

**HARMONIOUS APPROACH OF CHRISTIANITY  
TO OTHER FAITHS**

by

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The first word of this paper should be a word of apology. Others, more qualified than this writer, could present better the theme entrusted to me: "Harmonious Approach of Christianity to Other Faiths." It is not an easy job to represent doctrines and theological trends when one is not thoroughly part and parcel of the whole. And since Christianity comprises at least the Orthodox, the Protestant and the Roman Catholic traditions with their characteristics, their varieties and even their prejudices, it is difficult to be complete and, shall we say, "objective."

Moreover I am drawing heavily on other writers, some of whom are also present at this conference. Hence the merit of the good things that may be offered is theirs; the disfiguration of their ideas, if any, is only the writer's.<sup>1</sup>

At the risk of oversimplification we may say that, in the past at least, the two poles around which the approach of Christianity to living faiths (should we say of "Christians" to "men" of living faiths?) have rotated are, in the context of the methodology for the missionary apostolate, the "Christianization of Asia" (rather a Protestant approach) and the "Asianization of Christianity" (often, specially today, a Catholic approach). I am fully aware that this twofold goal refers not simply to the relationship between Christianity and other religions but to "mission," to "evangelization." But I submit that this twofold methodology in the missionary enterprise has, at its basis, a more radical conception in the line of "approach." This conception is the appreciation of "the value—or values—of Asian Religions." And this is the fundamental issue in our topic.

In June 1975 the First Asian Congress of Jesuit Ecumenists (FACJE) convened in Manila to study the theme "Jesus Christ Frees and Unites Us for a Common Witness in Asia." One point clearly

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emerged; our very concept of "ecumenism" needs revision. Hence the title of the proceedings, a 350-page book: *Towards a 'Dialogue of Life': Ecumenism in the Asian Context*. Two pertinent paragraphs of the Final Statement and Recommendations may be quoted here:

2. This conference has brought us to a keener and clearer awareness of the great diversity of races, cultures, religious traditions, historical experiences and concrete problems which exists among the people of Asia. It has also made us conscious of Asia's common experience of brokenness, unfreedom, and blocked growth, resulting in massive poverty side-by-side with fabulous wealth, situations of domination, injustice and dependence, both intra-national and inter-national. We have come to see at the same time that Asia as a whole with its internal variety and community is a different reality from Europe, Africa and America.

4. We believe that concern for ecumenism has wider connotations in Asia than in Europe. Here it extends beyond Christian denominations with their theological and organizational (faith and order) pre-occupations, and reaches out to all the religious traditions of Asia. Dialogue with men of these religious and spiritual traditions is *the* central area of ecumenism in Asia. This conviction is based on the awareness of difference in Asian historical experience. The divisions within Christianity have neither roots nor context in the history of Asian peoples. They are imported realities and have little meaning for the believing peoples, especially with the disappearance of ancient hostilities between the churches in which the divisions originated. Asian ecumenism therefore consists primarily in dialogue with the millions of men and women of faith in the various traditions of Asia, among whom we live.<sup>2</sup>

The matter which the title of this paper covers is immense, but I will be allowed to "escape" a detailed historical survey of the problematic contained in it. It is beyond the scope of this presentation to outline, even briefly, the history of the relationship of Christianity to other religions. Religious pluralism is a fact of history and experience that is to be recognized; contacts between Christianity and other living faiths go back to the origins of Christianity itself, beginning with Judaism and going on within the Roman Empire through Greek and Roman cults to the religious traditions of Northern Africa, and in the course of the centuries, to the great religions of Asia, and the traditional religions of Africa. The contacts established especially after the 16th century with other religions, the pioneering efforts of Xavier in Japan, of de Nobili in India and of Ricci in China placed the problem of the contact of Christianity with the great Asian religions in particular on the theological map.

The word "approach" in the title needs some clarification. "Approach" seems to express the attitude of an outsider. Hence the word "communication" seems preferable to others, since communication confesses implicitly a given solidarity by taking one's stand in the world of the "other" and as part of it, not over or against his world, however sympathetic this may be meant.<sup>3</sup> In a certain sense, the term "approach" may be unavoidable since I will be speaking, by necessity, from the standpoint of the Christian tradition, and thus outside the "other religions."

This approach however is necessary and, in the words of Paul VI, "it is more urgent in the life of the Church today." He refers to the knowledge, the understanding, the dialogue, the collaboration of Christians with members of other great religions "in a spirit of loyalty and of fidelity to the principles of faith and at the same time of respect and esteem for their just moral and spiritual values." May Christians learn, he continued, to know and esteem properly "those riches which God in his bounty has given to the nations."<sup>4</sup>

It is to be acknowledged that there has been a kind of reversal in Christianity's attitude towards these religions. Because of the prevailing historical situation until a very recent past it tended to be defensive and critical; but today, while still holding her dogmatic verdicts, the Church has become more vitally aware of the Holy Spirit's activity beyond her own visible boundaries.<sup>5</sup>

Although other speakers may bring up their own explanation of terms, I feel that for the proper understanding of the question I will deal with, it will help to delimit the field, giving at the same time the essentials for the terminology used.

