion enters into a dialogical relation with another, it vis-a-vises - if a new verb may be coined to denote the defining of one's position, not in absolute terms, but in relation to or relative to the other party or parties in the dialogue." 2. Both theses directly concern the spirit wherein theology of religions must be practised, but the second may be more conducive to methodological directives than the first. Our further investigation should now first permit us to bring together a few more qualities which a theology of religions must possess in order to be viable.

THESIS III. Theology of religions must proceed in the closest possible relationship with the practice of the interreligious dialogue. Theirs should be a relationship of mutual conditioning and normation; but, if any precedence can be assigned, it should go to the Christian praxis of dialogue.

In fact, considerations on the interreligious dialogue have already run like a red thread throughout our preliminary notes on the theology of religions, but it seems advisable to thematize this relationship more explicitly. In a sense, and because it is clear that a theology with the others becomes possible only in an attitude of dialogue with them. As to the question of possible precedence, it is true, of course, that the dialogue needs a theology of religions as an ongoing project. It is, indeed, the duty of Christian participants in the interreligious dialogue to reflect theologically on their praxis (its presuppositions and the effect if it has on themselves and on others), were it only because every participant necessarily carries in his head some assumptions or hypotheses about the other from the moment he enters into the dialogue — be they only vague and mostly unformulated. But, on the other hand, nothing could be more funest for the dialogue than ready-made and hard-and-fast judgments about the other. “We do better to enter dialogue with multiple and flexible hypotheses. We need to make clear that our interest in dialogue does not depend on the developing new and better hypotheses.” The thesis would then be that the reverse dependency, that of theology of religions on dialogue, is a stronger and more binding one, or that as I remarked already earlier from a certain point of view, theology of religions is nothing but “the study of the theological implications of the dialogue.”

The first practical consequence for Christian theology deriving from our thesis would be, I take it, that theology must cease its time-honored practice of making judgments on the other religions purely a priori and without sufficient previous knowledge of the reality of the others. Karl Barth’s sweeping condemnation of all religion as the work of human hubris over against God’s initiative in the sole Biblical revelation — purely a priori by his own admission — is a case in point, and it has been harshly judged by some: “My contention is that the totalitarian claim of the Barth-Kraemer approach is not only sinfully arrogant but also that it is dishonest, and therefore not Christian.” Without wanting to doubt Barth’s or anybody else’s subjective integrity, I still think that it is time for us to wake up to the objective injustice we have been doing the others by judging them “sight unseen,” and to the blasphemy this may imply against God, to whose working we have put limits by our all-too-human reasonings, without giving Him a chance to correct us by the objective facts of His world.

A totally different spirit speaks, for example, in the following words by Metropolitan G. Khodr: “The strikingly evangelical qualities of many non-Christians force us to work out an ecclesiology and a missiology which give pride of place to the Holy Spirit.” We shall see later what he means by that place of the Spirit, but it is not necessary to follow directly his conclusions in order to see how the experience of the other here precedes the judgment. Mgr. Jean Jadot points that, while the European theologians without any contact with non-Christians were routinely repeating their “extra ecclesiam nulla salus,” the seventeenth-century Franciscan, Pedro de Anuaga, through his contacts with Muslim slaves in South America, formulated the position that Islam could be a channel of salvation for Muslims. Indeed, in the encounter, non-Christians and their religions tend to reveal themselves as different from our pre-conceived ideas; and it is precisely such experiences that challenge many of our traditional formulations and thus send us back to the sources of our faith for new light.

From this it would also follow, by the way, that the responsibility for the elaboration of a theology of religions lies first of all with theologically trained people in the mission countries rather than with our theologians in the West, in as far as the latter have little opportunity of experiencing the others. A somewhat startling remark by the already quoted D. Steindl-Rast may dramatize a bit the all-important role of experience in this matter: “I got the key to dialogue between religions from the experience of a deep unity with monks of other traditions. There was no question on either side that we had much more in common with one another, say, Buddhist or Hindu monks, than each one of us with our co-religionists who are not monks.”

It may thus not be remiss to introduce here a short meditation on some of the implications of the interreligious dialogue, in the hope that this may provide us already with a few provisional indications that will help delineate the parameters of our problem. We thus take our departure from the fact Christianity — and most clearly and authoritatively the Catholic Church — recently changed its long-standing negative attitude to other religions into a positive one. Symptomatic is here, of course, Vatican II’s Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions: “The Church therefore has this exhortation for her sons: prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their society and culture.”

It has been remarked, however, that “the conciliar declaration deliberately deals with the Church’s habitus (relationship); which means that it largely omits questions of systematic theology.” In other words, Vatican II has mostly limited itself to preconizing a practical attitude, without directly defining its theoretical underpinnings; thus leaving us with the question what the minimum theoretical conditions are to make dialogue a desirable Christian practice. Let us try to enumerate here a few of these conditions or implications, with the proviso that many of the points mentioned will have to be taken up again for fuller treatment in further theses.

1. A positive attitude towards other religions presupposes a positive evaluation of the other religions, for the opposite would be pure hypocrisy and opportunism, which cannot be called Christian. The earlier inimical attitude was not
really Christian in that it showed a lack of love, but it was at least honest and in line with one’s ideas. — Our further question will, of course, be: on the basis of which theological principles can a Christian appreciate other religions positively?

2. It has often been said that Vatican II put an end to the “ghetto mentality” or defensive posture that the Catholic Church had taken on since the Reformation, and opened the Church’s doors and windows to the world outside, in a readiness to see the Spirit at work also there. It is thus perfectly true that the dialogue that Vatican II wanted to instigate is not only with other religions, but also with atheism, secular ideologies, science, etc. But it is also true that, in that wider-ranging desire for encounter, a special place is given to the other religions — particularly but not uniquely in Nostra Aetate. This seems to imply that, within the unlimited field of the working of the Holy Spirit, the religions occupy somehow a privileged position; or, as W.C. Smith has it, that “God saves us in any way He can, I suppose, but thus far primarily through our religious systems.”

This point again requires further inquiry, but an objective study of the religions in the history of mankind might, provisionally, justify a judgment like the following: Granted that the religions (Christianity included) show demonic features, most of the genuine quests for human wholeness and betterment have historically taken on the form of religion. An observation of a different order may also be in its place here: Granted that our rapidly secularizing and divided world needs dialogue on all kinds of levels, religion still seems to be the locus for transcultural dialogue, at least if something more than scratching the surface of our differences is intended.

3. A further implication of this singling out of the other religions as privileged dialogue partners appears to be that the Church feels a greater affinity with them than with whatever other movements on earth; in other words, the presupposition that there is common ground somewhere between Christianity and the other religions over and above our common humanity. A publication by the Roman Secretariat pro Non-Christianis seems to bear me out where it says: “The deep solidarity in the religious nature of man, which is shown in scratching the surface of our differences is intended. However, this neat distinction between two meanings of the term “unity”, of which the former is called “practical” and the latter “theological”, is not necessarily a tautology: that it is, of course, God’s will if it is necessary for humankind. I am only too happy to grant this, but would like to indicate that I still consider my statement as going crescendo; in other words, that there are enough passages in Holy Scripture that indicate that God wills that unity, not only because today it has become a human necessity but, far beyond that, because it is His plan for his human creatures ab initio. J. Heisblitz points out that “Genesis 3-11 associates sin with enmity among people (Gen. 4) and with the belligerent plurality of peoples (Gen. 11)”11; this in line with Origen’s dictum: “Ubi peccata sunt, ibi est multitudo, ibi schismata, ibi haereses, ibi dissensiones.”12 And Jean Danielou presents us, I believe, with the right perspective: “Pentecost restores what had been broken at Babel: again people of all nations communicate in the unity of the Spirit, by which something like a new common language is being given back.”13

Still, we can adopt a methodological distinction:

1) “Unity” as immediately practical necessity. Here “unity” is taken in a very broad sense, circumscribed by the actual necessity: sufficient mutual understanding, tolerance, willingness to live together and to collaborate if need be... We could call this the immediate goal of the dialogue and, presumably, very few people will want to contest its legitimacy.

2) “Unity” as a theological vision, which could then be called the final goal of the dialogue. Here things are much more debatable: Is it not true that unity must be seen as the goal of the narrower ecumenical movement (among Christian denominations) but not of the wider ecumenism (among the religions)? I honestly doubt whether, in Christ’s view, there is such a sharp and essential difference here as some theologians propose, but it must be conceded that the meaning of the term “unity” and equally the “timing” of that vision (a question we shall come to later) pose even more delicate problems in the latter case than in the former.

