

P. LEO J. ELDERS, S.V.D.
Pontificiae Academiae Romanae S. Thomas Socius,
in Seminario Majori Rolduc Professor

THE THEOLOGICAL MEANING OF NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

(Published in *Doctor Communis* 42 (1989), pp. 31-41.)

After the First World War criticisms were leveled against the neo-scholastic method in theology. It was felt to propose the truths of the faith in an abstract and barren manner. Developing a living theology, in keeping with the spirit of the age, was now considered an urgent task. This movement began in Germany, was joined by a number of French theologians and did produce noticeable fruits in the form of studies of patristic thought, liturgy, the history of dogmas, etc. It has now become possible to measure the full impact of this movement: besides its positive aspects, it also produced some less fortunate or even disastrous effects: the scholastic method of arguing with its sharp definitions, clear divisions and distinctions was abandoned by many; the enormous mass of knowledge and experience accumulated in the classical manuals of theology is no longer carefully studied; interest shifted from the study of the doctrine of the faith to that of the thought of protestant authors or to a dialogue with contemporary philosophical views. The concern with non-Catholic thought, the absence of a solid knowledge of the entire dogmatic tradition of the Church, the ease with which unfounded personal convictions and feelings are proposed as Catholic theological views, make that frequent oversights and wrong assertions mar publications in the field of Christian studies.

The theme of the theological meaning of non-Christian religions provides a good example of what we said. It has regained actuality because of the rising self-awareness of peoples belonging to non-western cultures, but also because of a fashionable trend among Christians who proclaim tolerance, mutual respect and dialogue to be foremost values.

A source of much confusion is the indiscriminate use of the term *religion* which many authors hardly bother to define. In classical Latin as well as in Medieval theology religion signifies man's dealings with God, a virtue directing man's life to the Creator of the world. However, according to F. Heiler¹ religion means the community with transcendental reality *based on the experience of grace, that is on a revelation of the divine*. In this way the

¹ *Erscheinungsformen und Wesen der Religion*, Stuttgart 1961, 562f.

meaning of the term shifts from objective and communitarian forms of religious life to an inner experience; religion is said to rest upon a revelation. In anthropology and the science of comparative religion the term has yet another meaning: it denotes a coherent whole of convictions, ceremonies and customs which concern a reality deeper and greater than this material world alone. It goes without saying that it is of paramount importance to distinguish between the various meanings of the term: if we are speaking of man's personal quest of God *his religion* may indeed be considered a preparation to his conversion. Religion as a socio-cultural system, on the other hand, is a man-made structure which will of ten contain elements abhorrent to Christian thought: a religion which urges the sacrifice of children to Moloch is a perverse and fatal aberration, but it is possible that individuals, acting according to their natural religiosity within the context of such a religion, are nevertheless honestly seeking God. In such cases it is totally wrong to say that they are saved by their religion. On the contrary their religion, in the sense of specific beliefs and determinate rites, removes them from God^{1a}.

Some speak of a Copernican revolution to denote the change toward a growing understanding of non-Christian religions which has been taking place in the Church: traditionally the Church held that in order to be saved man must accept the Good News, abandon his false gods and turn to the living God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as revealed in Jesus Christ. However, a number of missiologists and theologians claim that the Church now holds the view that man can be saved by practicing his own pagan religion. To understand better what is happening and to evaluate these claims we must evoke the theological situation of the past decades. For hundreds of years the Magisterium of the Church, in particular the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith and Benedict XV, Pius XI and Pius XII in their encyclicals on missionary apostolate, have stressed that missionaries should not so much transplant their own culture and customs as announce the gospel. However, the idea that the gospel message and the community of faithful must develop along the lines of local customs in the various mission countries imposed itself somewhat belatedly when the colonial period had approached its end and Western

^{1a} The distinction between a local religion and culture on the one hand and the good pagan's personal religiosity on the other, is so obvious that even ardent advocates of interreligious dialogue and inculturation cannot help using it, -when confronted with the «facts of life». Answering the objections of an anthropologist who believes that total adaptation to Japanese ways of thinking will lead to syncretism, J. M. Umans suggests that Christianity is fulfillment, «being not so much fulfillment of Buddhist teaching as fulfillment of the fundamental longings of the Japanese heart» (See his «Dialogue with Non-Christian Religions», *Verbum SVD* 29 (19.88) 23-42, p. 41). Our question is: are these «fundamental longings» of the Japanese heart basically different from those of the African or Indian heart? If not, what is left of inculturation besides an accidental coloring of preaching and Christian life?

supremacy had been badly shaken. It was expressed by means of a terminology of implantation or of indigenization of the Church.