I do not intend to elaborate nor enter into problems connected with our topic such as secularization, nor dwell in such terms as salvation, revelation, faith, grace. The term "Religion" or "Faith" however needs some explanation.<sup>6</sup> We do not encounter "religions" or "faiths" in the abstract; we encounter religious *men*, the man, namely, who is fully aware of being involved in a creative relationship to the transcendent, to "sacred" reality, men who are faith-full. As it has been well said, religions of themselves do not save men; but they do make them conscious of their need for salvation.<sup>7</sup> Rahner speaks of "legitimate religion" by which he understands an "institutional religion whose 'use' by men at a given time can be considered on the whole as a positive medium of the proper relation to God and thus of obtaining salvation, and as such is positively taken into account in God's saving plan."<sup>8</sup>

Religions are not monolithic blocks but there is a great variety even within particular religions. Moreover, we do not encounter religions in the state of systems, except in books, but in the state of

complex reality lived by men. Hence the ambiguity of the term "religion" or "faith": at times it refers to the system, at times to the mass of men, and at times and perhaps more often than not to both, thus compounding confusion with misunderstanding.

The distinction is often used of religions which express an experience made by men (natural, "mystical" religions) and religions which proceed from a revelation which is received and transmitted (instituted, "prophetic" religions). Among the first, Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism are counted; Judaism, Christianity and Islam among the second.

There is also another distinction which may prove useful in talking about living religions: there are religious *systems*, there are *values* contained in these systems, and there is the religious *life lived* in the atmosphere of these religious systems. Amalorpavadass considers the distinction between religion as an abstract system and religion as a system which is actually lived-out as important.<sup>9</sup> If religion is considered not as an abstraction but as a living faith of the practising believers we will find that the prayer-situation is typical of what the living faith of man is, and that the tendency of some western scholars to present, for instance, Hinduism in negatives to contrast it with Christianity is definitely obsolete. People live their religious faith in positives, even if the way of explaining it may be negative (a well-known fact in genuine contemplation).

In this respect the remarks of Dr. Santosh Chandra Sengupta are extremely valuable: The admission of the Unlimited and the Infinite is common to different religions; each of the religions has an ethical commitment; the language of prayer and worship is also the language of an appeal to God for guidance and assistance in the realization of the ideals which make good living possible. At the same time "commitment to one's faith and openness to other faiths can be complementary." It is precisely in this positive attitude of openness and of preparedness to draw on other religions that there can be dialogue.<sup>10</sup>

It is also in this sense that the Declaration of Vatican II on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions explains the sense and content of the word "religion" and its functions in relation to human life. "Men look to the various religions for answers to those profound mysteries of the human condition which, today even as in older times, deeply stir the human heart: What is man? What is the meaning and the purpose of our life? . . ." <sup>11</sup> Even if, unfortunately, religions have many times been among the causes of human discord, struggles and wars, their purpose and meaning should precisely operate as a factor that throws light on the foundations of unity in the human

family. Religion, as such, should be the source of union between man and God and between man and man.

Often enough when there has been question of the relationship of Christianity to other religions, a terminology has been frequently used which, inoffensive in itself if properly understood, still gives rise to understandable resentment. To speak of relationship of Christianity to "non-Christian" religions sounds offensive to some, even if no offense is meant at all. Christians themselves are dissatisfied with the term because of its negative or even exclusivistic overtones. It may give the impression that Christians are arrogantly looking down on other religions. Conversely, Christians probably would not like the expression "Buddhism and non-Buddhist religions" or "Relationship of Buddhism to non-Buddhist religions." However, everybody would understand that even if the qualification might not be the most happy one, it still describes what is meant to be described without any offense intended. The most commonly used expression today is "men of living faiths."

"Christianity" is another term that needs to be described, if not defined. In describing Christianity two extreme theological positions are to be avoided: either a Christianity without religion—Christianity in its authenticity is said not to be a religion but "faith," introducing a vision which is rather oriented towards man and his destiny on earth; or Christianity as something not different from what any other believer believes in. Christianity, as understood here, is the historical, revealed "religion" which draws its origin and life from God's saving action and the person and doctrine of Jesus Christ; wherein the event of the Incarnation and the paschal mystery of his Death and Resurrection constitute the central points of personal commitment of the one following Christ to live according to his doctrine within the family Christ himself instituted, the Church.

"Christianity is not primarily or essentially a philosophy, a moral code or a doctrinal system. It is, first and foremost, a living web of relationships and communion between persons, taking in God and other human beings. The love of Christians for other men should flow from the love which He has poured into their hearts through His Spirit and which unites them to each other."<sup>12</sup>

For the purpose of the present paper, Christianity encompasses the various "churches" and their faithful followers who, although "divided" into constituencies and loyalties differing from each other, still claim their origin from and allegiance to Christ and the Church he founded. The main groups can be said to be the Orthodox, the Roman Catholic and the Protestant (although many "national" or independent churches have multiplied all over the world, intensifying the already existing scandal of a divided Christianity).

## Common Christian Stand

Notwithstanding the division of Christians into different churches, particularly the three main divisions just indicated, it can still be a question of "common stand" as far as the relationship of Christianity to other religions is concerned. It is true that we find contradictory statements or judgments on non-Christian religions uttered at times by the same theologians although in different periods of their lives, and certainly by theologians of various schools. But strangely enough the differences cut across denominational lines, and we find identical positions held by people belonging to different churches or different positions among theologians within the same church.