However, this neat distinction between two meanings of the term “unity” of which the former is called “practical” and the latter a “vision” (visionary, utopian?) could give the impression that the two are totally unrelated and that the latter, at least in its application to the other religions, is a new-fangled idea dreamt up by some ecumenical-minded souls, but completely unrealistic to us, required for the survival of humankind presupposes a sufficient unity in ideas, way on its own conditions; and, further, that, psychologically speaking, we need a vision to motivate us for the directly necessary action. But there is more: It can be maintained that the idea of a unity of all religions, which would then be the basis of the unity of all humankind, is not new at all, but — in accordance with Christ’s prayer: ut omnes unum sint — has always been the vision behind the missionary endeavors of Christianity; and that the only new element to find a certain realization at the present time.

This statement lends itself to all kinds of objections, of which the first might be that it contains a tautology: that it is, of course, God’s will if it is necessary for humankind. I am only too happy to grant this, but would like to indicate that I still consider my statement as going crescendo; in other words, that there are enough passages in Holy Scripture that indicate that God wills that unity, not only because today it has become a human necessity but, far beyond that, because it is His plan for his human creatures ab initio. J. Heisblitz points out that “Genesis 3-11 associates sin with enmity among people (Gen. 4) and with the belligerent plurality of peoples (Gen. 11)”11; this in line with Origen’s dictum: “Ubi peccata sunt, ibi est multitudo, ibi schismata, ibi haereses, ibi dissensiones.”12 And Jean Danielou presents us, I believe, with the right perspective: “Pentecost restores what had been broken at Babel: again people of all nations communicate in the unity of the Spirit, by which something like a new common language is being given back.”13


12 Origen, Hom. in Ex. IX, 1.
is that dialogue tends to change the modalities of that vision of unity.

A. Sharma helps us here by pointing out, in answer to his own question: “Whither dialogue? — What kind of a religious world is the dialogical process going to usher in?”, that one can envision the future of religion in three different ways: “(1) a single religion as world religion; (2) a world full of several religions; and (3) a universal religion as world religion”. The second vision sees the present plurality of religions basically persist indefinitely. A representative of this way of thinking might be the German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, of whom it has been said: “Moltmann is satisfied to allow the plurality of religions to remain. The goal is not the subsumption of all religions in Christianity, but the genesis of a universal community in which all people are liberated.” Vision one and three both envisage a religiously unitary world but with a fundamental difference: “The emergence of this one religion in the world is visualized either as the replacement of all religions by one, say, Christianity, or the replacement of all religions by a Universal Religion.” The third vision was that of many scholars of the Aufklärung, who saw all the particular or “positive” elements of religion as irrational and doomed to disappear before the universal light of reason. The first is expressed by Arnold Toynbee: “In peaceful competition, the best of the competing religions will eventually win the allegiance of the whole human race.” It can be further subdivided (while narrowing it down to Christianity): (a) Christianity as it is today will conquer all other religions, and (b) “the coming world religion is the Christian religion so understood and enlarged that others will be disposed to accept it.”

We cannot, then, but recognize that vision 1. (a) has been at work in the traditional idea of the Church’s mission. But it can probably be said that many of us, if not all, have come to the realization that we cannot any longer realistically entertain that vision. The former General Secretary of the Church Missionary Society in London, Canon Max Warren, may have given that awareness its classical expression: “We have marched around alien Jerichos the requisite number of times. We have sounded the trumpets. And the walls have not collapsed.” I do not know whether any theological conclusions can be drawn from a realistic evaluation of a situation but, anyway, one of the problems we shall have to face in our theology of religions is: Which vision of the future of religion does the interreligious dialogue point to?

5. Dialogue in the real sense of the word presupposes perfect equality and mutuality between the partners. — I have deliberately formulated this implication of the dialogue in as sweeping a way as I know how, in order to let the difficult problem this poses for the theology of religions appear in all its pregnancy. For, on the one hand, it is clear enough that not all verbal exchanges between two or more partners deserve the name of dialogue, but only these where the two speak on the same level, in real equality. This makes, for example, A. Pushparajan write: “Whether Christianity can grant equality of status to all major religions of the world with whom it enters into dialogue? This is how, Karl Rahner is no less square in his negation of this possibility: “Christianity cannot recognize any other religion beside itself as of equal right.” This sure be, or so it seems: Christians cannot enter into any authentic dialogue with the inference can only be that the above syllogism contains a subtle sophistry: Let us, in any event, try out some considerations and distinctions of the kind that may eventually lead to the discovery of the culprit.

a) We must, indeed, adhere strictly to the principle of perfect mutuality of the partners in the dialogue, for every deviation from this principle changes the nature of the dialogue into something else: an indoctrination session, a question and answer period, etc. This must account for the malaise I have sometimes felt before the Socratic dialogues of Plato: they tend to lose their dialogue character, namely when Socrates appears too overwhelmingly as the “master of maeulets” and the partner as the object of his craft. But, does the equality of the partners qua dialog partners presuppose that the partners are equals in toto, and recognize one another as such? This does not seem to be the case, for in that case a prime minister could never have a real dialogue with his valet, nor a mother with her teenage daughter — granted that this is difficult, it is not impossible. It looks as if we can conclude that dialogue is possible between unequals, even with mutual recognition of that inequality. It even appears to me that, in the Old Testament, Abraham brings off a real dialogue with God in his bargaining session over the lot of Sodom and Gomorra (Gen. 18:22-23). But the condition certainly is that, at the time of the dialogue, all real or imagined inequalities are eingeklammerd (put in brackets), completely put aside so that they can have no bearing on the dialogue. The superior must at that moment abandon his imperative stance and the teacher the “teaching mode,” while on the other hand — something which often proves even more difficult — the pupil must forget that it is the teacher he/she is speaking to, and the subject must overcome the awe he ordinarily feels before his superior. That reminds me of the Japanese young man at the Buddhist-Christian dialogue meeting at Hawaii in January of this year. After having frankly criticized the confessors that he had been able to do that only because the conversations were carried on in English: that permitted him to break through the master-disciple relationship, escape from which the Japanese language with its use of honorifics

14 Arvind Sharma, I.c., p. 242.
15 John B. Cobb, o.c., p. 35.
16 Arvind Sharma, Ibid.
18 Quoted in: W.C. Smith, The Faith of Other Men, New York: Harper, 1972, p. 120.
Faith meets Faith, Gian, John Cobb, was probably right to conclude: “Even so, it is not clear to gain from dialogue. The emphasis is on what we have to contribute to whether from this Catholic point of view, Christians have anything important Church recognizes the notion of a “cooperative search for truth” with them — distributed among the nations of the earth. But at the same time let them try the Vatican II documents, and also later documents emanating from Rome, are to illumine these treasures with the light of the Gospel...”24 But, all in all, whom they live, and should establish contact with them. Thus they themselves and, at least indirectly, through and from them. The Vatican II text that can learn by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a bountiful God has acknowledges this most explicitly might be the following: “(Christ’s disciples), moderate the other with integrity.”22 This inability should thus not preclude the dialogue, on condition always that “all motives except that of the cooperative reciprocal), or as Bishop John V. Taylor has beautifully expressed it: “In other words, one of the most significant things we have in common on which to build our mutual understanding is the experience of having a conviction that by definition precludes the other person’s belief, and being unable to accommodate the other with integrity.”12 This inability should thus not preclude the dialogue, on condition always that “all motives except that of the cooperative search for truth are excluded”23 from it.

6. Serious dialogue — over against pleasant banter, which is an end in itself — is a loss of time if we do not learn by it. The readiness which the Church shows to enter into dialogue with other religions, then, seems to imply that the Church expects to learn with the other religions — in other words, that the Church recognizes the notion of a “cooperative search for truth” with them — and, at least indirectly, through and from them. The Vatican II text that acknowledges this most explicitly might be the following: “(Christ’s disciples), profoundly penetrated by the Spirit of Christ, should know the people among whom they live, and should establish contact with them. Thus they themselves can learn by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth. But at the same time let them try to illumine these treasures with the light of the Gospel...”24 But, all in all, the Vatican II documents, and also later documents emanating from Rome, are not outspoken on this point. After studying these texts, the Protestant theologian, John Cobb, was probably right to conclude: “Even so, it is not clear whether from this Catholic point of view, Christians have anything important to gain from dialogue. The emphasis is on what we have to contribute to others, ... on the perfecting of other religious traditions.”25 To put it another way, there does not seem to be, in Catholic theology, much evolution or clarification on this point since the time (1945) that Jean Daniélou wrote: “There is in Islam a sense of God’s greatness and holiness ... a sense of God’s transcendence, which is an essential religious category. On this point we should not hesitate to say that the Muslims could have much to teach us.”26 Here again we run into a tricky objection that could be roughly formulated as follows: We cannot learn from other religions, because we already possess the fullness of God’s revelation in Christ. It is along these lines that, for example Fr. Henri van Straelen argues: “We do not have to learn from all the beautiful things to be found in Hinduism and Buddhism, for all that is at hand, in a better and clearer form and at the same time in its right place and order, in the Catholic Church... Be it said once more here: in this attitude there does not lurk any feeling of superiority, but only the deep conviction of faith that everything has been given us with Christ.”27 On the other hand of the spectrum, however, we find sentences like the following by W. C. Smith: “God is not revealed fully in Jesus Christ to me, nor indeed to anyone that I have met; or that my historical studies have uncovered.”28 Such sentences want to be an honest and realistic rendering of our experiential situation and cannot simply be disregarded because they echo too clearly St. Paul’s words: “For now I see indistinctly in a mirror, but then face to face. Now we know partly, but then we shall understand as completely as we are understood.” (I Cor. 13:12)