The Second Vatican Council teaches the traditional doctrine: the necessity of faith to be saved, the urgency of preaching the Good News, the task of evangelization as imposed upon the entire Christian Church. On the other hand, admitting that we have now entered an age of cultural and religious exchange, the Council expresses its appreciation of cultural and religious values, wherever these are found. The Council's doctrine of non-Christian religions is expressed in a number of texts. We mention the following:

« Nor is God remote from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, since he gives all men life and breath and all things (cf. Acts 17,25-28), and since the Saviour wills that all men be saved (cf. 1 Tim. 2,4). Those who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, in their actions try to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience — those too may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace strive to live a good life. Whatever truth or good is found among them, is considered by the Church to be a preparation for the gospel and given by him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life. But very often derived by the evil one, men have become vain in their reasonings, have exchanged the truth of God for a lie and served the world rather than the Creator”.²

The Council takes into account the possibility that there may be some values in the non-Christian religions. But generally (the text says « very often ») pagans will be on the wrong track and are serving creatures instead of the true God. *Lumen gentium* is far removed from the idea that certain components of non-Christian religions can give eternal salvation. Good elements, which may be found, are at best a preparation toward acquiring the grace of salvation.

According to the dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum*, § 3, this preparation consists in God's loving care for man, which leads people to monotheism. On this point the Council takes up the teaching of St. Paul. Contrary to what certain authors believe one finds in the conciliar texts, there is no question -whatsoever of a divine revelation in pagan religions. *Dei verbum* only speaks of a manifestation of God to our first parents, but does not mention at all the founders of world religions. On the other hand, the Council, and in particular the

² *Lumen gentium*, nr. 16.

Decree on missionary activity *Ad gentes*, § 2, point out the necessity to preach the gospel: not the non-Christian religions but the faith and membership of the Church give salvation. A morally irreproachable life and the fulfillment of natural law are considered a preparation for the gift of grace, not however the practice of one's religion. It is true, though, that the Council recommends to the missionaries that they « should be familiar with the national and religious traditions and uncover with gladness and respect those seeds of the Word which lie hidden among them ».³

In addition to these fundamental texts Vatican II has also issued a Declaration on the great world religions (*Nostra Aetate*) which is intended to bring people to engage in a dialogue. In the first paragraph of this declaration we read that the Council imposes certain limits on itself: it wants to consider these religions as a search for God by stressing the positive elements in them and leaving out the errors. The text addresses itself successively to Catholics, to those Christians who do not belong to the visible Church, to those who have not accepted the Good News but who, nevertheless, in one way or another are ordained to the people of God. The text then speaks of Muslims who claim to possess the faith of Abraham, and, finally, of those who seek God in shadows and images. God is not far from them and does not refuse them his help. Whatever truth and goodness one finds among these people is a preparation to the gospel.

We must duly admire the consistency of this teaching with the tradition of the Church. As *Ad gentes*, § 7 says, « although in ways known to himself God can lead those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the gospel to that faith without which it is impossible to please him, the Church nevertheless still has the obligation and also the sacred right to evangelize. And so, today as always, missionary activity retains its full force and necessity ».

However, for some theologians the Vatican texts have become a pretext to draw conclusions which go much further. Invoking the Pastoral Constitution *The Church in the Modern World* some argue that God wills the different cultures and, therefore, also the religions typical of these cultures, The latter would have a preparatory function. As *Proverbs* 8, 30-31 says, man gradually opens his eyes for loftier cultural and religious ideals; in this way pagan religions must be considered a preparation of the gospel, Moreover the Divine Word is everywhere present and active in the world; by studying foreign cultures

³ *Ad gentes*, par. 11.

and religions Christians will discover the seeds of the Word.⁴

With regard to this theology of “the seeds of the Logos”, one must observe that Justinus and those early Christian authors who coined the expression (borrowing a Stoic terminology) only wanted to say that some philosophers had reached insights which contain a partial truth. But the idea of canonizing pagan religions was totally alien to them.

Some even argue that the doctrine of the faith is never found in a pure form, but is always expressed in human categories, borrowed from the cultural environment. In cultural surroundings other than our western world words and categories of thought proper to those cultures should be used to express the faith, Since religion is always at the heart of every great culture, categories of thought of other religions should be freely adopted to state and present the Christian message. One might even go further and argue that the entire Christian message was thus far expressed in Hellenistic forms of thought, and that through a certain *kenosis* the Church should follow the example of Christ who deprived himself of his glory, that is, the Church should allow her doctrine and her structures to be stripped bare to a core, which should then be clothed in Indian, Chinese or African categories.