However, we find common elements in basic questions and basic agreement in official or quasi-official statements. It is mainly in the convergence of these declarations issued mainly by the WCC or by the authorities of the Roman Catholic Church that we find the existence of a real common stand.

The position of the Orthodox churches in this matter is less clear. But since the Orthodox churches are members of the WCC and the WCC has engaged in studies on the relationship of Christianity to non-Christian religions and issued statements regarding it, a "semi-official" position of the Orthodox churches *may* also be gleaned. It is to be acknowledged, however, that in this matter the Protestant and the Roman Catholic positions are much more sharply defined than the Orthodox position.<sup>13</sup>

A look at some of the meetings wherein either Christians alone or Christians and men of other faiths have gathered together to discuss expressly the problem of the relationship between Christianity and other religions will give us an idea of the high priority in which this item has been held. To enumerate the most representative of them, either on a national or an international level, we have the meetings in Kottayam, India (1962), Korea (1965), the SEDOS meeting in Rome and Kandy, India (1967), Birmingham (1968), Tokyo (1969), Kyoto, Lugano, Zurich and especially Ajaltoun, Lebanon (1970), Bangkok (1973), Colombo and Lausanne (1974).

In some of these meetings the participants took part as private interested individuals, in others as representatives of their respective constituencies. Only Orthodox, Protestants and Roman Catholics participated in some of them, while in others there were also members of other faiths: Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, Taoists, Hindus.

These and other gatherings are proofs of the increasing interest in dialogue between Christians and men of living faiths. This dialogue has become a primary concern in Christian circles and which by itself shows the change of attitude among Christians along this line. The

result has been the explicit recognition of a common commitment to sacred reality. The interest in the topic started gaining momentum only in the 50s. By 1955 a project study on "The Word of God and the Living Faiths of Men" was initiated as a joint program of the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council (they were to become integrated only in 1961 in New Delhi). This project was in a certain sense the aftermath of the Willingen meeting of 1952 where the awareness of a too much Church-centered and theologically exclusive ecumenism was considered in need of serious revision.

Since it becomes impossible even to glean through the various conferences, I would prefer to limit myself to a few of them: Ajaltoun, Lebanon in 1970, Colombo, Sri Lanka in 1974, and Nairobi in 1975. Their importance is both absolute and relative. They may be considered as representing the general trend and consensus among Christians because of their greater proximity to us. Thus they will give us the opportunity to draw conclusions that may illumine the position of Christianity in general towards men of other faiths.<sup>14</sup>

### **Ajaltoun, 1970**

The purpose of the Ajaltoun meeting (16-25 March 1970) was to help the members of the Christian Churches to understand more fully their missionary duty today and provide them with a guide for their present commitments in a pluralistic world.<sup>15</sup> Four Buddhists, three Hindus, four Muslims and about thirty Christians participated. There emerged a deeper mutual understanding not only at the level of ideas but also at the level of experience and devotion. Each one saw that he had need of the others under some aspect, and for all a common need of God. They "needed" each other in order to help each other to know God better and the different ways in which God has revealed Himself to Man.<sup>16</sup>

Samartha distinguishes three types of dialogue: a) an investigatory discussion among people who face common needs and common problems, b) an encounter of commitments genuinely held by people with great strength and sincerity, and c) "more than an encounter of commitments"—which is the title of Samartha's article. According to him Ajaltoun moved between the second and the third. Commitment he understands as "both an assent and a question, a road and a destination, an arrival and a departure."<sup>17</sup>

Some of the gains of the Ajaltoun dialogue expressed by the participants are recognized as valid by Samartha who underlines the fact explained by Professor Masao Abe, a Buddhist from Kyoto, that the sense of "incompleteness" does not imply a theological deficiency in one's position. It was rather significant that at Ajaltoun there was

little attempt made to look for the "common denominator" of all religions which, "like the core of an onion, does not really exist."

There was also a definite emphasis that worship, whether as corporate prayer or individual meditation, through words or symbols or ritual or even silence, is very essential in the context of dialogue to indicate particularly that authentic religion is more than philosophic concepts or theological ideas.

An important point was brought up in order to clarify the purpose of dialogue and to dissipate eventual doubts about the sincerity of the Christian approach to men of other faiths: "There was a strong feeling that dialogue between men of living faiths should not become, consciously or unconsciously, a new tool for furthering the Christian enterprise, but a living pattern for new relationships that have yet to be nurtured but of which there are already 'signs' in contemporary meetings." (Dr. Peter Latuihamallo of Indonesia.)<sup>18</sup>

A well taken criticism of the "Salvation History" theology at Ajaltoun was voiced by an Orthodox bishop to the effect that "the work of the Holy Spirit who is free and refuses to be controlled by theological technocrats, must break down—and is breaking down—the narrow walls of this vertical corridor."