This rough-and-tumble status questionis may suffice to make us aware of two things: 1) Theology of religions must have recourse to a much more refined analysis of fundamental notions, especially that of the “fullness in Christ,” than the ones suggested above. I personally believe that our next thesis should already be crucial on this point. 2) Our present problem is one of these wherein the need for the marriage of theology and spirituality is most clearly felt, and truth can only appear in the right praxis. For it is fundamentally the problem of the right Christian consciousness of the limitation of God’s gift in Christ (and the gratitude and desire to witness that this provokes) and of the limits of the vessels of clay wherein we receive this gift, together with the concomitant need we have of “all creatures” to bring this gift home to us (and the humility and never-abating “search for God” that are its fruits). In other words, the grateful conviction of God’s nearness cannot do away with the consciousness of the distance between God and creature, as another word by W. C. Smith, that comments on the Muslim word, Allah akbar, reminds us: “God is greater — than anything whatever: certainly than religion, than any one religion or than them all; greater than our law, than our ancestors’ or any men’s idea of Him, than our or other men’s faith.”29

One last remark in connection with the problem of the Church learning from the others: Theology of religions should succeed in making it clear what we

24 Ad Gentes, 11.
25 Jean Daniélou, o.c., pp. 56-57.
26 Henri van Straelen, Selbstfindung oder Hingabe, Abensberg: Josef Karl, 1983, pp. 31 and 32.
27 W. C. Smith, Towards a World Theology, p. 175.
mean when we accept that there is truth in other religions. Merely truth that we possess in a higher degree? Only truth that we equally possess but may have forgotten for too long, so that the others can at least play the role of reminding us of it? Or eventually also truth which our own Christian tradition has not been conscious of; in other words, “truth which our own Christian interpretations, limited as they are to the categories of a developing Western culture, do not possess.”

**THESIS IV.** Decisive for the theology of religions will be a right evaluation of the human condition in time, as well as due consideration of the Christian condition in the “interim” between Christ’s death-and-resurrection and His second coming at the parousia.

It will not be easy to formulate in a balanced and satisfactory way what I have in mind here, but let me try by a little detour. In a rather extreme form the problem of the theology of religions could be expressed as follows: How can the other religions have any legitimacy and role in God’s plan with humanity, if the claim of Christianity to possess the absolute in truth and salvation is true? It can then be noted immediately that the traditional answer had recourse to a “time scheme”. The other religions, especially the Old Testament, had a role before the establishment of Christianity, but were abrogated at the time of that establishment.

On the other hand, the acute consciousness of the historicity (relativity in time) of all things human, that dominates Western culture since the German Romanticism, makes any claim to absolute truth look overbearing if not downright ridiculous. The Protestant theologian, Ernst Troeltsch, who tackled this problem most thoroughly in connection with the claims of the different religions, came to think that “absoluteness” is a general characteristic of a naive way of thinking and thus “became, reluctantly, the first great Christian relativist.”

Troeltsch’s way of theologizing has been characterized as a “theological argumentation, which is maybe not always deeply probing with regard to the mystery involved, but is intellectually reasonable and argumentative.”

Many years have passed already since the publication of Troeltsch’s works, but it still remains true that “the relationship of truth and history belongs until today to the unsolved problems of theology.” What we can learn here is that, in our problem, a subtle tension between respect for the mystery and the demand for reasonableness is at work, and that Troeltsch’s reasonable relativistic solution is certainly going to tempt many.

It is against this background that we must reflect anew that certainly the mystery of our faith transcends reasonableness, but that precisely respect for that mystery should make us doubly watchful not to make, “in the name of that mystery,” any claims for ourselves that are unreasonable in that they negate our human condition. To speak more concretely, the mystery is that God has revealed Himself fully in that historically limited person, Jesus Christ, so that “in Him all the fulness of the Godhead dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9); but the claim that therefore the Church is at the present time in full possession of God’s absolute truth must sound unreasonable in itself and may, by its fall-out, make the claim for Christ look incredible also. For the Church is not only Christ but also we, all too human and sinful Christians. We can believe that in the Risen Christ all time, past, present, and future is concentrated in one absolute point, but the Church, as a community of humans, cannot receive and live that totality and fulness, bestowed on her, all at once but only in a temporal sequence and evolution.

In a reaction against overly ready identification of the Church with Christ, Vatican II has laid the stress on the “pilgrim Church on earth” on its way through the centuries towards the future fulness of the Kingdom of God. “Its goal is the Kingdom of God, which has now been begun by God Himself on earth, and which is to be further extended until it is brought to perfection by Him at the end of time.”

In a word, we are not yet *batti possidentes*; to us is given “grace as possessed in hope.” While, in a sense, the fulness of Christ has been given us, we are always on the way to Christ; while God has graciously revealed Himself to us, we are forever “God seekers,” *Kyoudsha*. As pointed out earlier, this condition of our faith involves a delicate dialectics between gratitude, a full appreciation of the greatness of God’s gift to us in Christ, and humility, a realistic and faith-inspired awareness of our own creaturely condition. This dialectics might be compared to that at work in the learning process of the child. Socrates insists that no knowledge can be given from the outside, and that the whole process consists in bringing out what was already there from the beginning, by a ma­teutic method. But, on the other hand, experience tells us that the educators and the environment are decisive in the development of the child’s intellectual capacities, and it certainly does not mean that the child should not be eager to “learn from others” and not grateful for everything it received from its parents and teachers. This comparison with the education of the child may not be so far-fetched, for the image of God patiently educating His people is certainly present in the Christian tradition. Hans Urs von Balthasar summarizes it for us: “Education of humankind through the ‘shadow’ (Synagogue) to the ‘image’ (Church), to the fulfilled ‘truth’ (eternal life).”

Two quotations may now make a bridge to a reformulation of the thesis.

“He who would understand Christianity as something ‘absolute’ forgets that Christianity must at all times realize the universality in principle, which is proper to it from the beginning, in ever partial ways in historical processes that imply relations with others.”

“The present Christian turn-about must essentially consist herein that the consciousness of being on the way with God, who revealed Himself in Christ, becomes vivid and life-shaping once again. A group of people trekking, under divine guidance, out of slavery towards full freedom cannot be triumphalist, exclusivist, absolutist. Such a group is glad to find

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travel companions, progress, helping hands; it needs encouragement, dialogue, pointers for the road.  

The point I want to make is that the other religions can only be seen and appreciated for what they are and can contribute to the People of God, in that open space or distance between Christianity and the Fullness of Christ, in that time of the “already and not yet” of God’s definitive action in humankind. Thus we come back to the “time scheme” we alluded to above and which is, of course, intimately connected with eschatology. It is no exaggeration, I believe, to say that a right view of the “timing” of God’s action with humankind is crucial for the theology of religions. Unfortunately, Karl Rahner has to lament: “The absence of a properly elaborated theology of history and temporality in general and of saving history in particular makes itself felt unfavorably in eschatology as it does elsewhere” and it is to be feared that theology of religions might become one of the main victims of that absence. Still, we shall need all the help we can get in order to revise the time scheme which we traditionally used to apply to the development of the Church and to the role of the other religions, and which I submit to have been very wrong. I guess that today the words of Vatican II, “The Church also realizes that in working out her relationship with the world she always has great need of the ripening which comes with the experience of the centuries,” apply in a very special way to the experience the Church is presently making with the other great religions of the world. It could be said that lack of ripeness through experience formerly induced the primitive Church to conceive a wrong time scheme and think of the parousia as imminent. The “transition from imminent experience formerly induced the primitive Church to conceive a wrong time scheme and think of the parousia as imminent. The “transition from imminent to remote expectation of the parousia” then happened at an early date, but it is by no means sure that we have already grasped all the consequences of that shift in timing. It may even be that our time scheme whereby we see the other religions as abrogated from the moment Christianity is established is simply a late fruit of that initial misunderstanding. However this may be, when Vatican II, for example, says: “His saving designs extend to all men... against the day when the elect will be united in that Holy City ablaze with the splendor of God where the nations will walk in His light (cf. Apoc. 21:23f)” (Nostra Aetate, 1), the unity of saved mankind is seen in an apocalyptic setting. And the question remains: What is to happen to the religious plurality of mankind in the meantime?