This view holds that the Church as it is now is a limited time-bound realization of the faith in Western modes of thought. A new Church should be born, viz. an assembly of various local churches, so that the Church itself is no longer centered around Rome, but becomes truly poly-central. Our answer to this revolutionary theory can be brief: in theological questions we must always rely on the faith of the Church and on the awareness it has of its mission. Now the Church does not think at all that it spread a *Latin* doctrine of the faith; on the contrary, it is firmly convinced that down through the ages it has been preaching the only universally true message of salvation. Furthermore, if one carefully considers the documents of tradition and the writings of the early Christian authors and the Fathers of the Church, one cannot escape the conclusion that with regard to the *contents* of their doctrine they are inspired by the sources of revelation and not by philosophical views⁵. It is true that certain structures and terms borrowed from the cultural surroundings were used, but the Church gave these terms a meaning which signifies realities accessible to all and universally valid. If something of the Hellenistic culture was adopted by the Church, it was so insofar as this culture possessed elements of universal value for people of all ages. The elaboration of the doctrine of the faith, of the

⁴ See Ph. Delhaye, ‘Etudes sur l’inculturation de la foi chrétienne d’après certains documents récents du Magistère’, *Esprit et vie* 98 (1988) 1-11; 23-32; 40-45.

⁵ For an overview of the question see L. Elders, ‘L’Eglise et les cultures’, *Nova et vetera* 1987, 7-35.

liturgy and the ritual of the sacraments, as it took place in the first centuries, is not just any such process, which might be replaced by a de-composition, followed by a new elaboration in a different cultural environment. In this process of formation we have to do with Tradition, which became a norm for the Church for ever. In the field of doctrine, of worship and of discipline the Fathers have engaged the Church and determined its life⁶.

In this connection a related theological opinion must be mentioned. In a lecture of 1961⁷, which was to have an enormous influence, Karl Rahner argued that God wills all men to be saved. However, very few become Christians, whereas the vast majority remain attached to their own traditional religions. We cannot assume, he says, that these millions of people get lost. Thus Rahner believes that they are saved because of the positive we must recall Rahner's philosophical theory according to which man can transcend the limits of his own being: in certain difficult or exceptional circumstances man has an experience of being related to, a transcendent reality. In this sort of religious experience he actually turns to God⁸ and receives God's saving grace. It follows, Rahner concludes, that all religions are legitimate roads to salvation and that their adepts

are Christians, although they do not know, it themselves (the so-called « anonymous Christians »). Rahner's theory ultimately rests upon a faulty philosophical view: there is no way natural man can work himself up to

a direct experience of God, for God “dwells in an inaccessible light” and “no one in this life can see God”⁹. There is no experience of God unless God addresses himself to man by revealing himself. We believe that he did so to Moses, the prophets and Jesus Christ. But Holy Scripture or Tradition do not give the slightest intimation of such a divine self-revelation to individual man. On the contrary, what God revealed to some has to be

⁶ See Y.J.M. Congar, *La tradition et les traditions*, II, Paris 1963, 200.

⁷ ‘Das Christentum und die nicht-christlichen Religionen’, *Schriften zur Theologie* V 143.

⁸ See his essay ‘Gotteserfahrung heute’, *Schriften zur Theologie* IX, 163ff

⁹ Students of the science of comparative religion, on the other hand, some-times argue that an experience of revelation is at the basis of all great religions. One must distinguish between natural metaphysical experiences, such as Plotinus and others had, and direct experiences of God. While the latter are reserved to those whom God himself places on the road to salvation and do not at all belong to non-Christian religions, the former may occur in people belonging to those non-Christian religions and possess some elements of authenticity and truth. But in such cases these experiences will concern the depth of one's own being or of the reality of the world and not the being of God which is beyond reach for natural man. Because the science of comparative religion considers the concept of an experience of the divine of basic importance, W. Pannenberg claims that experience must find a place in theology. See his *Wissenschaftstheorie und Theologie*, 1973, 317.

announced by these privileged few to others¹⁰. According to Rahner natural man can by his own force approach God through the practice of his religion. However, many religions are highly defective or even immoral. They are marked by pantheism, dualism or monism, or even atheism (if one wishes to call Buddhism a religion). It is unconceivable that precisely by a 'life in agreement with such metaphysical options man would come closer to God. At best one might say that by his own personal acts of religiosity, despite the religious lore in which they are embedded, man may prepare himself for the gift of faith.

