

## **FABC Paper No. 78, Part I**

### **Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures**

## **I. Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger**

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Holy See's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, gave this address to the presidents of the member bishops' conferences of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences and the chairmen of their doctrinal commissions in a meeting held March 3-5, 1993, in Hong Kong.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In his last words, the risen Lord sends his apostles to the ends of the earth: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations; baptize them ... and teach them everything I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19f; cf. Acts 1:8).

Christianity entered the world conscious of a universal mission. From the first, the followers of Jesus Christ recognized their duty to pass on their faith to all men. They saw in the faith a good which did not belong to them alone, but one to which all had a claim. It would have been disloyal not to carry what had been given to them to the farthest corners of the earth.

The point of departure of Christian universalism was not the drive to power, but the certainty of having received the saving knowledge and redeeming love which all men had a claim to and were yearning for in the inmost recesses of their beings. Mission was not perceived as expansion for the wielding of power, but as the obligatory transmission of what was intended for everyone and which everyone needed.

Doubts have arisen today about the universality of Christian faith.

Many no longer see the history of worldwide mission as the history of the diffusion of liberating truth and love, but as a history of alienation and violation. The new consciousness expressed here demands that Christians consider radically who they are and who they are not, what they believe and what they do not believe, what they have to give and what is not theirs to give.

Within the frame of this address, I can only attempt a small step in such a large undertaking. My intention is to consider the right and capacity of Christian faith to communicate itself to other cultures, to assimilate them and to impart itself to them. Basically, this would include all questions concerning the foundation of Christian existence: Why believe anyway? Is there truth for man, truth which is accessible and belongs to everyone, or are we destined, through various symbols, ever just to catch a glimpse of a mystery which is never really unveiled to us? Is speaking about the truth of faith presumption or duty? Even these questions cannot be confronted head-on and discussed in their entire magnitude. We have only to keep them in the back of our minds as the setting for our discussion of faith and culture.

### **1. CULTURE, INCULTURATION, THE MEETING OF CULTURES**

Our first questions must be: What is culture? How does it stand in relation to religion; and in what way can it be in contact with religious forms which were originally foreign to it? First, we might note that it was modern Europe which first originated a concept of culture in which culture appears as its own domain distinct from, or even in opposition to, religion. In all known historical cultures, religion is the essential element of culture; indeed it is its determining core. It is religion which determines the structure

of values and thereby forms its inner logic.

But if this is the case, inculturation of the Christian faith in other cultures appears all the more difficult. For it is difficult to see how a culture, living and breathing the religion with which it is interwoven, can be transplanted into another religion without both of them going to ruin. If you remove from a culture its own religion which begets it, then you rob it of its heart. Should you implant in it a new heart, the Christian heart, it seems inescapable that the organism which is not ordered to it will reject the foreign body. A positive outcome of the operation is hard to envision.

The operation can only have sense if Christian faith and the other religion, together with the culture which lives from it, do not stand in utter difference to each other. It only makes sense if they are interiorly open to one another, or to put it differently, if they naturally tend to draw near and unite. Inculturation, therefore, presupposes the potential universality of each culture. It presumes that in all cultures the same human nature is at work. It presumes that seeking union is a common truth of the human condition abiding in cultures.

To put it in yet a different way: The program of inculturation only then makes sense if no injustice is done to a culture when, due to the universal human disposition toward the truth, it is opened up and further developed by a new cultural power. It would follow too that whatever in culture excludes such opening and exchange marks what is deficient in the culture, for exclusion of the other goes against man's nature. The sign of a high culture is its openness, its capacity to give and receive, its power to develop, to allow itself to be purified and become more conformed to truth and to man.

Let us attempt now a kind of definition of culture. We might say culture is the historically developed common form of expression of the insights and values which characterize the life of a community. Let us try to consider now more closely the individual elements of this definition in order to understand better the possible intercommunication of cultures which the term inculturation must mean.

A. First of all, culture has to do with knowledge and values. It is an attempt to understand the world and man's existence in the world, but it is not an attempt of a purely theoretical kind. Rather it is ordered to the fundamental interests of human existence.

Understanding should show us how to be human, how man is to take his proper place in this world and respond to it in order to realize himself in his search for success and happiness. Moreover, in the great cultures this question again is not posed individualistically, as if each individual could think up a model for coming to terms with the world and life. Man can succeed only with others; the question of right knowledge is thus also a question about the right formation of the community. The community, for its part, is the prerequisite for individual fulfilment.

In culture we are dealing with an understanding, which is knowledge, which gives rise to praxis, that is to say, we are dealing with a knowledge which encompasses the indispensable dimension of values or morals. We must add something else which was self-evident to the ancient world. The question of man and the world always contains the prior and actually foundational question of God. One can neither understand the world, nor live uprightly, if the question of the divine goes unanswered. Indeed, it gets to the root of the great cultures to say that they interpret the world so as to order it to the divine.