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TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS (IV)

J.バンプブラフ持(共信会)，諸宗教の神學の樹木を目指して、本身において命題5に至る。それは、この神学では、言語表現ができるだけ曖昧さを許さぬ力で用いるわけならばならない、ということである。すなわち、この神学が新しい試みであるだけにわずかな手違いが私たちはこれを遮せてしまいかねず、しかも、私たち周囲の宗教的信仰を越えて対話を続けねばならぬのだから、正確な言葉使用が要求されているのである。

そこで、同様に自己の宗教及び他宗教に対する態度を示すために用いられて来た若干の術語の時期に移り、それぞれの有する意味と問題性を指摘する。たとえば、「相対性」という術語はドイツ神聖論の背後を有し、キリスト教に適用するのに障壁がある。

なお、同様に、第二バチカン公会議は「作者主義」から他者宗教への態度において「包括主義」への転回点になったと思われるとして、K. ラーナーの「無名のキリスト教」の解釈に、イデオロギー的傾向が暗に見られ、とおる。一般的に言うと、「包括主義」は、世界のあらゆる宗教大学においてより教義的、或いは文化的な痛み及びキリストにおける神の痛みの無比的な独立性という二つの地域を結び合したものですろう。

結局のところ、私たちは、キリストにおける神の期待の包括的な「統一」についてのみ語りうるだけでないだろうか。

Notice to the reader: In this series of articles I have promised to “think aloud... on the reality of the religions on whose turf we work and the meaning of the new appreciation which the Church is showing them since Vatican II.” Subsequently, I have seen the need to divide my expose into two parts: I. Preparatory theses and II. Central theses. You must have felt by now that my scrubbings did not arise, like Venus, in full panoply out of the ocean of a well-organized and ready manuscript, but represent an ongoing process of reflection. This, however, has brought us to an impasse for which I want to apologize. It has merely become clear that I shall not get beyond my preparatory theses before the patience of editor and readers alike (not to speak of the original one-year plan) runs out. If this is regrettable, it is not, I believe, a breach of promise, since the original proposition only was: Let us get a discussion of the problem on the road.

THESIS V. Theology of Religions must endeavor to use words with the least possible ambiguity. If this is a requirement common to all right use of language, it is especially important in this treatise, because it is a relatively new one and a slight confusion at the beginning may lead us far astray, and also because with it we want to communicate beyond the boundaries of our own confession.

Thus, although delineating terminology is rather boring and unglamorous drudgery, that moreover smacks of the pedantic, I believe that we cannot avoid
having a preliminary look at the terms most commonly used to describe one's allegiance to his own religion and the different attitudes toward other religions. This article, therefore, takes up a few of these terms in view of clarifying their meanings and their mutual relationships. But I must confess to the feeling that my analysis does not lead us very far yet, and want to appeal to better brains.

1. Absoluteness

Especially in the German language sphere the “absoluteness of Christianity” is spoken of. Not to leave anybody in suspense any longer than necessary, I am going to write down my conclusion immediately: We must absolutely ban this word from our vocabulary, since to the others it sounds like an arrogant or ridiculous claim, and since too many of the connotations of the term do not in fact apply to Christianity (or any other religion, for that matter). I could not agree more with W. Oxtoby where he writes: “Frankly, I am uncomfortable with talk of Christianity or any other religion as absolute. Religions are relative; God is absolute.” And I am happy to say that I found my feeling that this use of the word could not be part of the Christian tradition confirmed by some serious authors. “The term, ‘absoluteness of Christianity,’ has its origin mainly in the tradition of German Idealism and evangelical theology of the last 200 years;” and “the concept of ‘absoluteness’ does not go back much farther than Hegel…” Indeed, I believe that tradition reserved the word “absolute,” for God and the transcendentalia as realized in God (esse, bonum, verum absolutum) and I would be very surprised to find it applied directly even to Jesus Christ in our Christian tradition. An investigation of why eighteenth century German authors started speaking about Absolutheit des Christentums might teach us much, not about our faith, but about modern thought patterns which undoubtedly influence us and which we must overcome in order to gain a fresh look at Christianity amid the World Religions. One could think here of a “re-formulation of religious life,” or of a reduction of religion to truth in a Greek classical sense.

However this may be, a short look at some of the aspects of absoluteness that do not apply to Christianity may work as a first antidote. The absolute is something that stands by itself unconditionally and historically, transcendent to and discontinuous with all others, and not indebted to anything else. Christianity, on the other hand, is conditioned by the covenant, forever standing under God’s judgment, and dependent on the permanent historical mediation by Jesus-Christ. Christianity does not exist by and for itself; it is essentially relative: it exists only in view of the Kingdom of God, and as a servant of God’s plans with humanity. Moreover, Christianity in its concrete shape is very much a product of history and not simply transcendent to the history of religion since it is much indebted for some of its elements and ways of expression to Judaism, Greek culture, the mystery religions, etc.; to the extent that D. Constantelos can say: “By the fifth century Christianity had developed into a very syncretic religion.”

In view of all this I cannot but think that it is intellectually more sound and honest not to apply the term “absoluteness” to Christianity, and to call aspects of absoluteness which may fit Christianity by other, more restricted terms.

2. Final, unsurpassable

A first candidate in this respect might be the term, “finality.” When applied to Christianity, this term usually denotes the idea that the new Covenant in Christ is meant to be definitive, i.e. to cover the whole period up to the second coming of Christ, and not to be supplanted by a new (higher) revelation, covenant, era of the Spirit, and so on; because in Christ the whole fulness of God dwells. It may be good to remember that in its traditional use the term says something about the Old Testament (not final, surpassed), Islam (not surpassing) and Chiliastic movements (with possible application to the ‘Moonies’), but, at any rate, does not directly refer to any non-Abrahamic religion, nor in itself exclude historical growth within Christianity itself. And it is probably true that in the primitive Church the finality of Christ and his Church was seen against the background of an imminent eschaton.

3. Unique

A second term covering one aspect of absoluteness is “uniqueness.” It cannot be doubted that the Christian tradition claims uniqueness for Christ and his Church. This claim finds its expression, among others, in the doctrine of the Incarnation: “That God was personally and uniquely present in a sense which cannot be said to be true of any other human being.” Uniqueness in itself, however, is a trait shared by all true individuals. In the best Christian tradition every person can lay claim to absolute uniqueness and irreplaceability in God’s eye, and my uniqueness does not exclude anybody else’s. So far, there is no argument, and history of religion can easily recognize the unity of Christ alongside that of the Buddha, Mohammed, Shinran, etc.

4. Exclusiveness

But, of course, statements of history of religion are essentially different from statements of faith, which rather pertain to the language of existential commit-

5 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, as quoted in Alan Race, Christians and Religious Pluralism - Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983, p. 100.
8 Alan Race, o.c., p. 113.
ment and preferential love. Here, the unicity claimed for the object of devotion can never stay on this lofty objective level and necessarily seems to take on the connotation of exclusiveness: “No one but the Buddha,” or, in the classical expression of Christological exclusiveness: “Et non est in alio salus...” (Acts 4:12). It will not be easy, but all the more important, to pin down what is happening, humanly and logically speaking, in this transition from simple unicity to exclusive unicity. For there can be no doubt that it is especially Christian exclusiveness that has attracted strident critique from many sides and, probably for that reason, has become a bone of contention among theologians.

The Lutheran theologian, E. Braaten, presents the theologies of Paul Knitter and John Hick as “laying the axe at the christological roots of exclusivism” in order “to pave the way for dialogue with other religions that won’t be ’hamstrung’ by the exclusivistic mindset.” But, over against Knitter’s conclusion that “there is no exclusive claim that belongs to the core of the Christian message,” he affirms: “Christian faith has no knowledge or interest in Jesus as Jesus, minus the names which symbolize his unique meaning... The exclusive claim is no footnote to the gospel; it is the gospel itself.”

The reader may notice how “unique” and “exclusive” are used here as synonyms, as indeed we usually do in ordinary, especially emotion-laden, language. When a lover calls his girl unique, he means that she is the only one (for him) with exclusion of all others. For the lover himself that is all there is to it but, since our question might be whether the two theological positions sketched above are really as contradictory and mutually “exclusive” as they seem to be, we are obliged to pay attention to the logic of such statements. Which role does the exclusion of all others really play? When the lover finds his girl to be unique, he may have had some experience of other girls, but his conclusion does not contain any real judgment about the others. Indeed, no other girl this girl unique provokes the exclusion of all (further) comparison, and thus does the exclusion of all others simply cease to exist on that level? If so, we are again struck by the similarity with “religious lovers,” a Saint Bernard who finds every page of a book tasteless where he does not find the name of Jesus written, and a mykonin, who finds only one sound to express his most diverse feelings: Namu Amida Butsu.

