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A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON *INCLUSIVISM* AS THE PREVAILING PARADIGM IN THE CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

HISTORYCZNE SPOJRZENIE NA *INKLUZYWIZM* JAKO DOMINUJĄCY PARADYGMAT W CHRZEŚCIJAŃSKIEJ TEOLOGII RELIGII

Abstrakt

Artykuł wyjaśnia różne spojrzenia na religie świata. Jego głównym celem jest analiza *inkluzywizmu* religijnego jako najbardziej powszechnego podejścia do innych religii we współczesnej debacie teologicznej nad religiami. Artykuł zwraca szczególną uwagę na rozwój modelu chrystocentrycznego w Kościele katolickim, odnosząc się najpierw do wczesnych ojców Kościoła, a następnie do teologii Logosu. Analiza pokazuje, że teologia Logosu w historii była zawsze obecna w katolickim podejściu do wierzących inaczej obok ekskluzywistycznego aksjomatu *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (poza Kościołem nie ma zbawienia). Później ta inkluzywistyczna teologia znalazła swoje zastosowanie w „teorii wypełnienia” Jeana Danielou, w idei „anonimowego chrześcijaństwa” Karla Rahnera, w stanowisku II Soboru

Watykańskiego w sprawie innych tradycji religijnych oraz w posoborowym oficjalnym nauczaniu Kościoła. Artykuł kończy się oceną złożoności, wyzwań i nieuniknionych słabych punktów chrystocentrycznego podejścia do innych religii.

Słowa kluczowe: religie świata, dialog międzyreligijny, eklezjocentryzm, ekskluzywizm religijny, inkluzywizm, chrystocentryzm, teoria „wypełnienia”, „anonimowe chrześcijaństwo”, teocentryzm, pluralizm religijny

Abstract

The article first explains various perspectives on the world religions. Its main focus is on the inclusivist perspective as the most common approach in the debate on religions. Here special attention is given to the development of the Christocentric model in the Catholic Church referring first to the early Church Fathers and afterwards to *Logos* theology. The analysis shows that the theology of the *Logos* was always present in Catholic attitudes towards other believers throughout history alongside the exclusivist axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the Church no salvation). Later, this inclusivist theology was echoed in the „fulfilment theory” of Jean Danielou, „anonymous Christianity” of Karl Rahner, the Second Vatican Council’s stand on other faiths, and in the post-conciliar official Church teaching. The article ends with evaluation of the complexity, challenges and unavoidable shortcomings of the Christocentric approach to other religions.

Keywords: world religions, interreligious dialogue, ecclesiocentrism, religious exclusivism, inclusivism, Christocentrism, „fulfilment” theory, „anonymous Christianity”, theocentrism, religious pluralism

Introduction

In recent decades the most spectacular shift in theological reflection has taken place in Christian theology of religions. There are several reasons for the shift in focus. The first is the rise of historical consciousness and a new theological understanding of religious pluralism in the world

which forces Christian theology to re-evaluate its view on world religions. The second is the challenge of inculturation and the process of globalization. All religions, including Christianity are culturally conditioned and as Christianity moves from Western to Asian, African, and Latin American cultural forms of expression, it is faced with the challenge of religious diversity. These factors give rise to new questions concerning the relationship between Christianity and the religions. Theologians representing different theological views have proposed various answers, some more satisfying than others. The aim of the article is to describe the historical-theological context out of which one of such views called *inclusivism* or *Christocentrism* emerged and examine its validity.

1. Various approaches to religions

In a current theology of religions it has been a common practice among theologians to distinguish three approaches to other religions: *exclusivism*, *inclusivism*, and *pluralism* and in parallel three basic perspectives of *ecclesiocentrism*, *Christocentrism*, and *theocentrism*¹. Other typologies, both interesting and innovative but at the same time very complex, have been proposed. Paul Knitter proposed one such typology in his book *Introducing theologies of religions* (2002) in which he distinguishes a „replacement” model (*exclusivism*), a „fulfilment” model (*inclusivism*), and a „mutuality” and an „acceptance” model (*pluralism*).

Other theologians such as Gavin D’Costa, Joseph DiNoia, Roger Haight opt for more flexible categories. They argue that the traditional distinction between *exclusivism*, *inclusivism*, and *pluralism* is no longer useful. It is „wordy” and „dysfunctional”² and hardly advances the dialogue between religions. Similarly Joseph DiNoia expresses his criticism by saying that this threefold „typologizing obscures the more basic issue posed by current circumstances of religious interaction: how to

¹ Cf. D. LANE, *Vatican II. Christology and the world religions*, „Louvain Studies” 24 (1999), p. 151.

² R. HAIGHT, Review symposium on Paul Knitter’s *Jesus and the other names: Christian mission and global Responsibility*, „Horizons” 24 (1997), p. 272.

affirm the universality of the Christian dispensation without sacrificing its particularity”³. In addition, the traditional typology fails „to recognize the religious other as *other*, not as a mere outsider to, reflection, extension, or unwitting member of, one’s own tradition (e.g. «non-Christian»)”⁴. The entire debate indicates that there is a real need for moving forward and constructing new categories which would be better suited in expressing the diversity of numerous approaches to the theology of religions⁵.

Despite this real call for a new typology, the threefold approach of *exclusivism*, *inclusivism*, and *pluralism* continues to prevail. The rationale for this is that the three fundamental and mutually incompatible perspectives have dominated the entire debate on religions for decades. This is also one of the reasons that this article refers to this threefold perspective. Nevertheless, the central focus of the analysis is *inclusivism* (*Christocentrism*) as the most fruitful paradigm in the theology of religions which also finds support in official teaching of the *Magisterium* and in Catholic theological circles.

Before examining the historical-theological roots of *inclusivism*, it is important to say a few words about the other two models. The first model is described as *exclusivism* because of its claim that those who do not directly believe in Jesus Christ cannot be saved. Sources for this theology include the works of Karl Barth entitled *Church dogmatics* and of Hendrik Kraemer entitled *Why Christianity of all religions?*⁶. On the Catholic side, *exclusivism* is identical to *ecclesiocentrism* and the axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, and is usually linked with the names of St. Cypri-

³ J. A. DiNoia, *The Diversity of religions: A Christian perspective*, Washington 1992, p. 180.

⁴ T. W. TILLEY, *Christianity and the world religions: A recent Vatican document*, „Theological Studies” 60 (1999), p. 323.

⁵ For further criticism directed towards the threefold typology of *exclusivism*, *inclusivism*, and *pluralism* consult T. W. TILLEY, *Christianity and the world religions...*, *op. cit.*, p. 323-327.