B. Culture in the classical sense thus includes going beyond the visible and apparent to actual causes, and thus culture at its core means an opening to the divine. Related to this, as we have already seen, is the notion that the individual transcends himself in culture and finds himself carried along in a larger social subject whose insights he can borrow, continue and develop further.

Culture is always bound to a social subject which, on the one hand, takes up the experiences of the individual and, on the other, helps shape them. The common subject conserves and develops insights which exceed the capacity of the individual, insights which can be termed prerational and superrational.

In so doing, cultures appeal to the wisdom of the "ancients," who stood nearer to the gods; they appeal to primordial traditions which have the character of revelation; that is to say, they do not stem from men's probing and deliberating but from an original contact with the ground of all things. In other words, cultures appeal to a communication from the divine.<sup>[1]</sup>

The crisis of a culture ensues then when the culture is no longer able to bring this superrational heritage into a convincing connection to new, critical knowledge. In such a case, inherited truth becomes questionable; what was once truth becomes mere habit and loses its vitality.

C. Something else comes to the fore here. Society marches onward, and therefore culture also has to do with history. On its journey through time, culture develops through its encounter with new reality and the arrival of new insights. Not sealed off, culture stands in the dynamic stream of time, which contains a confluence of currents moving toward unity.

A culture's historicity means its ability to progress, and this depends on its ability to be open and to allow transformation through encounter. To be sure, one can distinguish between cosmic/static and historical cultures. The ancient cultures are said to depict the mystery of the cosmos as ever the same, while the Judeo-Christian cultural world, in particular, understands the way with God as history. History is thus fundamental to it.

Such a distinction between static and dynamic cultures is to a certain extent quite correct, but it does not tell the whole tale, because even the cosmically directed cultures point to death and rebirth, to being human as the way. As Christians we would say they contain within them an adventistic dynamic, but this is a topic to which we will need to return.<sup>[2]</sup>

Our small efforts here to clarify basic categories of the concept of culture help us to understand better how cultures can meet and intermingle. We can now say that a culture's attachment to a cultural individuality, to a particular cultural expression, is the basis for the multiplicity of cultures and their respective characteristics. Conversely, we can ascertain that culture's historicity, its movement in and through time, embraces its openness. An individual culture does not just live its own experience of God, world and man. Rather, by necessity it encounters on its way and must come to terms with other cultures with their typically different experiences.

Hence, to the extent to which it is open or closed, internally broad or narrow, a culture comes to deepen and refine its own insights and values. This can lead to a profound evolution of its earlier cultural configuration, and such a transformation need not be in the least a question of alienation or violation.

A successful transformation is explained by the potential universality of all cultures made concrete in a given culture's assimilation of the other and its own internal transformation. Such a procedure can even lead to the resolution of the latent alienation of man from truth and himself which a culture may harbor. It can mean the healing passover of a culture. Only appearing to die, the culture actually rises, coming fully into its own for the first time.

For this reason, we should no longer speak of inculturation but of the meeting of cultures or interculturality, to coin a new phrase. For inculturation presumes that a faith stripped of culture is transplanted into a religiously indifferent culture whereby two subjects, formally unknown to each other, meet and fuse. But such a notion is first of all artificial and unrealistic, for with the exception of modern technological civilization, there is no such thing as faith devoid of culture or culture devoid of faith. It is above all difficult to envision how two organisms, foreign to each other, should all of a sudden become a viable whole in a transplantation which stunts both of them. Only if all cultures are potentially universal and open to each other can interculturality lead to flourishing new forms.

Up until now, we have been concerned primarily with what could be called phenomenological considerations, that is to say, we have noted how cultures work and develop. In so doing, we have

argued to the potential universality of all cultures as the fundamental idea of a history which aims at unification. But then we ask ourselves: Why is this so? Why are all cultures only particular and therefore different from one another? Why are they, however, at the same time open to all other cultures and capable of reciprocal refinement and combination?

I do not wish to address the positivistic solutions to these questions -- and these of course exist. It seems to me that precisely here reference to metaphysics cannot be avoided. The meeting of cultures is possible because man, despite all the differences of his history and social constructs, remains one and the same being. This one being, man, however, is himself touched in the depth of his existence by truth. The fundamental openness of each person to the other can only be explained by the hidden fact that our souls have been touched by truth; and this explains the essential agreement which exists even between cultures most removed from each other.