5. Universality, Universalizing, Universalism

Could we then conclude that in both cases the exclusiveness is born out of the universalizing of the unique? We may probably say so, if for safety’s sake we add that the term, “universalizing,” may have to be seen as an analogous term, with partly different meanings in each case. But this tells us to go and have a closer look at the new term that slipped into our discussion: universal. A sentence by the same C. Braaten may act as a bridge for us here. To his own question: “What is the essence of the uniqueness of Jesus?” he answers: “When we confess the uniqueness of Jesus, we do not mean merely that he was a concrete individual man, which he was. We mean that he is the concrete embodiment of universal meaning.”

The pair of concepts: universal(istic)-particular(istic), plays a big role in the science of religion. It is said there, for example, that Buddhism and Christianity are universalistic religions and Shinto and Judaism particularistic ones. It is also said that the core of Buddhist doctrine is universal truth, while the core of Christian doctrine is particular (while historical) truth. I fear, however, that these conceptual tools may prove too blunt for a theology of religions. (To say it with Pascal, they do not only hit the point but also a large area around it - somewhat like carpet bombing). Taking these concepts at their face value, it should be the particular that excludes others and the universal that is all-inclusive and inclusive. But this seems already to contradict our provisional conclusion that exclusion is born out of universalizing. In fact, both universalistic Christianity and particularistic Judaism are to be found side by side in...
the front row of those religions most branded as exclusivistic. Which amounts to a rare kettle of fish!

To bring some semblance of order in our ideas, it may be easiest to begin with the question: What can the term, "particularistic," mean when applied to religion? Apart from its confusing use as simply synonymous with "exclusivistic," the term, "particularistic religion," seems to allow for three different meanings:

1) A religion that is completely wrapped up in its own particularity without concern for any universal or any other particular. - This might be the case of most tribal religions (Shinto included), where other gods are not negated but seen as without relationship to the own people. The concomitant exclusivism has only the sense of excluding all other peoples from one's own religious community with its rights and obligations.

2) A religion that is equally identified with a particular people, but which conceives of its gods (or God) as the gods (or God) of all the world. Here, exclusion seems to be twofold: all others are excluded from the believing community (like in 1), and all other gods and religions are negated. From this point, the history of the Old Testament could be seen as the transition from Yahweh as the tribal God of Israel (henotheism) to Yahweh as the only existing God (monotheism), who then tends to show some care for other peoples and to entrust Israel with a mission to them. Here the question must be left open whether, besides Judaism, any other religion could be classified as this kind of religion. Did Shinto tend to this in some of its periods?

3) Finally, "particularistic" is used to indicate religions that - like, for example, Christianity and the Nichiren sect - claim universal validity for their own particularity. Looked at from the other side, namely on account of their universal claim, these same religions can be, and are in fact, also called universalistic. Such particularistic-universalistic religion admits again, at least logically speaking, of several varieties:

a) a religion that claims full actual possession of the universally valid. Here all other particulars are, of course, excluded as invalid, but no people can be excluded from the community without relegating them to the realm of the less than human or the doomed.

b) a religion that lays claim to the finally valid but admits the need of historical process for its full possession. Here, other particulars can be recognized as having a (provisional) legitimate role.

c) a religion that envisions its own particularity as a universal mission entrusted to it; thus, either claiming for its own particularity an exclusive place among all particulars (denying all others any universal role), or at least a unique place (leaving the possibility of other particulars also having a universal role, subordinate or not to its own). Here we meet again with Judaism (at least one conception of it) and with exclusiveness of commitment as distinguished from exclusiveness of possession.

With these particularistic-universalistic religions, however, the meaning of the term, "universalism," in religion is not exhausted. It is also used, for example, to denote the belief in the universality of salvation, either of the offer of salvation (as in Christianity) or of actual salvation (as Mahayana Buddhism tends to believe). We may also remark, per transennam, that in the Christian tradition the word "catholic" is often used to express the idea of the universal. But most important for our problematics might be the universalistic trends in religion which directly appeal to the mandatory universality of truth. Here, "universalism" takes on two different meanings:

1) An exclusive claim for the universal, with exclusion of all particulars. This is the trend that developed in Europe with the Aufklärung: in the name of the goddess of reason all the mutually contradictory particular elements of the different religions were rejected as irrational. Thus, Deism developed and Kant was induced to write his "Religion within the Boundaries of Pure Reason." As people who have been conscientized again to the great role played by the "irrational" in human life by the experience of two world wars and the Freudian doctrines, we cannot naively share this rationalistic dream; and as Christians we cannot, of course, agree with this depreciation of all particulars. God has, after all, chosen the particular in order to reveal Himself: But we may do well to realize that this kind of universalism must have looked as the liberating truth to the European intelligentsia who had seen the ravages of bloody religious wars and were more than fed up with the intellectually sterile bickerings of Catholic and Protestant theologians. This historical realization may help us to understand that, in the present confrontation of the religions of the world, this kind of universalism may again appear in the eyes of many as the intellectually most satisfying solution for the problem of the pluralism of religions. But in the same historical back-mirror we might also read the warning that the partition between the rejection of all particularity in religion and the abandonment of all religion is paper thin and, on the contrary, the distance between the religiously valuable and the intellectually satisfying great indeed.

In our Japanese situation, however, we cannot be satisfied with a recollection of the sole Western history of religion. We must also remember that in Buddhism this universalistic trend is strong and of long standing. I alluded already to the fact that Buddhist truth was presented from early on as absolutely universal: a Dharma that, theoretically speaking, can be discovered and experienced by everybody. And there is the further claim that absolute truth must be "formless" ("nameless"), without particularities, so that even in the Pure Land school, with its stress on the saving Name of Amida, orthodox "theology" maintains that not this name but formless Buddhahood is ultimate truth. Here, we can recognize that this universalistic tendency plays a positive role and gives Buddhist religiosity its unique flavor. But if we want to learn a lesson there we must not forget (as is all too often done) that this doctrinal universalism is counterbalanced in Buddhist religiosity (even of the Zen variety) by a very strong particularism in practice.

2) The second form of religious universalism to be mentioned looks, on the surface, like the complete opposite of the former one, since instead of rejecting all particularity it makes a universal claim for all religious particularities. We all know its classical image: All the paths up Mount Fuji differ among each other, but they all lead to the same top. In other words: all religions differ in their doctrines, rituals, etc., but they are all valid insofar as they lead to the same universal and absolute truth.

This position was most clearly taken by Neo-Hinduists since the nineteenth century, but one could ask oneself whether the man in the street, not only in Japan but also in the West, is not saying something similar when he naively states: "All religions are the same, aren't they, Father?" However, when a theologian (be he Hindu or Christian) says this, he must be conscious that he is
really saying that the various religious particularities (and the differences among them) have no importance or truth in themselves, but only as "höhen (expedient means); and that he thus expresses, in the first instance, a strong relativism. And when a taxi driver throws this wisdom at you, his passenger in the back seat, there is no indication that he would claim any privileged position for his own religion. But on the other hand it has been pointed out often enough that the doctrine of the Neo-Hinduist really implies that he can see all the religious paths converge because he himself (as a Hindu) stands on the top, on the transcendent standpoint of absolute truth. Thus, what in the first instance appeared as relativism reveals itself as a kind of absolutism, not so different from that of the rationalists. And here this universalism faces Ninian Smart’s objection: “There are those who may seek to outline to us a Perennial Philosophy in which at their most profound level all the faiths are one. But is it indeed the profoundest level?”

6. Inclusivism

Both forms of universalism thus appear to claim for themselves a higher, totally universal or absolute standpoint, but they differ in that the former excludes all particular "truths" while the latter purports to include them all. This brings us to a new term, "inclusivism," and immediately alerts us to its ambiguity. For what in Neo-Hinduism at first sight appears as a magnanimous recognition of all other religions has been characterized as a "smothering embrace" that in fact kills the particularity of the others by reducing their total value to something different from themselves.

Here I want to suggest that an awareness of this ambiguity is especially important for us Catholics, since Vatican II itself can be seen as a turn-about from exclusivism to inclusivism in the attitude of the Church to other religions, and practically all Catholic theologians since then show an inclusivistic trend. Karl Rahner’s notion of "anonymous Christians" speaks for itself but a quote may confirm this for us: “I do not see my own explicit Christianity as one opinion among others which contradict it. I see nothing other in my Christianity than the anonymous Christian: a recognition and home-coming of everything in the way of truth and love which exists or could exist anywhere else.”