⁶ Cf. K. BARTH, *Church dogmatics*, vol. 1, 2, Edinburgh 1965; H. KRAEMER, *Why Christianity of all religions?*, London 1962; T. MERRIGAN, *Exploring the frontiers: Jacques Dupuis and the movement „Toward a Christian theology of religious pluralism”*, „Louvain Studies” 23 (1998), p. 339.

an (210-258) and Fulgentius of Ruspe (468-533). This position eventually changed and in 1949 was declared no longer valid⁷.

The second approach to the question of how „others” are saved, which is the opposite of *exclusivism*, is provided by a school of theology which is known as *pluralism* or *theocentrism*. It interprets God’s universal will to save in terms of the „common goal” which unites all religions and views the diverse traditions as authentic paths to salvation. The main emphasis of *pluralism* is on a „common ground” which can be found outside every particular religion. This „common ground” can be for example, socio-economic liberation, ecology, or an eschatological reality. Consequently, „pluralist theologians insist that salvation is possible in and through a variety of independent and more or less equally valid religious traditions”⁸. This however is contrary to the Catholic official teaching which opposes any form of compromising the universality and uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the only Saviour.

The third approach to the question of how members of other religions are saved is referred to as *inclusivism* or *Christocentrism*; an „in-between” approach. It focuses on the historical mediation of God’s salvation that is available to people in particular times and places⁹. *Inclusivism* emphasizes that despite the genuine value and positive role of religions in the economy of salvation, Christ must always be implicated in the salvific process and the explicit Christian faith is the completion of any religious system (Karl Rahner); that salvation history is one but God’s self-communication is Trinitarian (Jacques Dupuis); that with the Spirit as its starting point and centre, Christianity can be more open to others and more faithful to the Gospel (Gavin D’Costa); and that Jesus is the

⁷ In connection with the case of Leonard Feeney, Pope Pius XII stated that „[to] gain eternal salvation it is not always required that a person be incorporated in fact as a member of the Church, but it is required that he belong to it at least in desire and longing (...). When a man is invincibly ignorant, God accepts an implicit desire, so called because it is contained in the good intentions of soul by which a man wants his will to be conformed to God’s will”. *Letter of the Holy Office to Archbishop Cushing of Boston*, Rome 1949, in *The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church*, Kansas 1955, 274-275.

⁸ Cf. T. MERRIGAN, *Exploring the frontiers...*, *op. cit.*, p. 339.

⁹ *Ibid.*

„universal” Saviour who is in the centre of the religious universe (Monika Hellwig)¹⁰.

The following analysis focuses on *inclusivism* and the Roman Catholic Church which remained at the forefront of this prevailing theological thought on religions. The analysis also describes numerous factors which contributed to a positive change of attitudes towards other believers in Catholicism and states why the *inclusivist* perspective continues to be consonant with the Church's belief on religions.

2. *Inclusivism* in the early Church

Authors of the New Testament books and the Christian communities, for whom the books were written, did not pay much attention to the „other religions”. For them the existent relationship with Judaism, their mother religion was more important. This situation changed during the second century as the various Christian communities interrelated with the Greco-Roman world. In this „new world”, Christians constituted a minority, often challenged by the philosophies and religions in which they were immersed¹¹. Consequently, Christians were forced to ask questions concerning their relationship with their neighbors. „The main question was what to think of the person of Jesus Christ and his saving activity on the one hand and, on the other, of the philosophies, the individual philosophers and the many religions and cults, in the midst of which the young Church was living”¹².

The first three centuries were the time when the early Christian theologians tried to discover the meaning, if any, of God's presence in other religions. Among the early Christian theologians one school represented by Tertulian was especially „concerned to make a very sharp distinction between the Christian religion and others”¹³. Another school, on the

¹⁰ Cf. D. P. HUANG, *Christ, the one Saviour of the world: Reflections on our emerging Christological Question*, „East Asian Pastoral Review” 34 (1997), p. 199.

¹¹ Cf. P. KNITTER, *Introducing theologies of religions*, New York 2002, p. 64.

¹² E. D. PIRYNS, *Current Roman Catholic views of other religions*, „Missionalia” 13 (1985), p. 57.

¹³ *Ibid.*

contrary, sought unity between the two. Theologians from the second school constructed a central theme of God's Word present in the world and developed a new terminology describing this presence of God as *the logos spermatikos*.

Theologians argued that the Word of God made flesh and embodied in Jesus was also scattered in the Greco-Roman world¹⁴. Moreover, they believed that seeds of the divine *Logos* were „spread throughout the whole of humanity long before it manifested itself in Jesus of Nazareth”¹⁵.

The most prominent theologians of this school were Justin Martyr (d. 165), Irenaeus (130-220) and Clement of Alexandria (150-215). Justin Martyr acknowledged the operation of God's Word (*Logos*) among individual non-Christians. Irenaeus, building on Justin's theology, added the concept that divine manifestations (cosmic and historical) took place through the *Logos*. Thus, God's theophanies, applied to the Word, became Logophanies. For Irenaeus, to know God the Father was to know God as a person at the existential level who graciously addressed God's self to people as *Logos*. Irenaeus believed that this knowledge of God was granted to all. This means that Irenaeus attributed to the *Logos* God's self-disclosure in the economy of salvation¹⁶.

Clement of Alexandria extended this influence of the *Logos* beyond the boundaries of the Judeo-Christian tradition into the Greek world. Clement argued that Greeks, through their philosophy, actually sought God. Philosophy, in Clement's understanding came from God and constituted, for the Greek world, a divine economy parallel to the Jewish economy of the Law. Both economies were designed by God to lead people to Christ. Consequently, Clement called Greek philosophy a covenant made by God with people; it is a „stepping-stone” to the „philosophy” of Christ, that is, the Good News¹⁷.

¹⁴ Cf. J. URBAN, *Dialog chrześcijaństwa z religiami pozachrześcijańskimi*, in H. Zimoń (ed), *Religia w świecie współczesnym: Zarys problematyki religiológicznej*, Lublin 2000, p. 587.

¹⁵ E. D. PIRYNS, *Current Roman Catholic views...*, op. cit., p. 57.

¹⁶ Cf. J. DUPUIS, *Toward a Christian theology of religious pluralism*, New York 1997, p. 60-66.

¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 66-77.

It is apparent therefore that for the early Church Fathers the „seeds of the Word, or [the] reflections of the eternal Truth, [were] like a preparation, a prefiguration, of the fullness of revelation that will coincide with the coming of Jesus Christ”¹⁸. This belief in God’s saving presence beyond the Church was soon to change. Historical development in the fourth century influenced the shift „from a stress on God’s universal love and presence to a stress on the particular importance of the Church. Under Emperor Constantine and under Emperor Theodosius (379-95), the often-persecuted minority community of Christians suddenly became the official state religion. [...] The welfare of the Church was now wedded to the welfare of the state, which meant that the enemies of the state became the enemies of the Church”¹⁹. It is understandable therefore that Christian attitudes towards those who were „outside” the Church, that is, non-Romans and non-Christians, began to change.