On the other hand, diversity leading to isolation can be accounted for by the finiteness of the human spirit. No one grasps the whole; the myriad insights and forms build a kind of mosaic displaying their complementarity and interrelatedness. In order to be whole, everybody needs each other. Man approaches the unity and wholeness of his being only in the reciprocity of all great cultural achievements.

To be sure, we must acknowledge that this optimistic diagnosis is not the whole story. The potential universality of cultures again and again comes up against almost insurmountable obstacles when we try to translate it into practical universality, for it is not only a question of the dynamic force of what we share in common. We must also consider the element of separation, the barriers and contradictions, the impossibility of crossing over because the dividing waters are too deep.

We spoke before of the unity of the human being, of his being touched by God in a hidden way through truth. We realize too, however, that there is also a negative factor in human existence, an alienation, which hinders knowledge and cuts men off at least partially from the truth and thereby from one another. In this undeniable factor of alienation lies the poverty of our efforts to promote the meeting of cultures.

While we might deduce from this fact that it is wrong to accuse all earthly religions of idolatry, it would be also incorrect to regard all religions only positively. We should not all of a sudden forget the critique of religion which not only Feuerbach and Marx burned into our souls, but also such great theologians as Karl Barth and Bonhoeffer.

## **2. FAITH AND CULTURE**

Now we come to the second part of our considerations. We have discussed thus far the essence of culture and the conditions of cultural encounter and intermingling giving rise to new cultural forms. From the realm of principles, we must now venture into that of facts. But before we do so, we need to summarize once again the essential results of our reflections and ask ourselves what can unite cultures so that they do not become merely superficially attached to each other but that their meeting becomes the occasion for mutual enrichment and refinement.

The medium that brings them together can only be the shared truth about man, which necessarily brings into play the truth about God and reality as a whole. The more human a culture is, the greater it is, the more it will speak to truth which was formerly closed to it and the more it will be able to assimilate truth and itself be assimilated by truth.

At this juncture the Christian faith's special self-understanding becomes manifest. Christian faith, if it is alert and honest, knows quite well that there is a good deal of the human at work in its particular cultural expressions, much of which is in need of purification and opening up. But Christian faith is also certain that in its core it is the self-disclosure of truth itself and therefore is redemption. For man's real poverty is the darkness to truth. This darkness falsifies our actions and pits us against one another, precisely

because we are tainted, alienated from ourselves, cut off from the ground of our being, which is God.

The communication of truth brings deliverance from alienation and division. It illumines the universal standard which does no violence to any culture but leads each to its own center, since each culture is finally the expectation of truth. This does not mean uniformity. Just the opposite. Only when this occurs can opposition become complementarity because each culture, based on a common standard, can now bear its particular fruit.

This is the great mandate with which Christian faith came into the world; it underlies the inner obligation to send all peoples to the school of Jesus because he is truth in person and thus the way of mankind. For the time being, we do not wish to join the dispute over the legitimacy of this mandate, but we shall need to return to this issue. For now let us put the following question: What conclusions should we draw from the aforesaid for the concrete relationship of Christian faith to the world's cultures?

First, we must state that faith itself is culture. There is no such thing as naked faith or mere religion. Simply stated, insofar as faith tells man who he is and how he should begin being human, faith creates culture; faith is itself culture. Faith's word is not an abstraction; it is one which has matured through a long history and through intercultural mingling in which it formed an entire structure of life, the interaction of man with himself, his neighbor, the world and God. This means too that faith is its own subject, a living and cultural community which we call the people of God.

The historical character of faith as subject comes perhaps most clearly to expression in this concept. Does then faith stand as one culture among others such that one would have to choose whether to belong to this people as a cultural community or to another? No. At this point, what is special and proper to a culture becomes evident. The cultural subject people of God differs from the classical cultures which are defined by tribe, people or the boundaries of a common region insofar as the people of God exists in different cultures which for their part, even as far as the Christian is concerned, do not cease to be the first and unmediated culture. Even as a Christian, one remains a Frenchman, a German, an American, an Indian, etc.

In the pre-Christian world, also in the great cultures of India, China and Japan, the identity and indivisibility of the cultural subject perdures. Double membership is in general impossible, with the exception, of course, of Buddhism, which is able to unite with other cultures as a kind of inner principle. But the doubling of cultures first arises in any consistent way with Christianity, such that man now lives in two cultural worlds, his historical culture and in the new one of faith, both of which permeate him.

This interaction will never be an entirely accomplished synthesis; it includes the necessity of continuing efforts toward reconciliation and refinement. Again and again man must learn the transcendence toward wholeness and universality which is proper not to a specific people, but precisely to the people of God, which embraces all men. Again and again, on the other hand, what is held in common must be received into the realm of the particular and be lived or even suffered in actual history.