To which Maurice Boutin recently remarked: “Here, it would seem that Christians such as Rahner strive again to include everybody within the reality of Christianity, and this is precisely what ideologies often do.” Lack of space makes, me, regretfully, skip mention of other theologians, especially Hans Küng.

It is true that these Catholic writers can "claim a pedigree in the early centuries of Christian theology," and that a kind of inclusivism momentarily appears as a must since “it aims to hold together two equally binding convictions: the operation of the grace of God in all the great religions of the world working for salvation, and the uniqueness of the grace of God in Christ, which makes a universal claim as the final way of salvation.”

Supposing, then, that in the future too we shall have to handle some sort of inclusivism, we better make sure that it is the right sort and that we drive warily, fully aware of the tensions of our inclusivism as our vehicle. We shall therefore have to analyze very carefully the conditions which our inclusiveness must fulfill in order to be Christian: i.e., to fully recognize the others for what they are and to be united with them in sincere love. It cannot be doubted that, at the bottom of the inclusivistic trend in our Christian tradition, there lies the desire for unity with all of mankind, and thus of breaking down the walls that an exclusivistic attitude would put up. And a sense of the continuity of God’s working in Christianity and in other religions is evidently an element involved. But we should not forget that an instrument of unity can easily be turned into an instrument of domination over others.

Our big question may then be: How is the unity obtained and how are the others included in that unity? We saw already that it must not be obtained by reducing the others to oneself like particulars to a universal. Neither can it be a unity obtained by including the others as mere subordinates or means in view of a goal dictated by us as a higher "raison d’être." The inclusiveness of the Pax Romana or the Great East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere will not do. Our model should rather be the unity of a human community depending on inter-subjective interaction and wherein real plurality is preserved. Summarizing, we must probably say that it can only be the inclusive unity of God’s plan in Christo, which is in the way identifiable with what we already are or have.

7. Relativism, pluralism

Finally, we must give a moment’s attention to two interrelated terms which we have been using already: "relativism" and "pluralism." Relativism could be defined as the position which denies the existence of the absolute (truth) or at least our human capacity of reaching it. Concomitantly, "pluralism" would be the position that denies any unity in the plurality of the phenomena. Since relativism stands over against absolutism, this brings us back to our starting point. Which is fitting enough, but since our allotted pages have run out we must be brief here. Arnulf Camps distinguishes three types of relativism:

1) "Epistemological relativism maintains that... we can know truth only insofar as it is valid for us." This is a general philosophical position which negates the existence of objective, absolute truth, at least for us, humans.
2) "Cultural relativism maintains that each religion is the appropriate expression of its own culture." What is directly negated here is the universal validity of our culture- and history-bound truth. "Historicism" can be classified here.
3) "Theological relativism... maintains that all religions are paths to the same goal." This one we have encountered already.

In a word, relativism takes the sting out of the problem of the plurality of religious claims by doing away with the thorny question of who is in possession of the truth. Unfortunately, it also takes all the fun out of life together with all dialectic and all mission; and makes all dialogue utterly senseless or at best

14 Alan Race, o.c.e., pp. 45 and 38.
an exercise in exotic curiosity. Why would I want to learn from the Buddhists if they have only cultural or "geographical" truth? And how could I hope to correct my own grasp of the truth by it if my own truth can never go beyond the culturally relative?

In order to give at least the impression that we accomplished something in these pages, I want to end this article by formulating one more thesis.

**THESIS VI.** The way to recognition of and unity with other religions does not lie in
- a "universalization" of Christianity in the sense of giving up or diluting the fundamental particular elements of the Christian tradition by a wholesale symbolic interpretation or an evaporation into a humanistic philosophy; or in
- a "relativization" of Christianity, by demoting it from the status of a universal faith to a "culture religion," relevant only in its own cultural and historical situation.

In the depths of interreligious dialogue, where people meet in freedom and expectation, there are moments when the particular labels that partners wear lose their importance and that which is behind and beyond them breaks through in spiritual freedom, offering a vision of the ultimate that holds them together..." (S.J. Samartta)

The previous slice of this formless theological loaf ended on a categorical rejection of two of the most tempting ways out of the theological quandary of the plurality of religions, in terms which I better repeat here:

The way to recognition of and unity with other religions does not lie in
- a *universalization* of Christianity in the sense of giving up or diluting fundamental particular elements of the Christian tradition by a wholesale symbolic interpretation or an evaporation into a humanistic philosophy; nor in
- a *relativization* of Christianity, by demoting it from the status of a universal faith to a "culture religion," relevant only in its own cultural and historical situation.

It is with a few reflections on these words that I would like to embark on this final leg of our preparatory exploration trip into this as yet uncharted
and theological territory. The fundamental reason for the no to all-or-nothing relativism, as intimated earlier, is that I am not ready to deny us, humans, every possibility of reaching, however, imperfectly, universally valid truth or, in more Christian terms, that I do not want to side with Pontius Pilate against Christ's words: "I am the Truth." Undergirding this rejection is the conviction that nobody can really live such a relativistic position, not to speak of the logical contradiction in affirming as universally true that there is no universal truth.

W. C. Smith adds to this a more pragmatic consideration: "The world has little profit from that broadminded relativist who accepts the diversity of men's loyalties because he feels that no loyalties are ultimately valid, nothing is inherently worth while. Modern relativism is sophisticated cynicism—and is a devastating, not a constructive force." And a second element in this rejection is, of course, the refusal to disconnect religion from the human search for truth, and to camp it squarely and exclusively in the realm of feelings and subjective preferences, like so many Japanese people seem inclined to do.

However, this refusal "to enshrine the doctrine of cultural pluralism at the expense of a fundamental devotion to truth" does not dispense us from looking for the grain of truth hidden in the premises of this relativism. For this particular Lorelei could not lure so many people, and would soon lose her license as a siren, if she sang completely out of tune. Indeed, we could find the purer motive behind contemporary, historical and cultural, relativism in a reaction against the arrogant self-confidence and pole position of the truth of "the Christian West" at the height of its world hegemony. As a plea for a humbler and more realistic attitude, it rejects the rationalistic hucksters and advocates the recognition of other cultures as equal partners in the one world. As is the case with practically all reactions in the history of humankind, it swings too far in the direction of the opposite pole, but in the meantime manages to provide us with a valuable examination of conscience re the quality of our commitment to the truth. For, seen in retrospect, we Christians, have often shown a too great attachment to definite formulations of truth, as if ultimate truth could be neatly caught in words — there is a lesson for us in the Eastern simile of the finger pointing at the moon; and we have often been "over-committed" to truth, i.e., in oblivion of the limits of our own grasp of the truth, all too ready to do battle against others for the truth as we saw it. We need to go further in the direction indicated by the same W. C. Smith: "We have become much less but have also more sophisticated about claiming truths articulated in words; and about judging whether two statements made in differing circumstances contradict each other than they seem to do so." Thus, the lesson to learn from contemporary relativism may be a new awareness that our grasp of the truth today is severely limited: it is necessarily perspectivistic, standpoint-bound, and represents only a moment in an ongoing search for truth. This then would be the legitimate sense in which it can be said: "All our truth is relative." Needless to say that this awareness is extremely important for the interreligious dialogue, for it is this awareness that can make us look for complements and corrections of our own grasp in other traditions and religions.

When, next, we look for what is positive and acceptable in the other position we have rejected, namely the "universalization" of Christianity, a quote from an Orthodox theologian may give us our first hint: "There is a universal religious community which, if we are able to lay hold on what it offers, will enrich our Christian experience. What we have to do is to penetrate beyond the symbols and historical forms and discover the profound intention of religious people, and to relate their apprehension of divinity to the object of our Christian hope." I believe that it is rather easy for people with a Catholic background to sympathize with what is said here, and that this sentence describes rather well what many of us are trying to do, consciously or unconsciously, in the interreligious dialogue. On the other hand, if one wanted to define what universalization really aims at, one could probably use these same words and say: it wants to "penetrate beyond the (disparate, particular) symbols and historical forms, and discover" the universally valid and acceptable. I further believe that we would be well on our way to a solution of the problem of religious plurality, if now we could further define the exact similarities and differences between these two positions. Since this, unfortunately, lies beyond my powers, I can offer here only a few preparatory questions and comments.