Studies of the exclusivist axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* show that strict evaluation of other religions remained in the Catholic Church until around the sixteenth century, and in a modified form until the middle of the twentieth. However, in a parallel way to *exclusivism*, the view of the early Fathers on other religions containing seeds of the divine *Logos* had also been more or less prominent in Catholic theology until the Second Vatican Council²⁰. Nevertheless, it was in the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s that a real shift in Catholic theology of religions was initiated. This shift relates to a theological concept called a „fulfilment theory”.

3. The „fulfilment theory”

Jean Danielou should in fact be regarded as the main constructor of this theory. Danielou looked at the other religions from the Christian perspective of God’s design for the salvation of humanity. For him a theology

¹⁸ C. GEFFRÉ, *From the theology of religious pluralism to an interreligious theology*, in D. Kendall, G. O’Collins (eds), *In many and diverse ways: In honor of Jacques Dupuis*, New York 2003, p. 51.

¹⁹ P. KNITTER, *Introducing theologies...*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

²⁰ Cf. J. DUPUIS, *Toward a Christian theology...*, *op. cit.*, p. 153-157.

of history was a gradual manifestation of God to humanity and salvation history was limited only to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Salvation history [culminated] in Jesus Christ, whose message of salvation has been entrusted to the Church”²¹. Any other history which preceded God’s manifestation to humanity in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Danielou called a „prehistory” of salvation. Consequently, he applied this term (prehistory) to all religions outside the Judeo-Christian world.

In addition, Danielou distinguished between the natural and the supernatural and between religion and revelation. For Danielou the „natural” meant a revelation of God who spoke to every human being through the cosmos, the conscience and the spirit. However, this natural knowledge of God was imperfect and a human person required a more positive (supernatural) revelation. The „supernatural” revelation was given in the Bible and in the life of the Church. The Old Testament depicted God in terms of truth, justice and goodness. The New Testament unfolded the mystery of the Trinity. The knowledge of God was developed in the sacramental life of the Church and in mystical experience. Christianity belonged to the Judeo-Christian revelation, to the supernatural faith. The world religions belonged to the order of natural reason. Hence, even if these religions reached the knowledge of God through the created world or through their own conscience, it was still in the order of nature. Hence, they could not lead their adherents to salvation through faith because they had no saving power in themselves²².

Henri de Lubac built on Danielou’s distinction between nature and the supernatural and added that both were „intimately united in Jesus Christ. In him and through him, the supernatural [did] not replace nature, but [informed] it and [transformed] it”²³. De Lubac further argued that the same relationship existed between Christianity and the world religions. When the two encounter each other, Christianity purifies and transforms the traditions thus revealing their real value. In this context

²¹ Ibid., p. 134.

²² Cf. J. DANIELOU, *The Lord of history: Reflections on the inner meaning of history*, London 1958, p. 115-116, 118-119.

²³ J. DUPUIS, *Christianity and the religions...*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

the religious traditions do not play any significant role in the mystery of salvation and certainly cannot constitute „ways” to salvation. Assigning to the world religions any special role in God’s plan of salvation would mean placing them in competition with Christianity and thus „obscuring the uniqueness” of Christianity and „destroying the unity of the divine design”²⁴.

Urs von Balthasar contributes another element to the „fulfilment theory” by characterizing the mystery of Jesus Christ as the „Concrete Universal”. In this way, Balthasar indicates both the absolute character of Jesus Christ through whom God manifests God’s self to humankind and the absolute character of Christianity in relation to other religions. In reality, Christianity „assumes and fulfills all the positive elements involved in the fundamental religious attitude of the human being, while at the same time transcending them”²⁵. In this way, Balthasar places Christianity in sharp opposition to other traditions. Both represent opposite attitudes and directions; Christianity belongs to the supernatural and other religions to nature. Ultimately Christianity assesses and fulfills what is good in the other, and purifies and transforms it²⁶.

In general, the „fulfilment theory” acknowledges that other religions search for a Christ who can fulfill their spiritual desires. However, only Christianity possesses Christ and thus is the only saving religion which has its origin not in human aspirations but in God’s „divine and supernatural self-communication”²⁷. If Christ saves the other believers, it is not through their religious communities but *in spite* of them. This also means that Christians should admire and respect the human goodness of other believers but there is no need to engage in a meaningful dialogue with their religions. The reason is apparent, as religious communities they do not possess God’s saving grace even if individual believers from these religions, in a mysterious way known to God, can be touched and saved by Christ’s grace²⁸. The theory of „fulfilment” has found its place in most of

²⁴ H. DE LUBAC, *The Church: Paradox and mystery*, New York 1969, p. 148-149.

²⁵ J. DUPUIS, *Toward a Christian theology...*, *op. cit.*, p. 141-142.

²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 143.

²⁷ D. P. HUANG, *Christ, the one Saviour...*, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

²⁸ Cf. *ibid.*

the documents of the Second Vatican Council and especially in the official teaching of Pope Paul VI, to which we will turn later²⁹.

4. Karl Rahner's „anonymous Christianity”

Just as the „fulfilment theory” was a step away from *exclusivism* in the Catholic Church, a radical turn in the Catholic approach to the world religions took place through the theology of Karl Rahner who was one of the pioneers in exploring new areas in a Christian theology of religions in the twentieth century. Although Rahner had never studied other religions directly, he dialogued with numerous Buddhist, Jewish, and Muslim thinkers around the world³⁰. His analysis of Christian doctrine made him believe that „God's world was much bigger than the Christian world”³¹. Certainly, it was much bigger than the Roman Catholic Church. In the 1960s, Rahner began to pay closer attention to „non-Christian” religions in an essay entitled „Christianity and the non-Christian religions” published later in 1966 in his *Theological investigations*. Using standard Catholic doctrines, Rahner undoubtedly built a progressive theology of religions.

The central theme of Rahner's theology was that God is love who wants to reach and embrace all people of all nations. In other words, God wants to save the entire human family and to do it, God wills to find all the necessary means. This is possible for God because God constantly communicates (reveals) God's self to every human being. At the same time, God enables every person to experience God's self-communication in the world³². God does it through *grace* giving this saving grace to every single human being and not just to Christians³³. On this basis, Rahner drew an important conclusion that human nature is not just „na-

²⁹ Cf. PAUL VI, Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, Rome 1975 (EN), 53.

³⁰ Cf. H. D. EGAN, *Karl Rahner: The mystic of everyday life*, New York 1998, p. 19.