From the whole tenor of the final document issued at Ajaltoun it appears clearly that if the Church ignores the spiritual riches which are to be found in many peoples and religions, she is depriving herself of a great source of wealth. "Our duty," said the Pope on his return from India, "is that of knowing better these people with whom, by reason of the Gospel, one came into contact, and of recognizing how much good they possess, not only for their history and civilization, but also for the heritage of moral and religious values which they possess and preserve."<sup>19</sup>

The purpose of the dialogue, as any serious scholar knows, is not to unify the religions. Complete fidelity and full attachment to our own faith, which we must preserve intact, must not become an obstacle to dialogue. On the other hand the spirit of repentance for all our past mistakes becomes a dialogue of reconciliation, and must become an act of communion.

In the context in which these conversations took place it is important to clarify the issue of the relationship between mission and dialogue. They are two distinct issues though not opposed to each other. Mission, for Christians, is an act of obedience to an order from Christ, but it presupposes dialogue and must be brought about in the climate of dialogue. Men of other religions are mansions where the Spirit, in some form, dwells, works and calls us. The same is true of the impulse a follower of another religion may feel for his



own "mission" that he should also make others sharers in the faith and spiritual life he finds satisfying for himself. Proselytism, however, is always out of the question.

Nothing better perhaps than the comment of Munshi Zaka Ullah, a Muslim from India, to a Christian participant expresses what an interfaith dialogue should be: "Tell me your beautiful Names of God, and I will tell you mine." An interfaith dialogue should be an interchange that, by itself, enriches the soul and draws men closer to their God.

### Colombo, 1974

Another meeting which throws light on the matter under study is the conference held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, 17-26 April 1974. Fifty people belonging to five living religious traditions (Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Muslim) issued a memorandum entitled "Towards World Community" as the outcome of their meeting.<sup>20</sup> Some of the traits of this meeting make it truly different from the Ajaltoun conference: such was the presence of Jews and a greater contingency of Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists who constituted the majority, as per contrast with Ajaltoun where the overwhelming majority were Christians. The more detailed recommendations of the meeting indicate also a real progress along the road of interfaith relationships. The meeting, like the Ajaltoun conference, was also sponsored by the WCC; but in Colombo the participating faiths had a say in the convening of the meeting and its agenda.

Certain points deserve particular mention: No one was interested in syncretism; both the 'crusade' and the 'fruit-salad' approaches were tacitly rejected; a 'differentiated relatedness' where responsibilities for living together in communities could be accepted without in any way ignoring particularities was a better expression over and against the oversimplification that "what is common unites, what is different divides." The memorandum states, among other things, that no single concept of dogma or spirituality was fully acceptable to all five traditions, but that areas of agreement between two or more traditions were found. "We were... not prepared to say that the conceptual divides, the mystical unites... We agreed that spiritual values can be recognized in another person's religious tradition without necessarily adopting the language in which that tradition is expressed... Even when interreligious conversation does not lead to all-round agreement it can create mutual understanding and can promote harmony and concord among people of different convictions... Ignorance about differing faiths and traditions gives rise to prejudices and mutual misrepresentations and caricatures..."

The importance given in Colombo to the 'spiritual' is also worthwhile mentioning. As an orthodox Jewish Rabbi puts it: "One must recognize the vulnerability of the spiritual when you bring it into the open. Spirituality is like a bird. If you try hard you may catch it; if you try too hard you can choke it."<sup>21</sup>

The memorandum rejects both the extremes of dogmatism, which in the name of ultimate commitment is insensitive to the reality of other faiths, and of a syncretism which in the name of universalism undermines the religious identity itself. Respect for and reverent observation of diverse forms of worship, meditation and prayer were also recommended.

The significance of these and other conferences for the topic of "Harmonious Approach of Christianity to Other Faiths" consists in the fact that here Christians take a definite stand on the matter, content and methodology of this relationship. They give us an indication of what Christians in general, and in particular the semi-official representatives of the WCC, feel. The participation of Roman Catholics on the other hand suggests that we are speaking about a kind of tacit agreement on what represents the approach of "Christianity" to other religions.

### **Nairobi, 1975**

The WCC General Assembly at Nairobi (23 November - 10 December 1975) gave a clear indication of the WCC's concern in the matter of the relationship between Christianity and other living faiths. It speaks of a different dimension of community, "that is, community with people of other faiths and convictions, and in the widest sense, the community of all humanity."<sup>22</sup> Among the recommendations suggested two are to be particularly noted: "b. Sympathetic and critical studies on the faiths and ideologies of people with whom the temporal destinies of Christians are intertwined, including other peoples' understanding and misunderstandings about Christian claims. — c. Examining and revising wherever possible with the assistance of people of other faiths our catechetical, liturgical and theological materials. The aim is to remove all caricatures and misrepresentations of other peoples' faiths, cultures and ideologies and in the teaching about other religions in theological seminaries."<sup>23</sup>

The Report of the Moderator of the Central Committee to the Assembly of the WCC takes up explicitly our topic and shows its importance. "Should we not make greater efforts to discern how Christ is at work in other faiths, generally in their traditional patterns and more particularly in their renewal movements which have felt the impact of Jesus Christ?"