Let us first remind ourselves that, logically speaking or in the realm of objective discourse, bringing all religions together in one universal is a beautiful but impossible dream. For it would either mean to chop off (i.e. to make abstraction from) all the particulars that protrude on all sides from this universal. In this case, it is easy enough to imagine—and history is there to prove it—that all the specifically religious is lost in the process. It is against this tendency, which shows itself in some recent theologies, that Professor Smith protests: "The truth at which we are aiming must not be sought at the price of sacrificing our own loyalties, our own tradition. At such a price it would not be true... We must move forward, not back... It is a creative task that is demanded of us, not a destructive one of sloughing off any part of each man's vision that other men do not share." Therefore, each partner in the interreligious dialogue must "carry" the particularity and history of her or his tradition. One does not serve the cause of unity by hiding or negating it, and we can sympathize with the Lutheran theologian who wrote: "I do not want the Church of which I am a part to be represented by a theology that has already abandoned the heart of the Christian gospel." Or it would mean that one could occupy a standpoint beyond (above) the religious diversity, from where one could see the total dynamic of all religions flow together into one. For us, humans, however, such a standpoint does not exist. "There is no theological helicopter that can help us to rise above all religions and to look down upon the terrain below in lofty condescension." "There is no platform from which one can claim to have an 'objective view"
which supersedes all the ‘subjective’ faith commitments of the world’s faiths; every man must take his stand on the floor of the arena... and there engage in the real encounter of ultimate commitment.”

The question then becomes: Could there possibly be a religious way of transcending or penetrating beyond the symbols and historical forms apart from the intellectual reductionist one? And could it be that in that beyond the different religions converge after all? If so, would the practical conclusion then be that, in the present interreligious situation, each religion must strive to transcend in this way its own particularities? We may first remark that we could speak, not only of a rational, but also of a religious a priori claim for the final unity of all religion, if we accept the original unity of all divine revelation and the same direction towards God shared by all humans as God’s creatures. A posteriori evidence is not lacking either. There is the fact that saints (those people who went all the way in their own religious tradition) of different traditions appear to recognize one another and feel extraordinarily close, while showing a high degree of freedom towards the forms and forms of their own tradition. (A bit in the line of St. Augustine’s “ama et fac quod vis”). Moreover, it seems to me that Jesus himself, in his interreligious dialogue with the Samaritan woman, points in that same direction. “The woman said to Him, ‘Sir, . . . our fathers worshipped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem it is . . . our fathers worshipped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is . . . your temple, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.’ (Revel. 21: 10 and 22) It cannot be doubted, however, that Jesus wanted his disciples to strive for this spirit and truth, and that therein lies an important element of his Good News or New Testament.

It looks therefore as if a certain penetrating beyond the particular forms of Christianity is not only a possibility but must be a serious concern of Jesus’ followers. This invites us to a serious reflection whether our loyalty to the Christian tradition does not contain also a wrong clinging to, and overly restrictive interpretations of, Christian particulars – resulting not only in unfreedom of the children of God, but also in unnecessary opposition to others. But even granting all this, our original problem still stands: How can we define and concretize this going beyond the particulars? We certainly do not see beforehand the point where this process is supposed to lead to; and we can only hope that a similar process in the other religions will arrive at this same point. And how do we evaluate exactly the religious particulars in this case? How can we see them at the same time as necessary embodiments of the divine on the way to direct contact with God, and as obstacles to contact with the divine in spirit and truth and to the unity of mankind?

It seems clear, however, that this religious process of transcending differs essentially from the logical process of universalization, and that there can be no question of simply pushing the particulars aside. For it is only in and through the particulars that the process finds its direction. The aim is thus not simply transcendent but also immanent in the particulars. All of this is beautifully hinted at in a rich text by Raymundo Panikkar:

Christian ecumenism tries to reach a unity among Christians without stifling their diversity. . . . The goal is always a new point of agreement, in deeper loyalty to a principle both transcendent and immanent to the various Christian confessions. And because of the recognition of this transcendent-immanence, agreement does not entail conformity of opinions; it means harmony of enlightened hearts.

And it may be good to be aware that our considerations have brought us in the vicinity of Paul Tillich’s notion of self-transcending particularity:

Christianity will be a bearer of the religious answer as long as it breaks through its own particularity. The way to achieve this is not to relinquish one’s religious tradition for the sake of a universal concept which would be nothing but a concept. The way is to penetrate into the depth of one’s own religion, in devotion, thought, and action. In the depth of every living religion there is a point at which the religion itself loses importance, and that to which it points breaks through its particularity, elevating it to spiritual freedom and with it to a vision of the spiritual presence in other expressions of the ultimate meaning of man’s existence.

THESIS VII. In order to come to a right status questionis of the Theology of Religions, we need a thorough analysis of the exact causes and meaning of the exclusivist attitude of Christianity in history, i.e. of its non-recognition of other religions.

From the just developed perspective, we could see Vatican II’s abandonment of the Church’s negative attitude towards the other religions as a transcending
of a very restrictive interpretation of the "and there is no salvation in any other name," without however abandoning the necessity of Jesus' Name. But, in order to understand what this change exactly means and in which direction it points, we must go back in history, first of all to find out when and under which circumstances the exclusivist attitude originated (for it would not be the first time that we have been considering as solid Christian tradition a tenet of relatively recent origin), and further to investigate the contents of this traditional exclusivism and to try to unravel the positive and negative elements in it – for it must undoubtedly be a mixed bag, with several wrong tie-ups, valid Christian insights and (sinful or not) misunderstandings. Needless to say that the thorough analysis demanded here will require the concerted efforts of many specialists in the history of Christian doctrine, and that the present pages can only offer a few questions.

1. The primitive Church: Taking over the O.T. prophetic tradition in a universalistic context

The title of this paragraph is of course provisional. It only summarizes what I see, for the moment, as important elements in that seminal period. But it seems to answer immediately our first question: When did Christian exclusivism originate? Christian exclusivism appears to be there from the beginning, since the early Christians inherited it from the Jewish tradition. However, my contention is that this heritage cannot have had the same meaning for the early Church as it had for the Jews, since they changed their perspective from the sole Jewish people to all peoples. What we would really like to find out is in which sense they saw themselves as the sole carriers of God's plans with humanity.

We are referred back, first of all, to the Old Testament and the specialists in the field. The following picture is, therefore, only meant as a tatakiket. There are in the O.T. very inclusive scenes and pronouncements regarding God's work in and care for all peoples, especially in the Wisdom tradition – which the theology of religions will have to subject to a very careful study, but the dominant note seems to be the prophetic one of a jealous God and of a deadly polemics against the gods of the peoples. Donald Swearer summarizes for us:

The roots of the exclusivist claims of the Bible lie in the monotheism of the Old Testament, which gradually developed.... New Testament Christianity, therefore, is the inheritor of the theological viewpoint of exilic and post-exilic Judaism which had moved from a position where Yahweh was affirmed as the highest God among other gods to the one and only God, the exclusive Lord not only of the Israelites but also of the universe.14

In this view, all other religions seem to be reduced to one thing and one thing only: idolatry – a narrowing of view that will have ominous consequences for Christian theology. But, for Judaism itself two further points have to be made. One, the O.T. polemics against the gods of other peoples does not seem to be directed really against their existence, nor against their worship by other peoples, but essentially against the danger of infidelity they constituted for the


Jews. The cult of these gods may be permissible for other people, but not for the Jews, since they are Yahweh's people, betrothed to Him by a special covenant. The demand of explicit and exclusive monotheistic faith was thus only addressed to the Jews.

Two, it can be maintained that "salvation outside the Church" is not made a problem in the O.T. "The dilemma, either to belong to the covenant religion or to miss salvation, does not expressly appear in the O.T."15 "Notwithstanding (or precisely because of) the strongly stressed specificity of its experience with Yahweh, Israel has in no way relegated the other peoples to a godless and salvation-less void."16 At this point, we can only direct our question to New Testament scholars: What happened exactly to the consciousness of the early Christians when they became aware that Christ's mission and message were not only meant for the Jews, but equally for the gentiles, and consequently opened up their community also to them? How did these gentiles, and their religions, now appear in their eyes? And what does a description like the following really mean: "The people of God before Christ and the gentiles are, in a shocking way, placed on the same line with regard to their relationship to the Unique – not to the disadvantage of the former, it should be noted, but in favor of the latter."17 What was opened up here to the gentiles: the possibility of salvation? or the sharing in a special vocation hitherto reserved to the Jews?