Something very important follows from this. One might think that the culture is the affair of the individual historical country (Germany, France, America, etc.), while faith for its part is in search of cultural expression. The individual cultures would allocate, as it were, a cultural body to faith. Accordingly, faith would always have to live from borrowed cultures, which remain in the end somehow external and capable of being cast off. Above all, one borrowed cultural form would not speak to someone who lives in another culture. Universality would thereby finally become fictitious.

Such thinking is at root Manichaeic. Culture is debased, becoming a mere exchangeable shell. Faith is reduced to disincarnated spirit ultimately void of reality. To be sure, such a view is typical of the post-Enlightenment mentality. Culture is reduced to mere form; religion, to inexpressible mere feeling or pure thought. The fruitful tension is lost which one would expect to characterize per se the coexistence of two subjects.

If culture is more than a mere form or aesthetic principle, if it is rather the ordering of values in a historical living form and cannot prescind from the question of God, then we cannot circumvent the fact that the church is its own cultural subject for the faithful. This cultural subject church, people of God, does not coincide with any of the individual historical subjects even in times of apparently full Christianization, as one thought one had attained in Europe. Rather the church significantly maintains her own overarching form.

If this is so, when the faith and its culture meet another culture hitherto foreign to it, it cannot be a question of dissolving the duality of the cultures to the advantage of the one or the other. Gaining a Christianity deprived of its concrete human complexion at the cost of losing one's own cultural heritage would be as mistaken as surrendering faith's own cultural physiognomy. Indeed the tension is fruitful; it renews faith and heals culture. It would therefore be nonsensical to offer a sort of precultural or decultured Christianity which would rob itself of its own historical force and degrade itself to an empty collection of ideas.

We may not forget that Christianity already in the New Testament bears the fruit of an entire cultural history, a history of acceptance and rejection, of encounter and change. Israel's history of faith, which has been taken up into Christianity, found its own form through confrontation with the Egyptian, Hittite, Sumerian, Babylonian, Persian and Greek cultures.

All of these cultures were at the same time religions, comprehensive historical forms of living. Israel painfully adopted and transformed them in the course of her struggle with God, in struggle with the great prophets, in order to make ready an ever purer vessel for the newness of the revelation of the one God. These other cultures came thereby to their own lasting fulfillment. They would all have sunk into the distant past had they not been refined and elevated in the faith of the Bible, thereby attaining permanence.

To be sure, Israel's history of faith begins with the call to Abraham: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house" (Gn 12: 1); it begins with a cultural break. Such a break with its own antecedent history, such a going forth, will always stand at the beginning of a new hour of the history of faith. But this new beginning reveals itself to be a healing power which creates a new center and which deigns to draw to itself everything truly human, everything truly godly. "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (Jn. 12:31) - these words of the risen Lord also apply here. The cross is first of all break, expulsion, elevation away from the earth, but precisely thereby it becomes a new center of magnetic pull, drawing world history upward and becoming a gathering of the divided.

Whoever joins the church must be aware that he is entering a cultural subject with its own historically developed and multitiered interculturality. One cannot become a Christian apart from a certain exodus, a break from one's previous life in all its aspects. Faith is not a private way to God; it leads into the people of God and its history.

God bound himself to a history which is now also his, and one which we cannot cast off. Christ remains man in eternity; he conserves his body in eternity. Being man and being body inevitably include however a history and culture, a quite particular history and culture, whether we like it or not. We cannot repeat the event of the incarnation to suit ourselves in the sense of taking away Christ's flesh and offering him another. Christ remains himself, indeed according to his body. But he draws us to himself.

This means, since the people of God is not a particular cultural entity but rather has been drawn from all peoples, therefore even its first cultural identity, rising from the break, has its place. But not just that. This first identity is necessary to allow the incarnation of Christ, the incarnation of the Logos, to reach its fullness. The tension of the many subjects in the one subject belongs essentially to the uncompleted drama of the incarnation of the Son. This tension is the real inner dynamism of history; it stands to be sure always under the sign of the cross; that is to say, it always has to contend with the counterstress of closed-mindedness and refusal.

### 3. CHRISTIAN FAITH AND NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS IN THE CURRENT HISTORICAL SITUATION

All of this follows if Jesus of Nazareth really is the incarnate meaning of history, the Logos, the self-manifestation of truth itself. It is then clear that this truth is the place where everyone can be reconciled and nothing loses its own worth and dignity. But at this point objections are heard today. To claim a religion's concrete statements of faith to be true is considered today not only presumption but also a sign of being unenlightened. Hans Kelsen expressed the spirit of our era when he maintained that Pilate's question "What is truth?" is the only appropriate standpoint vis-à-vis the great moral and religious problems of mankind. Truth is replaced by majority decision, he says, precisely because there can be no commonly binding accessible standard for man.<sup>[3]</sup>

Thus the multiplicity of cultures becomes a proof of their relativity. Culture is put in opposition to truth. This relativism, a basic sentiment of enlightened man reaching today far into theology, is the gravest problem of our time. It is also the fundamental reason why praxis has replaced truth and thereby shifted the axes of religions. We do not know what is true, but we do know what we must do, namely, usher in a better society, the "kingdom," as it is frequently said, taking a word from the Bible and applying it in a profane, utopian sense.