³¹ P. KNITTER, *Introducing theologies...*, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

³² Cf. *ibid.*

³³ Cf. K. RAHNER, *Foundations of Christian faith: An introduction to the idea of Christianity*, London 1978, p. 153-161, 170-175.

tural” but „graced” nature which unites the human person with the presence, power, worth and peace of God. He called such nature „super-nature” or the „supernatural existential”, the ontological orientation of the person to God³⁴.

Besides insisting that people are truly graced, Rahner added another element in his theology of religions; the world religions might therefore be „possible” ways of salvation for their adherents³⁵. Rahner’s claim was that God’s grace was not only active in individuals but also in religions. He based this claim on what contemporary anthropology and psychology were saying concerning human beings as social beings embodied in their social groups. People become who they are not by a sort of spiritual transfusion but through the immediate environments in which they live. If this is true of people as human beings, it must also be true of people as spiritual beings. God uses others, social and religious bodies to grace people because grace must be embodied³⁶.

Consequently, the religions of the world might be viewed as the most effective ways in which God’s presence dwells in human history. It is in religions that human beings search for deeper meaning and answers to their existential questions. If Christians believe that God acts throughout human history and God’s actions have to be visible, then religions are the first areas where one needs to seek God’s presence. Moreover, if the community of believers for Christians themselves is the primal locus of God’s presence, so for Buddhists or Hindus their own religions must also be the embodiment of God’s grace. Thus, Rahner arrived at the far-reaching conclusion that God reaches other believers in and „through the beliefs and practices of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and indigenous religions”³⁷.

³⁴ Cf. K. RAHNER, *Nature and grace: Dilemmas in the Modern Church*, London 1964, p. 114-143; IDEM, *Concerning the relationship between nature and grace*, in *Theological investigations*, vol. 1, *God, Christ, Mary and grace*, London 1961, p. 309-317; IDEM, *Grace in freedom*, London 1969, p. 226-247.

³⁵ Cf. IDEM, *On the importance of the non-Christian religions for salvation*, in *Theological investigations*, vol. 18, *God and revelation*, London 1984, p. 291.

³⁶ Cf. H. VORGRIMLER, *Karl Rahner: His life, thought and works*, London 1965, p. 61.

³⁷ P. KNITTER, *Introducing theologies...*, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

One needs to emphasize, however, that in his new theology of religions, Rahner was careful not to say that the divine presence of God in other religious traditions and God's saving action was „reality”. Instead of „reality” he spoke of the „possibility” or the „probability” of other religions being ways of salvation³⁸. Whether the „possibility” was the „reality” was another issue which needed to be proved through concrete studies and dialogue with the religious traditions. Yet Rahner was opening a new ground for the theology of religions. On this basis, Christians were invited to approach other believers in a new way. Members of the other traditions were no longer people who did not know anything about God. Rather they were people to whom God had been present and had revealed God-self before the arrival of the Christian missionaries³⁹.

At the same time, Rahner introduced in his theology the special role of Jesus Christ in God's plan of salvation. If God's grace is present in human nature and history, it is because of Jesus. Jesus is the cause of whatever „revelation” or „salvation” is present in the world and Jesus is God's clearest and final Word spoken to humanity. Consequently, Christ is the „absolute” guarantee, „support”, and „source” of strength that enables people to live a worthwhile, graced life and achieve unity with God in this and in the next world. Jesus is the „only” and „absolute” Saviour⁴⁰. In addition, those who do not know Jesus can still experience God's saving love but they do not see where this experience is leading them. Consequently, „any Buddhist or Hindu or Aboriginal Australian who experiences the grace of God's love in their religion is already connected with and oriented toward Jesus, because Jesus represents the ultimate goal of God's gift of love and grace”⁴¹. This implies that other believers who are graced by God through their own religious traditions are

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Cf. K. RAHNER, *Christianity and the non-Christian religions*, in *Theological investigations*, vol. 5, *Later writings*, London 1966, p. 131.

⁴⁰ Cf. K. LEHMANN, A. RAFFELT (eds), *Karl Rahner – The concept of faith: The best of Karl Rahner's theological writings*, New York 1993, p. 52.

⁴¹ P. KNITTER, *Introducing theologies...*, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

already directed towards the Church of Christ. In a way, Rahner states, they are already Christians and experience what Christians experience in Jesus Christ but still without their full awareness of it⁴². In this sense they can be called „anonymous Christians”.

Rahner’s concept of „anonymous Christianity” was for some a continuation of the „fulfilment theory”⁴³, for others it became a challenge and an inspiration, and for yet others a real threat undermining the Christian message. The danger was that if other believers or non-believers were already „Christians”, the Church no longer needed to be considered the only means of salvation and truth in the midst of other religions. Missionaries no longer needed to preach the Good News. Consequently, if the „non-Christians” did not need to be saved, what was the purpose of proclaiming the gospel and doing mission work? Nevertheless, in Rahner’s view, the Church was intended to be something more than a rescuer from perdition. The task of the Church was not to rescue others but to help them walk firmly on the road to unity with God. Consequently, Christian proclamation was supposed to be carried out for more noble motives than conversion to Christianity⁴⁴. This however was for the Church too far reaching.

5. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965)

Undoubtedly from the Catholic perspective, the Council will always constitute a step forward in the history of Roman Catholicism in

⁴² Cf. K. RAHNER, *Observations on the problem of the „anonymous Christian”*, in *Theological investigations*, vol. 14, *Ecclesiology, questions in the Church, the Church in the world*. London 1976, p. 280-294.

⁴³ For Claude Geffré, even the idea of „anonymous Christians” is a continuation of the „fulfilment theory”. Based on the „supernatural existential” present in every human being, the theory refers to „a kind of implicit, *anonymous*, hidden fulfilment, being embodied only in the upright conduct of life”. C. GEFFRÉ, *From the theology of religious pluralism...*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

⁴⁴ Its main purpose was to share the gospel with others in order to help them become more aware of who they were, children of God, called to live in their own lives, in the love and justice visible in Jesus. See P. KNITTER, *Introducing theologies ...*, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

relation to other religions⁴⁵. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the Council seriously reflected on „the subject of interreligious dialogue and of religious pluralism”⁴⁶ and secondly, it gave „a positive evaluation of the other religions of the world”⁴⁷. The religions were filled with elements of „grace” and contained „rays of Truth”. It was a new direction undertaken by the Church. From this moment on the Church would see positive things in the other religious families and call upon Christians to take these religions seriously as partners in dialogue.