And how did the early Christians see their community and its mission? From the above, it seems unlikely that they immediately started thinking in terms of: either join our group or be damned. And even if they saw themselves as the appointed heirs to the special vocation of the Jews, is it possible that they immediately started seeing themselves as a new particularistic people? Central to our problematics here is, of course: How did the early Christians see Jesus? But it is time to confess that I have avoided up to now to touch directly on Christological questions, because I consider them too delicate to figure in these preparatory considerations. Therefore, now too, only one quotation as food for thought: "Both economies (that of the Jews and the larger one which embraces all the peoples of the earth)... are, in a New Testament perspective, joined and fused in Jesus. He is the 'elect'... in whom Israel is resumed. But he is also the 'Wisdom of God,' present throughout the universe."18

2. The early Church Fathers: Wisdom and Religion

Let us first remark that these early Fathers must be considered to be extraordinarily important for the theology of religions – and that has not been carefully studied anew from this angle – for the simple reason that they are probably the only Christians before our time with a real awareness of the plurality of religions. "Religious pluralism was the milieu of the first Christians. But the society of Western Christendom, in which the thought and tradition

18 P. Rossano, in: Mission Trends No. 5, p. 29.
of our Church was developed and fixed, was very different."

Here we would like to know how these people regarded the religions in whose midst they lived, and the relationship of their own Christianity to them. But here again we can offer only some suggestions. It appears that (at least many of) the early Fathers saw God at work in the whole of human history: "There is only one God, who from beginning to end and by various economics, comes to the rescue of humankind." (Irenaeus, Adversus haereses III, 12:13); and tended to regard the totality of God's activity in humanity as the Christian dispensation: "Christ is the firstborn of God and the divine Word in whom every race of man have shared; and those who lived according to the Logos are Christians, even though they have been thought to be godless, as among the Greeks Socrates and Heraclitus." (Justinus martyr, Apologia, I:46) Thus, these Fathers certainly provide a basis for an inclusivistic view of Christianity.

However, from very early on, the Fathers appear to make a definite distinction - and thereby to introduce a dichotomy that is going to weigh heavily on subsequent theology - between pagan culture and wisdom (philosophy), on the one hand, and pagan religion on the other. Many of them show a strong appreciation of pagan wisdom and consider it to be bestowed by God, a kind of revelation and preparation for the full wisdom of the Gospel. Probably influenced therein by the O.T. Wisdom Tradition, they saw all human wisdom as inspired by God. "Origin... emphasized that there is no truth independent of the direct action of God, whether in Judaism or in Hellenism"20, and Clemens of Alexandria even teaches that "it (philosophy) was given to the Greeks as their Testament and as a stepping-stone leading towards the philosophy of Christ." (Stromata V)21 On the other hand, however, they seem to have regarded (all?) the religious observances of their contemporaries as idolatry. Justinus brought it all together in one short formula: "The Logos speaking through Socrates and others sought to lead men to the light and away from the work of demons: pagan religions." (Apologia) In this judgment, they may have been influenced by the low quality and oppressivity of the Greco-Roman polytheism of their day, but they certainly echoed also the O.T. diatribes against the gods of the gentiles.

This leads us to a rather important question. We could be tempted to say that, therefore, the Fathers of the Church tended to appreciate profane (rational) wisdom but condemned all religion outside Christianity - a conclusion which most theologians seem to have drawn. But I believe that this would be a clear case of the word religion(s) deceiving us, and of us inserting our contemporary idea of religion into these venerable heads. Would they have understood our question: Do you consider Plato's philosophy as religious or as profane? And, more to the point: Supposing that these Church Fathers had known Buddhism in its Indian context, would they have seen it as idolatry or as Wisdom coming from God? I would certainly bet on the latter; and this leads me to deplore one more fact that has bedeviled the Christian view of other religions in the past. I mean precisely the fact that in its past history Christianity never met a non-monothestic religion of the high quality of Buddhism.

3. Western Christendom: The Porcupine

With this irreverent title I only mean to indicate that medieval Christianity was a beautifully rounded-off world with religion encompassing and uniting all realms of human endeavor; and a world turned in on itself because threatened from the outside. Both features are, I believe, important for our purpose: The fact that Christianity came to be identified with a cultural-political community, which had to be defended against its enemies; and the fact that this world was continuously threatened by a different religio-political complex and thereby cut off from the rest of the world, especially the East. Immediately following our earlier quotation, J.V. Taylor goes on to say: "(Western Christendom) was hemmed in by the encircling power and superior culture of Islam and confined to the Western corner of the vast Euro-Asian continent... As a counter aggression the Church developed a crusading ethos that became a fundamental feature of its tradition." And Archbishop Jean Jadot draws a similar picture: "For Christians (in the Middle Ages), the experience of 'the other' consisted almost exclusively in the Jewish people in their midst and the Muslims, generally perceived as the enemy to be combated in the Iberian Reconquesta, in the crusades over control of the Holy Land, and in the Ottoman rule in the Balkans with their threatened invasion of the West."22

What could, under the given circumstances, the image of "the other religions" be? W. Oxtoby summarizes it as follows: "When Europe began to take Islam seriously during the Crusades, the fourfold categorization of Christians, Jews, Muslims, and pagans caught on... For early modern Europe, the Jews constituted an alien community within Christendom, the Muslims were the alien community outside, and 'paganism' represented an alien world from the past."23 Also for brevity's sake, I am tempted to summarize in a more drastic way: The perception of the other religions by the medieval Christians was so warped by ignorance, fear, and enmity, that their theological judgment constructed thereon can scarcely be considered as instructive, let alone valid. Their only real experience was of two other monotheistic religions, two more sons of the same Abraham. Of how the judgment on Islam was dictated by fear, not the most enlightened of counselors, we need not say any more. The experience and evaluation of the Jews in their midst is a much more complicated question, but for us it may be sufficient to know, for the moment, that the consciousness that Judaism was superseded by Christianity and the image of the Jews as "killers of Christ" made any positive evaluation immensely improbable. Finally, the only knowledge of non-Abrahamic religions was mediated by the reading of the classics and the practices of some "rustics" (the first meaning of "pagani") in outlying districts who had not yet adopted the higher culture of Christianity. All in all, not the best of preparations for the new meeting with the religions of the world which happened in modern times after a practically blank page of more than a thousand years.

21 G. Khodr, Le., p. 40.
4. Modern Times: The Self-image of the Conqueror

I do not want to conjure up here the infamous image of the Christian missionary carrying a cross in his left hand and a gun in his right; nor do I agree with those people who like to stress, nowadays, that motivation and spirit of the Christian missionaries were fundamentally the same as that of the conquistadores. I only want to submit that the *Zeitgeist* of that period, wherein Western civilization conquered the world, made it impossible for Christians (and enormously difficult for the others) to see Christianity, this inspiration and crown of the "higher civilization," in any way together with the other religions. And the pre-conceived ideas which we have watched building up over the centuries — idolatry, work of the devil, inferior paganism, etc. — further complicated things and must have made it extremely difficult to see and experience the others as they really are.

That nevertheless the first objective information about Eastern civilizations and religions reached Europe via the letters and reports of missionaries is a thing to be proud of and proves once more that the individual can rise above his social conditioning. Many questions remain to be asked here. For example, in which ways did the "extra ecclesiam nulla salus" come to be relativized in the minds of most Christians? Did nobody make a connection between the "baptism of desire" of the good pagan and his religion? How did a Ricci distinguish, or see the relationship of, other culture and other religion? Many more... , too many to be brought up here. But there is one, much more general, question which I want to at least mention here, because it influences considerably the development of the theology of religions today. It is a very involved question, but let me first try out a lapidary formulation: How does the "Protestant ethos" affect the Christian view of other religions? I can then only add a few indications, which try to make a long story short.

Although its first origin goes back to a time usually labeled as the Late Middle Ages, Protestantism can be considered to share most of its roots with Western modernity. This Western modern spirit managed to produce a civilization so different from the other cultures the world had known before that it is sometimes called a "freak": and Protestantism tended to look on Catholicism as a kind of "paganism", over against which it wanted to return to the purity of God’s historical Word, which is to be found nowhere but in the Bible — insisting thereby on the discontinuity of that divine Word with the human’s religiosity and natural (creational) strivings. Far be it from me, in this ecumenical era, to negate the positive elements of this attitude. Only, it seems to me that, on the exact point which concerns us here, this "Protestant ethos" in its purity makes things very difficult, if not downright hopeless — with which confession I do not intend to brand as "impure" those Protestant authors whom I have been quoting constantly.

Having come to the end of my scribblings, I believe that several more preparatory theses could be distilled from the above considerations. I cannot think of developing them now, but want to indicate a few:

**THESIS VIII:** Given the newness of the total perspective, Theology of Religions cannot be fruitfully practiced in simple continuity with the evolution of theology within Christendom. It should rather show the signs of a "new birth," somewhat in the line of the South American Liberation Theology.

**THESIS IX:** Together with the contemporary experience of the other religions, a new reading of the Bible (Old and New Testaments) in real appreciation of its universalistic trends, and a new study of the earlier Church Fathers, who truly confronted the non-Christian world in a minority position, might be the best resources for a Theology of Religions.

**THESIS X:** Essential for a genuine Theology of Religions is a re-affirmation of the dimension of creation in our faith and of the link of God and man on that level. In this connection, the re-evaluation of the relationship of Jesus Christ with creation — of the historical with the ontological — in the line of St. John’s prologue is of the greatest importance. For this and other reasons, the concept of "salvation" cannot be the sole central concept of a Theology of Religions.