Church-centeredness, Christ-centeredness, God-centeredness, all of these seem to give way to kingdom-centeredness, the centering on the kingdom as the common task of all religions, under which point of view and standard they are supposed to meet.<sup>[4]</sup> So there is no reason any longer to approach them in their core, to bring them into relationship with each other in their moral and religious messages. On the contrary, the religions thereby become distorted in their deepest being, in that they are expected to serve as a means to a future structuring which is really foreign to them and empties them of content.

The dogma of relativism also works in another direction. Christian universalism concretely carried out in mission is no longer the dutiful passing on of a good, namely, truth and love intended for everyone. Rather mission becomes the arrogant presumption of a culture which thinks itself superior to the others and so would deprive them of what is good and proper to them.

The conclusions drawn from this relativism differ from culture to culture even if they are related in their basic thrust. In Latin America today there is a movement under way which calls itself *teologia india*, the title referring to the indigenous peoples. The movement mourns the passing of the old religions of that continent and would like to revive them in some fashion.

The religions are seen as the ways of the different peoples to God and thus basically as equally valid paths to salvation. Each people has the right to its way; Latin America must finally be liberated from the alienation which it experienced when Western Christianity was imposed upon it.

The situation is a little different in Africa, where in contrast to Latin America, the original tribal religions are still vigorous. But even here a reverse movement can be seen, due to the self-doubt afflicting Christianity today and the reduction of its religious substance to mere moral imperatives. Why should Africa give up its religious identities to the advantage of a religion whose proclamation and implantation in retrospect appear to not a few to be only another self-alienating aspect of the colonialism imposed upon them?

Whoever looks more closely can easily see that there can be no simple return to the past. For it is not only the case that the convergence of mankind toward a single community with a common life and destiny is unstoppable because such an inclination is grounded in man's essence, but also because the diffusion of technological civilization is irrevocable. It is a romantic dream to want to preserve pretechnological islands in the sea of humanity. You cannot enclose men and cultures in a kind of spiritual nature reserve.

Virtually no one, whether in Latin America, Africa or Asia, seriously wants to exclude himself from natural science and technology, which originated in the West. But since technology, like natural science, appears to be neutral, the thought suggests itself: Why not accept the achievements of the modern age while at the same time, however, keeping the indigenous religions? This seemingly so enlightened notion, however, does not work. For in reality modern civilization is not mere multiplication of knowledge and know-how. It deeply encroaches upon the basic understanding of man, the world and God. It changes standards and behavior. It alters the interpretation of the world at its base. The religious cosmos is necessarily moved by it. The arrival of these new possibilities of existence is like an earthquake which shakes the intellectual landscape at its very foundations.

In any case, it occurs more and more frequently that Christian faith is discarded as a European cultural heritage and the former religions are religiously reinstated, while at the same time technology, though nonetheless Western, is passionately adopted and exploited. This division of Western heritage into the useful, which one accepts, and the foreign, which one rejects, does not lead to the salvation of ancient cultures. It can now be seen that what is great and forward-looking, I would say the adventistic dimension of the ancient religions, meets its downfall because it seems incompatible with the new knowledge of the world and man, while magic in the broadest sense of the word, everything which promises power over the world, remains intact and becomes for the first time life-determining. The religions thus lose their dignity because what is best in them is eliminated and what was dangerous in them alone remains.

The situation of Asia vis-à-vis Christianity is different still from the situation in either Latin America or black Africa. For here we are not dealing with preliterate tribal cultures, but with high religious cultures which also have produced a great legacy of sacred texts and writings of philosophical and theological reflection.

In Africa, Christianity encountered the indigenous religions at a moment in which they themselves, in youthful vigor, were still in search of the ultimate word. One can recognize a certain analogy to the situation of the Mediterranean world in the moment of its encounter with Christ, even if the analogy contains much dissimilarity as well as similarity, as all analogies do. Christianity's early proclamation to the Greco-Roman world confronted religions which were moribund; they had lost their inner credibility and vitality. People were searching for something new. One need not hesitate to say that there was a longing for monotheism, for one God over all the gods.

Philosophy saw him from afar but could not chart a course to him; remaining philosophy, it was unable to replace religion. The Christian proclamation was here the interiorly awaited answer which could apprehend philosophical thought and fill it with religious reality.