Looking closer at the conciliar documents, one realizes that the most positive evaluation of the other religions is contained mainly in the „Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” (*Nostra aetate*)⁴⁸. In relation to religions, the Declaration states that God’s love and saving presence goes beyond the boundaries of the Church⁴⁹. It places „all religions in the context of the shared search for answers to ultimate questions about the meaning of existence, with particular reference to the origins and destiny of life”⁵⁰. The Declaration furthermore offers a specific description of how the various world religions respond

⁴⁵ Cf. A. BRONK, *Pluralizm religijny i prawdziwość religii*, in H. Zimoń (ed), *Religia w świecie współczesnym: Zarys problematyki religiologicznej*, Lublin 2000, p. 611.

⁴⁶ F. KÖNIG, *Let the Spirit breathe*, in D. Kendall, G. O’Collins (eds), *In many and diverse ways: In honor of Jacques Dupuis*, New York 2003, p. 14.

⁴⁷ D. LANE, *Vatican II...*, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

⁴⁸ Most of the conciliar commentators say that the development of this document was providential. Originally, the bishops decided to produce only a statement on the Jews to correct negative attitudes of Christians towards the Jewish people additionally fostered by anti-Semitism. For this reason, a new perspective on Judaism was essential. But when bishops from other countries in which Christians lived side-by-side with other believers realized that a new opportunity was emerging in the context of relations between Christianity and Judaism they wanted to extend this new positive attitude to other religious traditions. In this way, a statement intended to be only an appendage to the conciliar Decree on Ecumenism became an important declaration on interreligious dialogue. See G. D’COSTA, *The Meeting of religions and the Trinity*, New York 2000, p. 102.

⁴⁹ The Second Vatican Council in another document went even further saying that not only other believers but also atheists who follow their conscience are (although unknowingly) following God and are saved. Cf. VATICAN COUNCIL II, Constitution *Lumen gentium*, Rome 1964 (LG), 16.

⁵⁰ D. LANE, *Vatican II...*, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

to God's revelation, summarizing the basic beliefs and practices of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. It also speaks positively of other indigenous religions, recognizing their profound religiosity. The teachings and practices of the world religions represent what is „true” and „holy” and reflect „a ray of Truth that enlightens all people”⁵¹. Therefore, the Church encourages Catholics to collaborate with other believers and so „in witness of Christian faith and life, to acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral good found among these people”⁵².

Nostra aetate was not the only official document which acknowledged positive elements in the other religions. The Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad gentes divinitus*) recognizes in the other religions „elements of truth and grace”⁵³ and „seeds of the word”⁵⁴ embodied in Jesus. These seeds now became the foundation for „seeds of contemplation”⁵⁵, the „secret presence of God”⁵⁶ in those traditions. Another conciliar document, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*) continues to recognize in those religions „precious things, both religious and human”⁵⁷. This means that the Church's view of other religions is no longer *ecclesiocentric* but *Christocentric* with special emphasis on the role of Christ in the human family.

There is little doubt that all these conciliar pronouncements echo the theology of Karl Rahner. There are, however, two elements of Rahner's thought on religions which the Council refused to implement, namely that the other believers are „anonymous Christians” and that the world religions are „possible” ways of salvation. As indicated in the previous section, the concept of „anonymous Christians” „was too controversial among Christians [and] too uncomfortable’ for the other believers and, to the satisfaction of many, was rejected by the Council”⁵⁸.

⁵¹ VATICAN COUNCIL II, Declaration *Nostra aetate*, Rome 1965 (NA), 2.

⁵² NA 2.

⁵³ VATICAN COUNCIL II, Decree *Ad gentes divinitus*, Rome 1965 (DM), 9.

⁵⁴ DM 11, 15.

⁵⁵ DM 18.

⁵⁶ DM 9.

⁵⁷ VATICAN COUNCIL II, Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, Rome 1965, 92.

⁵⁸ Cf. P. KNITTER, *Introducing theologies...*, *op. cit.*, p. 76-77.

The fact remains that having recognized the real value and goodness of other religions, the Council, in order to remain faithful to the Church's traditional doctrine, repeated once again that what God did to humanity, God has done in Jesus Christ and continues to do so in the Church. Consequently the religions can find their fullness only in Christ, but for Catholics, this also means the Church. The Second Vatican Council stated: „For it is through Christ's Catholic Church alone, which is the universal help towards salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained”⁵⁹. This would indicate that all the goodness, truth and presence of God in the other religions serves to orient them to Christ and to the Church⁶⁰.

The question, which immediately arises, is: What is therefore the real aim of dialogue with the world religions? *Ad gentes divinitus* answers that for Christians the aim of dialogue is to „learn of the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations. They must at the same time endeavour to illumine these riches with the light of the Gospel, set them free, and bring them once more under the dominion of God the Saviour”⁶¹. That is why some theologians remained critical of the Second Vatican Council. They argued that the Council „spoke of „seeds of the Word” or of a „ray of that Truth which enlightens everyone” and which is found in the religions, but the Council did not specify the meaning of these expressions or state that the other religions can be means of salvation for their followers. In other words, the theological significance of the religions was left unanswered”⁶².

The Council did not engage in this issue because, in reality, it was not prepared to go beyond the concept of „fulfilment” which treated the other religions as *preperatio evangelica*. The suggestion in the conciliar document is that „the great religious traditions can be bearers of saving values that prepare for the recognition of the fullness of truth found in

⁵⁹ VATICAN COUNCIL II, Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, Rome 1964, 3. Also: LG 14.

⁶⁰ Cf. LG 16.

⁶¹ DM 11.

⁶² J. DUPUIS, *From religious confrontation to encounter*, „Theology Digest 49 (2002), p. 104.

Christianity”⁶³. In this way the Council wanted to be consistent with the core of the Gospel giving special place to Jesus Christ in whom God expresses God’s love for all people⁶⁴. After the Council, the Catholic community continued exploring the frontiers of the conciliar approach to the world’s religious traditions.

6. The Church’s post-conciliar teaching on religions

This exploration of the conciliar approach can be seen in the public statements of Catholic officials. The first part of the pontificate of Pope Paul VI was rather cautious in establishing serious foundations for interreligious dialogue on doctrinal grounds. The pontiff in his encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* (1964) wrote: „It is obvious that we cannot agree with various aspects of these religions and that we cannot overlook differences or be unconcerned with them, as if all religions had, each in its own way, the same value. ... Indeed, honesty compels us to declare openly what we believe, namely that there is one true religion, the Christian religion, and that we hope that all who seek God and adore him, will come to acknowledge this”⁶⁵. At the same time, the pope acknowledged „with respect the spiritual and moral values of various non-Christian religions, for we desire to join with them in promoting and defending common ideals. ... On these great ideals that we share with them we can have dialogue and we shall not fail to offer opportunities for it whenever, in genuine mutual respect, our offer would be received with good will”⁶⁶.

Unfortunately, in the later part of his pontificate in another document, his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975), Paul VI presented the world religions in rather negative terms: „Even in the face

⁶³ C. GEFFRÉ, *From the theology of religious pluralism...*, *op. cit.*, p. 47-48.