Despite the fact that Rahner's gratuitous theory is at odds with revelation as well as with the doctrine of the Church¹¹, it found acceptance with a number of theologians. G. Kraus deduces from Rahner's theory "that the world religions have their origin in an initiative of God. In their original components (Grundansatz) religions are not a product of human efforts, but a gift of divine grace... The fact that God wills all men to be saved is also proof of the presence of divine grace in those religions"¹². The saints of these religions would embody an authentic experience of God; we may discern in their lives the presence of the Spirit.

Imitating its divine Master the Church should free itself from triumphal-ism with regard to other religions and show a deep respect for the religious traditions of other nations.

Authors such as R. Panikkar even believe that the non-Christian religions are leading people to Christ or that Buddha, Krishna and other religious personalities must be seen as anticipating Christ. According to this author, everything is implicitly contained in everything, so that Christ is in Buddha, and Buddha in Christ. Mankind is underway to one universal religion.

In all those theories and statements we must distinguish between the respect they voice toward the great religions on the one hand and the saving power they ascribe to them on the other. On the first point we may concur. But with regard to the second assertion we must say that from a theological point of view, many non-Christian religions

¹⁰ In this respect one may recall Karl Barth's condemnation of all attempts of sinful man to approach God. Religion, he writes, is idolatry because it replaces God by human thoughts. We cannot follow Barth in his absolute refusal of all attempts of natural man to seek God: Barth seems to be a victim of the projection theory of Feuerbach (the concept of God would be a projection of man); he under-rates the natural goodness that may sometimes be found in man's religious life (St. Paul is much more positive in this regard!); furthermore, Barth turns down any preparation for the gift of grace and he posits a contradiction between nature and grace.

¹¹ See L. Elders, 'Les religions non-chrétiennes et le salut surnaturel', in *Cinquant'anni di Magistero Teologico. Scritti in onore di Mons. Antonio Piolanti nel 50mo del suo sacerdozio*. Pontificia Accademia di S. Tommaso, Citta del Vaticano 1985, 110-134.

¹² *Gotteserkenntnis ohne Offenbarung und Glaube*, Paderborn 1987, 411.

will loom as serious deviations from truth and virtue and as formidable obstacles rendering conversion to Christ difficult. The testimony of the Old and New Testament is clear and unanimous on this point: these religions belong to the world of fallen man, which is a prey of the evil spirits. The practice of the Church of the first five centuries concurs with this verdict.

However, one may also consider these religions in a cultural perspective, discern in their beliefs and rites certain positive values and take into account the fact that those who are born into these religions, can only with great difficulty extract themselves from them. In the foreseeable future millions of people will still be adepts of those religions. Direct preaching of the Christian message in confrontation with the views and customs of other religions, is not everywhere possible. In such a situation Christians must preach the gospel by giving an example of shining love, true piety and authentic virtue.

In situations where preaching the gospel message by words is impossible or counter-productive, Christians may sometimes engage in a fraternal dialogue. In such a dialogue they should listen to what the adepts of other religions have to say, show a certain amount of interest and avail of every opportunity to speak about God and salvation in Christ. In resorting to such inter-religious dialogue Christians pursue a policy recommended by Council texts such as *Nostra Aetate* and the Vatican decision to establish a Secretariat for non-Christian Religions. A dialogue may be particularly useful to do away with misunderstandings and to join forces in a campaign for world peace or to fight moral evils such as abortion. It may also help to reach a better understanding of the ways of thinking of others and to find an even more appealing expression of the gospel message in a particular culture.

However, some authors go much beyond this limited scope of an interreligious dialogue and argue that in such a dialogue Christians must acknowledge the working of the Spirit of God in other religions, discover the seeds of the Logos and pray together before the divine mystery. Any negative attitude with regard to non-Christian religions should be abandoned.

To this we say that wherever a Christian finds some good, he will give thanks to God the Creator. But despite the good he will undoubtedly encounter in « the good pagan » he may not act against truth: salvation is only to be found in Christ through faith in the Gospel Message; non-Christian religions, considered globally, as a coherent set of beliefs and rites, are for the greater part¹³ metaphysically untenable, because of their monistic, dualistic, materialistic or pantheistic nature; even if we leave out questionable moral and social

¹³ Exceptions would be those religions which are a pure expression of man's natural religiosity in agreement with the requirements of right reason and free of false ideologies and superstition.

teachings of these religions, we must nevertheless admit that they imprison man within nature or within his own self, or make him seek liberation by emptying himself of all desires and denying a real encounter in love with the Other.