In Africa, there was and is a similar need for the self-transcendence of the tribal religions. These too are not adequate to the needs of the historical moment; Islam and Christianity are trying to answer the question raised by the religions themselves.

The situation is different in India, China and Japan insofar as the traditional religions themselves have produced philosophical reasoning which interprets the world as a whole and, in so doing, assigns a rational place in the structure of life and culture for religion. Hence Christianity could not be experienced here as it was in the Mediterranean region or even in black Africa as a new stage of life in its own pilgrimage already pointing in the same direction. Rather Christianity appeared more as a foreign culture and religion establishing itself next to one's own and threatening to supplant it.

Conversions to Christianity have for this reason largely remained marginal in comparison to the whole of society. Nonetheless, the confrontation between the Christian and Asian religious worlds was not without effect, but rather ushered in a deep process of transformation, especially in Indian religiosity. Neo-Hinduism, as represented for example by Radhakrishnan, rests on the fusion of traditional Indian traditions with a late form of Western Christianity. One can no doubt see it as a synthesis of culture and



religion, but perhaps it would even be better categorized as a type of philosophy of religion in which modern Western relativism combines with traditional Eastern spirituality, offering a kind of rational basis for religious and cultic perspectives which, to be sure, have largely lost their original sense in this new vision.

If this is a case of a synthesis in which the Indian moment remains determinative, one could see, say in Panikkar, a union accenting more the Christian component. But here too we are dealing with a philosophy of religion rather than religion. Between, or perhaps better, beyond such attempts, the path must be found for the true encounter of cultures and religions, an encounter not characterized by loss of faith or truth, but by a deeper contact with truth which makes possible giving all that which went before its full and deep significance.

Such a synthesis of truth cannot be invented at a desk or else it will never transcend the status of philosophy or mere theory. Rather a process of lived faith is necessary which creates the capacity for encounter in truth and thus, as the psalm says, "places in a wide place" (31:9). But it naturally must be guided and ordered to the thinking of faith. That is the great task confronting theology in Asia today, a task which concerns at the same time the entire universal church.

Our gathering here in Hong Kong should be an encouragement to undertake this work and at the same time help us to clarify the necessary principles involved. The church fathers can ever show us the way to attain the right principles since they faced a quite similar task in their encounter with the religions of the Mediterranean area with its endemic philosophies of religion. For although the faith in the gods and thus the immediate sense of the ancient cults had disintegrated, new philosophical justifications of the pagan religions were devised which show very similar characteristics to the philosophies of religion of our century, for example, to Radhakrishnan.

I shall mention only two striking examples. The Roman rhetorician Symmachus (c. 345-402), who passionately defended the preservation of the ancient Roman religion, provides us the first. He became especially famous for petitioning Caesar to reinstate the goddess of victory in the Roman senate. The key line of his memorandum justifying his request reads: "Uno itinere non potest veniri ad tam grande secretum" - "one cannot succeed to such a great mystery by only one road." This passage is a classical expression of the Roman idea of religion. The divine mystery is so great that no human way can exhaust it; no religion may encompass it. It can only be approached from different sides and must be represented in various forms.

Symmachus did not want to abolish Christianity; he but wanted to integrate it into his notion of religion. Christianity should learn to see itself as one way to see, seek and speak about God, recognizing that there are also other ways. Even Christianity may not presume to exhaust the great mystery.

Perhaps the problem can be seen even more clearly in the case of the emperor Julian the Apostate (332-363), who wanted to suppress once again "intolerant" Christianity and re-establish the ancient cults, all this against the backdrop of neo-Platonic philosophy. Julian criticized the Old Testament and the Christian faith from the same standpoint as Symmachus. His main complaint against Christianity and his single objection to Judaism involve the First Commandment: "Thou shalt not have strange gods before me." He could not and would not recognize the uniqueness of the one God. Even the God of Israel, the God of Jesus Christ, is for him one appearance of the divine, but one which does not deplete the "great mystery." For this reason, the God of the Old Testament and the God of Christians must tolerate other gods besides him. For this reason, the Nazarene cannot be recognized as the one incarnate Logos who is the only mediator of all mankind.

In the dispute with enlightened philosophical polytheism, the fathers have identified the supporting foundations of biblical faith; relativizing them annuls this faith and robs of its identity. What remains after its abandonment would be select elements of biblical tradition, but not the faith of the Bible itself. I shall attempt very briefly to indicate these basic elements as derived by the fathers from Sacred Scripture.