The fact that members of the Christian faith have entered into these dialogues means that they are ready to accept its risks and promises. At the same time we may notice the suspicion from people of other faiths that dialogue from the part of the Christians is a subtle weapon to perpetuate the "mission" enterprise; while some Christians fear that this kind of dialogue is a betrayal of Christ's command to evangelize. And such a dialogue—it is often thought from both sides—brings with itself the loss of one's own identity, be he a Christian or a follower of any other religion.<sup>24</sup>

## The Second Vatican Council

It seems necessary to complete the picture presented above by considering briefly the document issued by the Second Council of the Vatican entitled "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions." Although a Catholic document, it embodies most of the elements which are common to other Christians, even if it still leaves room for theological discussion on matters on which the Council did not feel it was prepared to pronounce itself.<sup>25</sup>

The Declaration, the shortest among the sixteen documents issued by the Council, was sensationally hailed in secular papers as a milestone in the relationship between the Church and the Jewish people. They missed the point. Its impact is still much wider and more profound than even the relationship with the Jewish *religion* (not directly the Jewish people!). In fact the meager two lines of the initial draft on non-Christian religions (outside the Jewish) grew into a full-fledged Declaration, a document whose importance is not commensurate with its length.<sup>26</sup>

The document presents the principles regulating the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church to non-Christian religions. After having made a brief description of Hinduism and Buddhism, the principles are illustrated in greater detail by two examples, the religion of Islam and the religion of the Old Testament, without any pretense whatsoever of being exhaustive or even satisfactorily complete. The Declaration ends with a reminder of the Fatherhood of God and a vision of humanity in which all men may feel themselves to be God's sons and therefore willing to behave as brothers.

The Declaration's purpose to promote the unity of the human family appears in the brief development of the ideas that all peoples comprise a single community, have a single origin, and tend also towards the same goal—God himself. His providence, his manifestations of goodness and his saving designs extend to all men.

The heart of the Declaration regarding the attitude of Catholics towards other religions is contained in no. 2 where the statement is made that "the Church rejects nothing which is true and holy" in these

religions—an explicit acknowledgment of the existence of truth and holiness in them. The acknowledgment is made however with great balance: we are not meant to proclaim the faith of Christ in such a way as to disdain and condemn out of hand all other religions; but neither are we meant to compromise our own faith by displaying false respect or regard for other religions. We must show respect even if those religions show a great divergence from Catholic teaching. This respect comes from two sources: the dignity of the human person and what is due it (its most sacred aspect is religion), and the content of these religions considered separately. In the Catholic conception, people belonging to other religions have come from God too and are not to be abandoned to their own resources, having been also redeemed by the Blood of Christ.

The change in attitude that the official document reflected has also an historical explanation. During the time of the first eight ecumenical councils the Church was the “Mediterranean” Church. During the Middle Ages it was transformed into the “European” Church and remained practically European, as far as hierarchy was concerned, up to Vatican I. In Vatican II it became more “universal” and henceforth the episcopate was geographically and ethnographically more representative. In fact in Vatican II one-fifth of the bishops were from Latin America and one-third from Asia, Africa and Oceania. The outlook had to be different. The difference was in the fact that a good number of bishops represented territories where the Church was in direct contact with the great living faiths of Asia, or the traditional religions of Africa. The problem of “other religions” had to come to the fore.

The establishment by Paul VI of the Vatican Secretariat for non-Christians between the second and third sessions (23 May 1964) added importance to the problem. The study of the Church’s relationship with other religions had to sink deeper, considering the realization that the human race “is being drawn closer together, and the ties between various peoples multiplied” (art. 1).

As a consequence the Declaration presents the Church as plunging into a reverence of God’s grace-filled workings among all men, everywhere and at all times. She not only tolerates, but positively respects all men outside the Church’s visible walls, “rejecting nothing that is true and holy” in them (art. 2), for there are “treasures that a bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth.”<sup>27</sup> The Church exhorts Catholics to converse and collaborate with the followers of other religions in order to “acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men” (art. 2) while offering a positive method of dialogue based upon “what human beings have in common, what promotes fellowship among them” (art. 1).

The fact should not escape our attention that this conciliar document is the only one that treats, in principle, religions as such, speaking openly of the "true and holy," of the "ways of conduct and of life," "rules and teachings," "spiritual and moral goods. . . . in these religions."

There are other four documents that explicitly mention the problem of other religions or men of other faiths and five more that make at least implicit reference to this subject.<sup>28</sup>

In perfect accordance with Vatican II the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) in its first Plenary Assembly at Taipei, 1974, issued a Statement wherein due prominence is given to dialogue with the religions of Asia:

In this dialogue [with the great religious traditions of our peoples] we accept them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. Over many centuries they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations.

Only in dialogue with these religions can we discover in them the "seeds of the Word of God". This dialogue will allow us to touch the expression and the reality of our peoples' deepest selves, and enable us to find authentic ways of living and expressing our own Christian faith. It will reveal to us also many riches of our own faith which we perhaps would not have perceived. Thus it can become a sharing in friendship of our quest for God and for brotherhood among His sons.<sup>29</sup>

Collating the various texts of the Vatican documents and having as their center the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions, the following figure emerges: God makes salvation possible and available to all men; God's saving presence is at work within all nations, cultures and religions; these religions deserve respect for what is in them "true and holy," for their "spiritual and moral goods," their "way of conduct and of life"; these religions stand within God's universal plan of salvation and are under his grace.<sup>30</sup>

The Council has stated that those who "sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through dictates of conscience" can attain salvation. More-

over the Council has gone further: it has declared that salvation is available even for those "who have not yet arrived at an *explicit* knowledge of God but who strive to live a good life."<sup>31</sup> The word "*explicit*" knowledge opens the gates much wider than it was formerly assumed, even if theology had always known the "implicit" knowledge of God and its relationship to salvation.