⁶⁴ For a further discussion of the teaching and the ambiguities of the Second Vatican Council concerning the other religious traditions and their saving values, see F. SULLIVAN, *Salvation outside the Church? Tracing the history of the Catholic response*, New York 1992, 162-168.

⁶⁵ PAUL VI, Encyclical letter *Ecclesiam suam*, Rome 1964 (ES), 107.

⁶⁶ ES 107.

of the highest forms of natural religions, the Church thinks that...the religion of Jesus which she proclaims through evangelization truly puts human beings in contact with the plan of God, with its living presence and his action.... In other words, through our religion an authentic and living relationship with God is truly established, such as other religions cannot bring about even though they have, as it were, their arms stretched out towards heaven⁶⁷. Indeed, this papal statement confirms that Paul VI upheld the „fulfilment theory” in its classical form.

At the same time, a continued call for interreligious dialogue was coming from another direction, the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions (established in 1964) which later (1989) became the Vatican Commission for Interreligious Dialogue. The official Catholic teaching on other religious traditions gradually began to emphasize that „God’s Word is active through the Spirit *and* (sic) in the hearts of people *as well* (sic) as in their religions *and* (sic) their cultures of which the religions are the ferment⁶⁸”.

This emphasis on God’s Spirit acting equally in the world and in the religions became the main theme of Pope John Paul II’s theology of religions. His teaching began to constitute a further call for openness to know and to talk with the other faiths. In his attempt, John Paul II went beyond the existent concept that there was „only one true religion, the Christian religion” which was still present in official statements of his predecessor Pope Paul VI.

Before engaging in investigating the pope’s view on religions, one needs to admit that, in general, John Paul II made an enormous contribution to the theology of religions and interreligious dialogue not only through his extensive and ground-breaking writings on the subject, but also, and perhaps more significantly, through his numerous symbolic actions. Firstly, on a daily basis, he encountered people of other religions. His gathering of different religions, particularly, to pray together for peace in Assisi in 1986 „gave concrete witness to the importance of

⁶⁷ EN 53.

⁶⁸ E. D. PIRYNS, *Current Roman Catholic views...*, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

inter-religious dialogue among all peoples of faith”⁶⁹. Secondly, were also numerous visits to places of worship of other religions. One of them was the pope’s pilgrimage to Jerusalem where he visited the Yad Vashem and the Wailing Wall during the Jubilee year (2000), and his visit to the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus in 2001⁷⁰. The pope’s concept of openness to talk with other faiths was also apparent when he visited Palestine and Israel. He went there to foster further relationship between Muslims and Jews as well as to ask their forgiveness for the sins committed by Catholics in the past.

Nevertheless, it was the pope’s official teaching on religions that became the most important contribution for a Christian theology of religions. There are three themes in the pope’s teaching which significantly contributed to the theology of religions: a) the presence of the Holy Spirit in other religions; b) the dialogical character of the Church; and c) the Church’s service for the kingdom of God⁷¹. All these themes represent steps forward in interreligious dialogue and are a continuation of what the Second Vatican Council taught on religions⁷².

The first theme is John Paul II’s focus on the presence of the Holy Spirit in the world which became his source of inspiration. The pope writes about the faith of other believers as being the effect of the Spirit of „Truth” operating outside the visible confines of the Church. The Spirit is operative in the lives of other believers not in spite of their religious adherence, but rather as its essence and foundation. This presence of the Spirit allows the pope to see spiritual treasures in the world religions and a fundamental unity among those traditions beneath the surface of existing differences. This is the result of the Spirit’s activity before Jesus Christ and after him within the different religious families. The

⁶⁹ D. LANE, *Vatican II...*, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

⁷⁰ C. GEFFRÉ, *From the theology of religious pluralism...*, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁷¹ P. KNITTER, *Introducing theologies...*, *op. cit.*, p. 81-84.

⁷² Once again, more careful and reserved evaluation of the post-conciliar magisterium’s recognition of the other religions as possible „ways” of salvation and its openness to interreligious dialogue is given by Cardinal A. DULLES, *World religions and the new Millennium: A Catholic perspective*, in D. Kendall, G. O’Collins (eds), *In many and diverse ways: In honor of Jacques Dupuis*, New York 2003, p. 8-11.

pope states that the Spirit „blows where it will” (John 3:8)⁷³. In *Redemptoris missio* (1990), the pope speaks about the Holy Spirit being present in the very structures of the human condition. He writes that the Spirit is to be found „not only in individuals but also in society and history, peoples, cultures, and religions”⁷⁴.

The second theme in the pope’s teaching relates to the dialogical character of the Church. To be a Christian means to be in dialogue with believers of other faiths. This sounds like a repetition of what the Council said in *Nostra aetate*, but it is not. That conciliar document was encouraging Christians to dialogue but only after the essential elements were in place. In *Redemptoris missio*, dialogue becomes the main obligation of Christians. Thus, both „dialogue” and „proclamation” become two inseparable ways of carrying out the mission of the Church⁷⁵. According to another document „Dialogue and proclamation” this mission is expressed in two activities: firstly, Christians are to let people hear the Gospel and, secondly, in this way they will „transform humanity, making it new”⁷⁶. Therefore, Christians are obliged not only to proclaim the Gospel but also to dialogue⁷⁷.

The third theme, which appears in the pope’s post-conciliar Church teachings on religions is that the Church is in the service of God’s Kingdom. The Second Vatican Council expressed this theme in its pronouncements, but more carefully and more indirectly. Perhaps the reason for this cautious approach lies in the traditional conciliar pronouncement that there is salvation outside the Church, but still the Church is „necessary” for salvation. The post-conciliar teaching went much further in this regard by saying: „The Church is effectively and concretely at the

⁷³ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, Rome 1979, 11. Also see the pope’s encyclical *Dominum et vivificantem*, Rome 1986.

⁷⁴ JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, Rome 1990 (RM), 28.

⁷⁵ Cf. RM 55.

⁷⁶ PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE, Reflection and orientations on interreligious dialogue and the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ *Dialogue and proclamation*, Rome 1991 (DP), 8.

⁷⁷ Cf. DP 77.

service of the Kingdom⁷⁸. The mission of the Church is therefore to foster the Reign of God⁷⁹.