A. The first great commandment is at once the first article of faith and faith's foundational principle of identity: "The Lord, our God, is one Lord." All "gods" are not God. Therefore only the one God can be adored in truth; to worship other gods is idolatry. Without this fundamental decision there is no Christianity. One finds oneself outside the Christian faith where it is forgotten or relativized. Christology, ecclesiology, worship and sacrament can only be correctly treated when this decision is made. Christianity revolutionized the ancient world with this confession of faith. The ancient world had proceeded from the exact opposite principle, as the Emperor Julian had again formulated it at the end of antiquity.

The one God is by no means an unknown theme in the history of religion. One can indeed say that the vast majority of religions are acquainted with him. Hence they know that the gods are not the final power but only relative powers. The religions are in general also aware that the "gods" are not "God." At the same time, the one God is, to be sure, frequently without a cult or at least is unimportant cultically because he is too distant from the life of man. Hence cultic practice addresses the gods, so that in the religions God, for all practical purposes, is often concealed almost entirely behind the gods.

Christian faith was for the Mediterranean world and then again for Latin America and Africa liberation from the gods because now the one God had shown himself and had become "God with us." The pivotal words with which Jesus rebukes Satan, the tempter of mankind, read: "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve" (Mt 4:10; Lk 4:8; Dt 5:9; 6:13). Without accepting this command one cannot stand on the side of Jesus Christ in the religion professed by the Bible.

B. Christian existence starts with this fundamental decision and has rested on it ever since. Where the difference between worship and idolatry disappears, Christianity is undone. The Bible and the language of the fathers calls the required decision conversion (metanoia). A theology which omits the concept of conversion would overlook the decisive category of biblical religion. Christian faith is a new beginning and not merely a new cultural variant in an ever developing religious framework.

For this reason, the fathers stressed emphatically the newness of Christianity. The act of conversion is essential to the special understanding of the truth of Christians. In a large number of religions, as we have seen, the reality of the one God was certainly not unknown, but this one God remains too distant. His mystery is inaccessible. Thus the concrete contents of religion can only be symbolic in nature. They are not truth but relative appearances beside which other appearances are possible.

The Christian faith recognizes in the God of Israel, in the God of Jesus Christ, the one true God, truth itself manifesting itself. Therefore Christian conversion is according to its essence faith in the fact of truth's own revelation. While mystery is not thereby abolished, relativism, to be sure, is excluded, for relativism cuts man off from truth, making him a slave. Man's real poverty is darkness to truth. He becomes free for the first time when he is obliged to serve truth alone.

Yet another point is important in this consideration. The fathers first of all emphasized very strongly the character of conversion as decision, and accordingly, the character of faith as exodus. When this point was secure, they emphasized more and more also the second aspect, namely, that conversion is transformation, not destruction. Conversion does not destroy the religions and cultures but transforms them.

With this insight, the fathers came more and more to oppose the iconoclasm of narrow-minded Christian fanatics. Temples were no longer dismantled but converted to churches. The inner continuity between the religions and Christian faith became visible. It came to a resurrection of what was best in the former religions. It was not a relativistic philosophy of religion which gave them continued existence; in fact, it was this that had made them ineffective in the first place. Faith gave the religions the space in which their truth could develop and become fruitful. Both aspects of the act of conversion are important, but only after the first step has succeeded, namely the decisive turning to the one God, can the second, transforming conservation, ensure.

C. The mystery of Jesus Christ is to be understood only in this context of the First Commandment and the act of conversion which it demands. For Jesus, who did not abolish the Old Testament but fulfilled it, the First Commandment remained the supporting foundation of everything further; the shema Israel constituted the underlying content of faith: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord."

I make bold to assert that the centrality of this passage for all Old Testament literature is also the essential reason for the unique place of the Old Testament in the Christian faith. Since the whole Old Testament is built around this one sentence, it is for this reason a "canon," Sacred Scripture, for Christians. Only for this reason it attests to Jesus and vice versa. Jesus is the key to the Old Testament because he makes this sentence concrete in his very flesh.

Unfortunately, lack of time does not permit us to present the Christological question as it should be presented. For this reason, I should like all the more to refer to the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, in which the essential issues are very vividly and clearly stated. This encyclical must form the standard for all further work on the theology of religions and mission. It cannot be studied and received intensively enough. I must settle here for a brief allusion.

The problem which arises in India, but also elsewhere, comes to expression in Panikkar's famous phrase: "Jesus is Christ, but Christ is not (only) Jesus." In order to see the full extent of the question, we should replace the word Christ with Logos or Son of God, since Christ is a salvation-historical title in which the full metaphysical depth of the mystery of Jesus does not yet come to light.