Clearly the Roman Catholic Church has taken an official position of great openness in relation to non-Christian religions and their religious and salvific values. "The Church's official policy has always called for exclusive adherence to the Christian cult; other cults have been officially tolerated only when they could be regarded as merely social and not religious. The contemporary Roman Catholic acceptance of non-Christian cults as channels of divine grace is therefore a significant departure from Catholic tradition."<sup>32</sup>

### **Historical Overview**

Let me place the realities of the Christian attitude towards other living faiths and the main points of doctrine mentioned above in the proper historical background.

There has definitely been evolution and progress in the appreciation of non-Christian religions within Christianity. This is a fact that needs no proof;

The process however has not been rectilinear; it has been rather a broken line in various moments of history;

There were sparklings of understanding in the primitive Church that neither the freedom given Christianity by Constantine nor the Christian assimilation of Nordic immigrations in the western culture were able to extinguish;

With the arrival of Islam the contrast between the two religions, both presenting themselves as revealed, became acute. As a consequence, Christianity, Eastern as well as Western, lost the original wide outlook towards the non-Christian religions that had prevailed before. It began globally attributing to the other religions the characteristics it thought to have discovered in the heat of its fight against Islam. This led Christianity to take an antagonistic position towards all of them;

This posture of confrontation, of which the Christian Churches cannot consider themselves free of guilt, lasted for twelve centuries until practically a few decades ago;

It is to be acknowledged too that the independence of the Asian and African countries, together with the revival of their ancestral

religions (which feel threatened by the surrounding secularism as well as by the missionary spirit of Christianity), have forced Christians to go back to an attitude which in many ways is analogous to the one prevailing during the first centuries of the Church.

As far as the West is concerned the last 80 years have seen an intense effort to know and deepen the knowledge of living religions in Asia and Africa. The results in the field of linguistics, literature and religion have been remarkable. Two aspects dominate the horizon: the religions considered in themselves, and their relation to Christianity.

It is in this field of the relationship of Christianity to other religions that apparently irreconcilable opinions have sprung. They fan out from those who are ready to place on exactly the same level Christianity and the other religions, to those who deny them any value except the human effort in its journey to the Absolute. One among those in between holds to the unicity of Christ and his Church but acknowledges in other religions manifold and valuable spiritual elements, some of which may be even supernatural. Among Roman Catholics in particular the middle-of-the-way position appears to be most commonly accepted and, as far as the main elements of the system are concerned, it seems to be the official stand as embodied in the Vatican II Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions. More and more Christian churches among the members of the WCC, and the WCC itself, as well as a good number of younger Protestant theologians especially in Asia seems to be holding to or veering towards this position.

This position seems to be equidistant from both rigid Barthianism and ultra-liberalism. But within this general stand there is still a two-pronged approach. Some are leaning heavily on the efficacious salvific will of God, considering all men of goodwill as "anonymous christians" who, in virtue of this implicit "faith," will attain salvation "within" their religions. Others, taking their starting point rather from historical and biblical data (as well as recent pronouncements of the Magisterium for some Roman Catholics) cannot separate themselves from what are considered more traditional teachings and position.

Scientifically, honesty forces the theologian to acknowledge that there is no adequate answer to the problem *as a whole*. Certain pristine rigid stands were obviously in need of reform, and both the WCC and the Second Council of the Vatican have boldly introduced them with their positive approach, giving us the pattern to be followed. But it is also to be admitted that the defenders of "anonymous christianity," among others, have raised serious questions in the field

of speculative—rather than biblical or ecclesial—theology that are still waiting for adequate answers.

I would like to finish this already long paper with a quotation from the “Declaration of the All India Seminar on the Church in India today.” It summarizes and reflects accurately, I believe, the attitude of today’s Christianity towards other faiths, and certainly it does reflect my own personal attitude towards them:

We wish to be in contact with the other religions of our country, which we value for their great contribution to the spiritual treasury of mankind. If in the past our relations have sometimes been strained through our fault, we ask for forgiveness; and we now invite them to a common witness to the transcendent destiny of man, in our present crisis of modernization and secularism. We believe too that fraternal exchange with them can be of immense benefit to the Christian fellowship itself in its renewal in India.<sup>32</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Source materials in various periodicals particularly in *International Review of Mission*, *The Ecumenical Review* and *Asia Focus* are extensively used. The first two are published by the WCC, the latter by the Christian Conference of Asia (formerly East Asia Christian Conference). I am particularly indebted to several authors: S. J. Samartha, from whom I have borrowed some ideas, insights and at times even his words, D. S. Amalorpavadass, T. Balasuriya, etc.