One must, however, emphasize here that although the post-conciliar official Catholic teaching affirms the positive values of other religious traditions, it also carefully balances this assessment. The Church says that what God is doing in and through other religions, is to be seen in relation to what God did and is doing in Jesus. Consequently, the Church is speaking about Jesus as the universal Saviour of humanity⁸⁰. Also dialogue with other religions must have limits. This means that although dialogue and proclamation are two components of the Church's mission, in the end, proclamation must have priority over dialogue⁸¹. This further means that dialogue and proclamation are not at the same level. In reality, dialogue always remains „oriented toward proclamation”, which also means „conversion”⁸². In short, dialogue has the purpose to form new Christian communities by gaining converts from other religions. Finally, the Reign of God and the Church can be distinguished but not separated⁸³. The pontiff says: „The Kingdom cannot be detached either from Christ or from the Church”⁸⁴. The Kingdom is inseparable from the Church because „both are inseparable from the person and work of Jesus himself”⁸⁵. Consequently, although the Church is always the servant of the Kingdom of God its role as a servant is unique and necessary. And although the Reign of God is present beyond the borders of the Church, this „external reality” „needs to find [its] completion through being related to the Kingdom of Christ already present in the Church”⁸⁶.

Concerning the last two pontificates of Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis, they have not offered any ground-breaking teaching on the sub-

⁷⁸ RM 20.

⁷⁹ Cf. DP 35.

⁸⁰ Cf. RM 5, 6. See also DP 22, 28.

⁸¹ Cf. RM 44, 34.

⁸² RM 47-49.

⁸³ Cf. P. KNITTER, *Introducing theologies ...*, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁸⁴ RM 18.

⁸⁵ DP 34.

⁸⁶ DP 35.

ject but rather numerous symbolic actions. Indeed, on various occasions, Pope Benedict XVI had confirmed the need for continuing good relations with the religions. But there were instances when the pope trying to engage in dialogue was misinterpreted and misunderstood. One such case was the meeting with the representatives of science at the University of Regensburg („anti-Qur’anic citations”). Generally, however, the pope’s stand on the other religions and interreligious dialogue had been along the lines of the Second Vatican Council and certainly in the spirit of the Declaration *Dominus Iesus* which addresses the danger of religious relativism in Catholic theology⁸⁷.

With respect to Pope Francis, his pontificate is still „new” in a sense, but on various occasions the pope has emphasized great importance of genuine, friendly contacts among religions which should serve unity and peace in the world divided by conflict and war. Pope Francis especially stressed significance of good relations with Islam, firstly to eradicate religious fundamentalism that fuels the ideology of ISIS, Boko Haram, and other terrorist organizations; and secondly to protect Christians facing persecutions from radical Muslims. His numerous interfaith trips and meetings with religious leaders in Vatican and abroad are the best examples of the Church’s openness to religions and to practical dialogue.

7. The *inclusivist* approach to religions in recent theology

On the basis of openness towards other religions made by Karl Rahner, the Second Vatican Council and Pope John Paul II, a number of Catholic theologians belonging to the inclusivist school decided to go beyond the Christian traditional view of religions and dialogue with them. Their new concepts are expressed in an entirely different language to that of „fulfilment”, namely a language of dialogue, witness and relationship⁸⁸.

⁸⁷ Cf. The Declaration was issued while he was still the Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. For the content see: CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, Rome 2000.

⁸⁸ Cf. P. KNITTER, *Introducing theologies...*, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

One of the theologians who began to shape this inclusivist position is Hans Küng and his concept of the „historical” Jesus. Küng’s position on the religions is expressed mainly in his work entitled *On being a Christian* (1977). In his early theological career, Küng already advocated the need for a more positive Christian attitude towards other religions. He believes that those religions give testimony to the conviction that God exists and that they have the capacity to respond to questions which God’s existence generates. Attempting to answer the Christological question in the theology of religions, Küng begins neither from presupposition of the reality of God nor from the incarnation of the Word. The basis for his Christology becomes the history of Jesus which ultimately leads to the recognition of Jesus’ divinity⁸⁹.

The main claim of Küng’s concept is that it is possible to know Jesus’ way of life and his self-awareness historically. He wrote: „We know incomparably more that is historically certain about Jesus of Nazareth than we do about the great founders of the Asian religions”⁹⁰. Although Küng does not deny the significant role of the other religious founders in leading their followers to God, he argues that because of the historical knowledge of Jesus, Jesus Christ is superior to any other founder. And because of the peculiarity and the singularity of Christianity, Jesus Christ is definitive and decisive for our relationship with God and for our relationship with others including the other believers⁹¹.

Küng’s further evaluation of other religions is based on their agreement (harmony) or disagreement with Christianity. Therefore, he takes Jesus Christ *a priori* as the final norm for any religion. If other religions are ways of salvation, they are „extraordinary” ways of salvation. They are ways „only in a relative sense, not simply as a whole and in every sense”⁹². Christianity is therefore a kind of „cultural catalyst” for other religions⁹³. Moreover, even if other religious traditions do have some

⁸⁹ Cf. H. KÜNG, *On being a Christian*, London 1977, p. 436, 399, 286-287.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 317.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁹³ Cf. *ibid.*, p.121.

answers to their human search for the ultimate reality, these answers do not have the same value as those of Christianity.

On the basis of Küng's Christology one may draw the following conclusion: that, to a certain extent, Küng brings something new to inclusivist theology through his concept of a historical Jesus. To a certain degree, his concept contributes to the *Logos* Christology which has been the main focus of *inclusivism* for a long time. Later the *Logos* Christology, as it will be seen, becomes enriched by another element; the activity of God's Spirit (D'Costa's and Dupuis's proposals). In addition, Küng's view of the religions as „extraordinary” ways of salvation should be regarded as innovative in the theology of religions. In reality, however, Küng's position on other religions does not differ much from that of Karl Rahner's or from the post-conciliar traditional Church's stand on Jesus' role. What is positive and valuable in other religious traditions can be brought to full realization only in Christianity. Consequently, although other religions play a certain role in the economy of salvation for their adherents, their role is secondary⁹⁴.

A step forward in the inclusivist approach is made by the Indian theologian Gavin D'Costa who emphasizes a Trinitarian character for a Christian theology of religions. D'Costa's theology emphasizes that Christians believe in God who is Trinitarian. In Trinitarianism God relates to the world in various ways expressed by different symbols: the Parent expresses the Divine as the source of all creation; the Word communicates God's self in Jesus of Nazareth; and the Spirit sustains all of creation with God's life-giving energy. D'Costa focuses mainly on the third way of relating within God, the Spirit. It is through the Spirit that Christians should view and dialogue with other religious traditions; the reality of God cannot be expressed exclusively through the activity of Creator or the saving Word, but also through the Spirit. It is the activity of the Spirit which makes God present in other religions⁹⁵.

By introducing the presence of the Spirit, D'Costa affirms the universality of God in all cultures and religions. Because of the presence of the

⁹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 113.

⁹⁵ Cf. G. D'Costa, *The Meeting of religions...*, *op. cit.*, p. 99-138.