In a surprising document *Dialogue and Mission* (1984) the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions proclaimed dialogue to be the norm for all missionary apostolate while it did not stress the necessity of faith for man in order to be saved. The document assumes that the non-Christian religions are values which are due to God's work. The Church would represent in greater plenitude what is already present in other religions. Instead of pointing out that the Church is bound by divine commission to preach the Gospel to all nations, the document asserts that Christians should seek to attain truth together with representatives of non-Christian religions. Throughout the document fraternal love and mutual understanding are recommended.

One must not overrate the importance this type of documents: apparently our text is an expression of the line of work the Secretariat is engaged in and which is preparatory to that of the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of the Nations. The function of the Secretariat is preparatory and external to the actual task and mission of Christians and may be useful in those situations where direct mission work is impossible, as we have pointed out above. It is, of course, possible that representatives of the Secretariat are so much engrossed in their own line of work that they tend to consider it the really important and the only valid approach. But such an attitude would witness to poor theological knowledge. It is only recently that Paul VI rejected "the attitude which refrains from preaching the faith under the pretext of respecting the freedom of conscience of others or because one feels that other religions as such are a valid road to salvation".¹⁴

In this connection we must also mention the encounter of the Pope with representatives of other religions on October 27, 1986 in Assisi. Apparently the intention and hope of the Holy Father were to make representatives of other religions sensitive to the threat of war, to make them seek peace, and to bring them into contact with Christianity and the Catholic faith. Dogmatically speaking the event does not create any problems, because no syncretism resulted: there was no common prayer, but only religious people who came together to pray each in his own way. The Pope clearly announced the faith of the Church that salvation is only possible in Christ.

The Pope invited each representative to pray for peace in « radical faithfulness » to his own

¹⁴ *Evangelium nuntiandi*, § 80.

tradition. We must not understand this as an invitation never to convert to Christianity, but as an exhortation to each representative to seek the very core of his religious life: if he does so, he may, driven by the grace of God, discover Christ.

One may regret, though, that the very togetherness of representatives of different beliefs on what seemingly was an equal footing created the impression that all religions are more or less equal partners, that the practice of such pagan religions is normal and that this type of encounter is of paramount importance to mission work and must replace outdated forms of missionary endeavor. Moreover, apostolic preaching was almost absent, if we except the Pope's confession of faith in Christ as the only Savior of man and the silent, but considerable influence of Assisi and its Christian art.

It is also somewhat astonishing that on this occasion Catholic houses of cult were opened to pagan religious rite. It is true of course that on their sightseeing tours non-Christian people bring their not always very Christian thoughts and their sometimes rather worldly desires with them when they enter a house of God. What happened in Assisi is perhaps not essentially different and 'more admissible. Only it gained much publicity and created a less desirable impression. The issue of touristic use of our churches is probably more important than is commonly thought and should perhaps come up for review.

On the positive side one may hope that the generosity and charity of the Holy Father and his helpers as well as the superb beauty of Assisi and the *splendor veri* of the treasures of Christian art stored in this Franciscan town may have lifted up the hearts of the representatives of pagan religions and increased their desire of God. The Holy Father himself pointed out the continuity of the Assisi encounter with the teachings of Vatican II; he rejected wrong interpretations (such as that of syncretism) and stressed that Christians must show a universal openness¹⁵.

We must certainly also look upon the Assisi event as an aspect of the political activity of the Holy See, in other words as a peripheral phenomenon in the life of the Church, unless of course one wants to consider it an inspired, quasi-prophetic gesture which, in the present juncture, in ways only known to God, was precisely what is called for to bring about peace and to promote the conversion of all.

If we consider the meaning of the convention from the point of view of the representatives of non-Christian religions, it may have produced in some a less desirable effect, viz. have strengthened a very widely held conviction that each culture and nation has

¹⁵ See L'attività della Santa Sede nel 1987, pp. 79, 736 etc.

its own religion and that, in the last analysis, all religions are equal.

In conclusion of our survey we may say that Christians must persevere in prayer and continue to make strenuous efforts in order not to lose sight of the essential truths of the faith. Furthermore, the heritage of Tradition and of the Second Vatican Council must be fully preserved also with regard to our attitude toward non-Christian religions.