<sup>2</sup> See *Cardinal Bea Studies IV*, ed. by P. S. de Achútegui, S.J. Manila: Cardinal Bea Institute, 1976. The Congress was organized by the Cardinal Bea Institute for Ecumenical Studies, Loyola School of Theology, Ateneo de Manila University. Forty-five delegates and observers from thirteen different countries in Asia took part in the conference. Among them were the Archbishop of Delhi, Msgr. Angelo Fernandes; the Archbishop of Taipei, Msgr. Stanislaus Lokuang; the General Secretary of the Christian Conference of Asia, Bishop Yap Kim Hao; and others. Notwithstanding its title, the Congress was also open to non-Jesuits and non-Catholics.

<sup>3</sup> See Carl F. Hallencreutz, *New Approaches to Men of Other Faiths*, Research Pamphlet No. 18. Geneva: WCC, 1970, p. 49, quoting Kraemer, *The Communication of the Christian Faith*, p. 60f.

<sup>4</sup> Paul VI to the members of the Secretariat for non-Christians, September 25, 1968, quoting *Ad Gentes*, no. 11. See the Secretariat’s *Bulletin*, no. 11 (1969) 115-16.

<sup>5</sup> See the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (LG) 8, 15, 16, and the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (UR) 3.

<sup>6</sup> When the present paper was being written the request had been for the author to speak on “Harmonious Relations of Christianity to Other Religions.” As the paper was “ready to leave” he received the new title: “Harmonious Relations of Christianity to Other Faiths.” In order not to delay the paper this section develops the concept of “religion” instead of “faith.” However we may make ours Dr. Samartha’s comment on this point a few years back. After



explaining the difficulties caused by the use of terms like "religion" and "faith," either in the singular or the plural, and his intention not to enter into details, he writes: "'Religion' and 'faith' can be used inter-changeably in certain languages but not in others. The word 'religion' itself may mean personal faith or the historical phenomena involving creed, cultus and culture or one particular aspect of life as different from others. There are some who feel that the term 'religion' should be dropped altogether, but it is doubtful whether this is really possible at this stage or whether an acceptable substitute can be found. The question is much deeper than mere translation of certain terms, because they represent, in some measure, certain basic attitudes or responses to the mystery of life and existence." S. J. Samartha, "The World Council of Churches and the Men of Other Faiths and Ideologies," *The Ecumenical Review* 22 (1970) 196. In this paper we do not deal directly with the problem of ideologies.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Eugene Hillman, *The Wider Ecumenism*. London: Burns & Oates, 1968, p. 71.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Rahner, S.J., "Christianity and Non-Christian Religions," *The Church, Readings in Theology* by Hugo Rahner et al. New York: Kenedy & Sons, 1963, p. 124. See *Theological Investigations*, Vol. V. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964, pp. 115-34.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. SEDOS, *Foundations of Mission Theology*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1972, p. 61. See also *ibid.*, p. 59, A. Semois' triple distinction just quoted.

<sup>10</sup> Dr. Santosh Chandra Sengupta, "The Problem of Understanding Other Religions," Secretariat for non-Christian, *Bulletin* 26 (1974) 107-09.

<sup>11</sup> Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate* (NAe) 1. *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. by W. Abbott. New York: America Press, 1966, p. 661.

<sup>12</sup> D. S. Amalorpavadass, "The Apostolate to non-Christians," SEDOS, *op. cit.*, p. 77. For the concepts of revelation, faith, salvation and grace which may come into discussion, general notions may prove to be enough since for the purpose of the present paper there is no need to enter into theological disquisitions regarding their presuppositions and nature. With what will be said in the course of the paper enough light may be gathered for the substance of the argument. — A very comprehensive study of the problem of "salvation" with all its presuppositions, concomitants and consequences is P. Damboriena, S.J. *La salvación en las religiones no cristianas*. Madrid: B.A.C., xxiv-533 pp. Under another aspect but extremely useful is *Research Seminar on Non-Biblical Scriptures*, ed. by D. S. Amalorpavadass. Bangalore: National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, 1974, 707 pp.

<sup>13</sup> Some indirect light may also be obtained from the Bucharest Orthodox consultation on "Confessing Christ Today," 4-8 June 1974. See *Mission Trends* No. 2, ed. by G. H. Anderson and T. F. Stransky. New York: Paulist Press, 1975, pp. 269-76, under the title "The Evangelistic Witness of Orthodoxy Today," esp. b), pp. 272-73.

<sup>14</sup> I refer the reader to some articles published on the matter. See among others S. J. Samartha, "The World Council of Churches and Men of Other Faiths and Ideologies," *The Ecumenical Review* 22 (1970) 190-98. See esp. p. 192 on the resolutions of the WCC Central Committee at Canterbury in 1969; S. J. Samartha, "Christian Study Centres and Asian Churches," *International Review of Mission* 59 (1970) 173-79; and the position papers compiled by C. Murray Rogers, "Inter-Faith Dialogue," *Asia Focus* 5 (1970) 235-45. The remarks of John B. Carman should be kept in mind even if the problem in question is "religion" as such: "Ecumenical discussion in Western Europe be-

tween Roman Catholics and Protestants is now widespread. It is therefore all the more striking that recent thinking about "religion and the religious" among Catholic and Protestant theologians should veer off so sharply in opposite directions, Roman Catholics affirming the value of human religion in general and other religions in particular in the divine economy of salvation, while many neo-Reformation theologians and those influenced by them have regarded "religion" as largely or even wholly opposed to Christian faith." John B. Carman, "Continuing Tasks in Inter-Religious Dialogue," *The Ecumenical Review* 22 (1970) 220. — It should be noted here that the present paper does not enter into the social-ethical or politico-ideological implications or consequences of inter-religious conversations (an immense and important topic which will be developed elsewhere during the conference).