Spirit in other religious traditions, Christians have to be ready for challenges when meeting them. They also have to listen to and learn from others. As a result, the Church has to be dialogical in order to remain the real Church of Christ⁹⁶. In addition, in a Spirit-based approach to other religions, the Church has to abandon the idea of „fulfilment”, because „fulfilment” works in only one direction. In a real dialogue with others, the Church opens itself „to genuine change, challenge, and questioning”⁹⁷. In this way, D’Costa moves beyond the „theory of fulfilment” to „mutual fulfilment” which is something different. „Mutual fulfilment” is a result of a two-way dialogue.

Although D’Costa gives a privileged place to God’s Spirit in his theology of religions, this Spirit is always oriented to the Word of Christ. Consequently, whatever the Spirit does in other religious traditions has to be evaluated in the context of the Word spoken in Jesus. Hence, although the Spirit acts and rules beyond the Word spoken in Jesus, it cannot go beyond the content of God’s Word in Jesus⁹⁸. Therefore, D’Costa concludes: „There is no independent revelation through the Paraclete, but only an application of the revelation of Jesus”⁹⁹.

Despite D’Costa’s concept being both innovative and challenging, it raises a serious question as to how the universal activity of the Spirit is related to the particular Word of God in Jesus. Unfortunately in his theology, D’Costa was not able to give a clear and satisfying answer to this question. A more concrete answer as to how the Spirit relates to the Word of God is proposed by Jacques Dupuis who also uses the Trinitarian approach to other religions¹⁰⁰. Using Trinitarianism, Dupuis explores areas of thought which may lead beyond the traditional limits of inclusive theology. His theology is the subject of investigation in another work of mine entitled *The „Inclusive Pluralism” of Jacques Dupuis* (2010) to which I refer the reader.

⁹⁶ G. D’COSTA, *Christ, the Trinity, and religious plurality*, in G. D’Costa (ed), *Christian Uniqueness reconsidered: The Myth of a pluralistic theology of religions*, New York 1990, p. 23.

⁹⁷ G. D’COSTA, *The Meeting of religions...*, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

⁹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 89.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹⁰⁰ J. DUPUIS, *Toward a Christian theology...*, *op. cit.*, p. 130-157, 180-201.

While Dupuis attempts in his proposals to move a Christian belief in the centrality of Jesus beyond the limits of the inclusivist approach, other theologians try to make this approach more inviting to others. One of these theologians is Monika Hellwig whose theology is more traditional than Dupuis's and who focuses mainly on the centrality of Jesus. She argues that Christianity will collapse „if the definitive claim for Jesus Christ is denied”¹⁰¹. Jesus stands in the center of God's plan and it is an offence to place him on the same level with other religious figures. In Jesus, „Christians know that God *has* (sic) provided the final word and a firm place”¹⁰². Thus, Hellwig makes a practical suggestion as to how Christians, in dialogue with other believers, can make their claim about Jesus in a loving and generous way. She emphasizes that in Jesus God has done and offered something really unique which has the potential to transform the lives of individuals and societies. In dialogue with other religions, it is not so important to argue on the basis of what the Bible says about them but on the basis of what can be observed in what Jesus has done for people, how he influenced and continues to transform people's lives through his message and person¹⁰³. However, she also adds that the claim to the universality and uniqueness of Jesus Christ does not deny „the salvific actual or potential role of other saviour figures”¹⁰⁴.

What Hellwig proposes might be challenging both to other partners to dialogue and to Christians themselves, but the strength of her argument depends only on how authentically Christians live out the values of Gospel. One must realize, however, that the authenticity of Christians' lives is not always self-evident to other believers. Consequently, on this basis alone, Christian witness may fail to lead other believers to an authentic religious engagement with Christianity.

¹⁰¹ M. K. HELLWIG, *Christology in the wider ecumenism*, in G. D'Costa (ed), *Christian Uniqueness reconsidered: The Myth of pluralistic theology of religions*, op. cit., p. 109.

¹⁰² P. KNITTER, *Introducing theologies...*, op. cit., p. 94.

¹⁰³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁰⁴ M. K. HELLWIG, *Christology...*, op. cit., p. 111-116.

Evaluation

All these attempts to explore further the traditional Catholic stand on other religions indicate that the inclusivist (Christocentric) school itself is characterized by a real diversity of views. They also indicate that theology has slowly and fearfully moved towards greater openness towards the other religions. Indeed this attitude of openness towards religions deserves praise. They also demonstrate that *inclusivism* constitutes a departure from rigid *eclesiocentrism*. This departure is visible in the affirmation that God's Spirit can touch people's lives „outside the Church” (Catholicism) and „outside the preached Word” (Protestantism).

In Roman Catholicism, mainly through the theology of Karl Rahner, *inclusivism* brings an entirely new dimension to the human condition in the world. Although human nature is a „fallen nature” and the world is challenged by real evil, this human nature is a „graced” nature because of God's constant self-communication to humanity. *Inclusivism* reminds one that this communication between God and humans does not occur only in the heart of individual people, but also through a religious community, its words, rituals and symbols. Consequently, if one believes that God touches people through the words and sacraments of the Christian community, one should at least accept a „possibility” that God may also do so through the beliefs and rituals of other religions. Consequently, if God is present in other religious traditions, interreligious dialogue is not only necessary and logical but has to be an essential part of the Church's mission.

Nevertheless, while *inclusivism* is open to dialogue, it also clearly reminds theologians and ordinary Christians about their non-negotiable elements. All religions have them and they determine the identity and the authenticity of the religion. Thus engaging in interreligious dialogue requires knowing one's own religious identity. For Christians those non-negotiables relate mostly to Jesus Christ. In Jesus as in no one else, God has done something special. Thus, despite some similarities between other religious figures and Jesus, he will always remain entirely different and unique. This difference and uniqueness must therefore be preserved. This does not mean that inclusivists are not open to find in other religions

„truths” about God which they have not received through Jesus. However, they cannot imagine agreeing to anything that contradicts what they have experienced in Jesus. The presence of the Spirit of God in other religions could reveal even more about those traditions, but the Spirit cannot be separated from, or opposed to, Jesus Christ.

This article has indicated that inclusivist theologians and Church officials sincerely and genuinely desire dialogue with other believers and their communities. They sincerely believe that dialogue can be enriching, challenging, and transforming, and some, like D’Costa and Dupuis believe that such a dialogue could lead not to one-sided „fulfilment” in Christianity but to „mutual fulfilment”. A question, however, remains as to how far they can engage in interreligious dialogue if it is only in Jesus that God has spoken God’s final Word. This seems to be one of the barriers the inclusivists will never cross. Hence although they try to construct proposals which emphasize the role and presence of God’s Spirit in the world, they will always hold firmly to the universality and uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the only Redeemer and Saviour of all people.

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