In his historical life, Jesus was reticent about the use of this title. The post-Easter tradition explains the title more and more decidedly by the title Son, which finally replaces it, and which then again John interprets in depth by the concept Logos. This process of the development of revelation is already, however, very prominent in the synoptic tradition. Peter's confession reads quite simply in Mark: "You are the Christ [the Messiah]." Matthew reads: "You are the Christ [the Messiah], the Son of the living God" (Mk 8:29; Mt 16:16). Jesus says expressly to Peter that the latter did not learn this confession from flesh and blood, that is, from either his culture or his religious heritage, but that "my Father who is in heaven has revealed" this to him (Mt 16:17).

Hence this confession, the fundamental confession of the entire church of all times and places, is expressly removed from mere human traditions and qualified as revelation in the strict sense of the term. Every interpretation which falls short of it is a return to the merely human. Christianity stands or falls with this confession. It can no longer be separated from Israel's basic confession: "The Lord, our God, is one Lord." The only God shows himself to us in his only Son and wishes to be worshiped as the only God in him. This answers in principle the question of the reversibility of the Christological formulas.

When Panikkar denies the simple reversibility, he is correct insofar as the two natures, the divine and the human, remain distinct. Jesus' human nature has its beginning in time; the divine nature of the Logos is eternal. Both are so different, as creator and creature are different, and therefore are not exchangeable. Nevertheless, in the incarnation, the eternal Logos has so bound himself to Jesus such that the reversibility of the formulas results from his person. The Logos can no longer be thought of apart from his connection to the man Jesus. The Logos has drawn Jesus to himself and so united himself to him that they are only one person in the duality of natures.

Whoever comes into contact with the Logos touches Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is more than the sacrament of the Logos. He is the Logos himself, who in the man Jesus is a historical subject. Certainly God touches man in many ways even outside of the sacraments. But he touches him always through the man Jesus, who is his self-mediation into history and our mediation into eternity. Christ is not a mere theophany, an appearance of God, but rather in him the being of God himself enters into unity with the being of man.

If we - with Peter, with the entire New Testament, with the entire church - confess Jesus as Christ, the

Son of the living God, then we do not only wish to say that this Jesus has become the highest manifestation of the divine for us, while others elsewhere may well have found their own unique saviors. Faith, in the sense of the New Testament, means precisely that we are being torn away from our subjective or merely human-cultural estimations, that he who takes us by the hand is the one who passes over the sea of time without sinking because he is the Lord of time. Faith as "theological" act transcends all experience. It is an act of assent which we can only make to the living God, who is truth in person. We may not confer this obedience on any relative reality. This is what Peter means when he says to the leaders and elders of the people of Israel: "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

In his letters from prison, Paul develops the cosmic significance of Christ and thereby opens up for us an "inclusive" Christology in the sense of what we said earlier about conversion. Faith in Jesus Christ becomes a new principle of life and opens up a new space for living. The old is not destroyed but finds its definitive form and full meaning. This transforming conservation as the fathers splendidly practiced it in the encounter between biblical faith and its cultures is the real content of "inculturation," of encounter and cross-fertilization of cultures and religions under the mediating power of faith.

It is here that the great tasks of the present historical moment lie. Without a doubt, Christian mission must understand and receive the religions in a much deeper way than it has until now. On the other hand, the religions, in order to live authentically, need to recognize their own adventistic character propelling them forward to Christ. If we proceed in this sense toward an intercultural search for clues to the one common truth, we will find something unexpected.

The elements Christianity has in common with the ancient cultures of mankind are greater than those it has in common with the relativistic-rationalistic world. The latter has severed itself from the common sustaining basic insights of mankind and led man into an existential vacuum threatening his ruin if no answer is forthcoming. For the knowledge of man's dependence on God and eternity, the knowledge of sin, repentance and forgiveness, the knowledge of communion with God and eternal life, and finally the knowledge of basic moral precepts as they have taken shape in the Decalogue, all this knowledge permeates the cultures. It is not relativism which is confirmed. On the contrary, it is the unity of the human condition, the unity of man who has been touched by a truth greater than himself.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Cf. Josef Pieper, *Überlieferung: Begriff und Anspruch*, Munich 1970; and *Über die platonischen Mythen*, Munich 1965.
2. Th. Haecker especially emphasized the concept of the adventistic in pre-Christian "paganism." Cf. Th. Haecker, *Vergil: Vater des Abendlandes*, Leipzig, 1931; reprinted, Munich 1947.
3. Cf. V. Possenti, *Le società liberali al bivio: Lineamenti di filosofia della società*, Marietti 1991, p. 315-345, esp. 345f.
4. Cf. the indications of J. Dupuis, "The Kingdom of God and World Religions," in *Vidyajyoti, Journal of Theological Reflection* 51 (1987), pp. 530-544.

END

**Part II. [Twenty-Five Years of Inculturation in Asia](#)**

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