<sup>15</sup> On Ajaltoun see among others F. Lopez Gay, "Dialogue Between Men of Different Faiths," Secretariat for non-Christians, *Bulletin* no. 14 (1970) 77-84; "The Ajaltoun Memorandum" in S. J. Samartha, *Dialogue Between Men of Living Faiths*, ed. by Samartha. Geneva: WCC, 1971, pp. 107-17; David Jenkins, "Commitment and Openness," *International Review of Mission* 59 (1970), 404-13. — On the Kandy meetings see *International Review of Mission* 56 (1967) 388-43, and *Study Encounter III* (1967) 52-56. On the Zürich consultation see *International Review of Mission* 59 (1970) 382-91. See also *ibid.*, pp. 427-29 the Statement of the EACC's Secretariat for Interfaith Dialogue, drawn in July 1970 which appears also in *Asia Focus* 5 (1970) 246-48.

<sup>16</sup> G. Lopez Gay, *art. cit.*, p. 79.

<sup>17</sup> S. J. Samartha, "More than an Encounter of Commitments," *International Review of Mission* 59 (1970) 393.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 399.

<sup>19</sup> *Teachings of Paul VI*, II, p. 735.

<sup>20</sup> The memorandum of the conference entitled "Towards World Community: Resources and Responsibilities for Living Together" is published in *Study Encounter X* (1974) 1-11. See also S. J. Samartha, "Reflections on a Multilateral Dialogue," *The Ecumenical Review* 26 (1974) 637-46.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 644.

<sup>22</sup> Report from Section III. "Seeking Community," under the subtitle "II. Faiths and the Search for Community." Mimeograph, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> Something perhaps could be said here about the Lausanne Congress of 1974; see G. Anderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 239-52. It dealt on Evangelism and drew up the document entitled "The Lausanne Covenant." In response to it a group of about 400 among the 2,700 participants issued another statement entitled "Theological Implications of Radical Discipleship." The two statements hold a different approach to Evangelism as a consequence of the problem of basic approach to men of living faiths and to living religions. — More important however for us in Asia is the Bangkok conference on "Salvation Today" (29 Dec. 1972-8 Jan. 1973). The *International Review of Mission* 62 (1973), pp. 133-230 published documents, papers and reports of the conference. Bangkok dealt with akin subjects like culture and identity where the problem of "conversion" was tackled; but it somehow limited itself by stating, when speaking about God's "presence with men," that "our preoccupation is with the revealed Christ and with the proclamation of him as he has been made known to us."

<sup>25</sup> See the commentary by John M. Oesterreicher on the "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions," *Nostra Aetate* (NAe), Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. 3. London: Herder and Herder, 1969, pp. 1-154.

<sup>26</sup> One of the bishops commented caustically on these two meager lines of the initial schema: "Two lines for two-thirds of the world!"

<sup>27</sup> Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes* (AG) 11.

<sup>28</sup> These are the most important: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (LG) 16, 48; Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) 73, 94; Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes* (AG) 11, 12, 16, 41; Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church, *Christus Dominus* (CD) 16; Decree on Priestly Formation, *Optatam Totius* (OT) 16; Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (AA) 27; Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum Educationis* (GE) 11.

<sup>29</sup> The Council does not say that the religions are means of salvation, but neither does it deny that they can be. Theology in fact—or some theologians at least—have tried to show that they can be such. See Samuel Rayan, S.J., "Mission After Vatican II: Problems and Positions," *International Review of Mission* 59 (1970) 414-26. See also A. Balchand, S.J., *The Salvific Value of Non-Christian Religions According to Asian Christian Theologians Writing in Asian-Published Theological Journals, 1965-1970*. Manila: East Asian Pastoral Institute, 1973.

<sup>30</sup> Constitution on the Church, LG 16.

<sup>31</sup> John B. Carman, *art. cit.*, p. 207. Although this statement is substantially true, still varied distinctions and qualifications are made by different theologians to the way grace and salvation are given. The use of the word "channels" in this context appears to single out as official *one* of the *various* explanations proposed by theologians. Not everybody, however, will agree with this view.

<sup>32</sup> *All India Seminar: Church in India Today, Bangalore 1969*. C.B.C.I. Centre. New Delhi, pp. 243-44, under section II, "Principles and Practice of Renewal," no. 3 entitled "Respectability and Dialogue." Also under section I, no. 3: "We recognize the wealth of truth, goodness and beauty in India's religious traditions; it is all God's gift to our nation from ancient times," *ibid.*, p. 240. See also the concrete recommendation of Workshop IV, "Dialogue with Other Religions," pp. 340-43. — The historical evolution of the whole change of attitude in Christianity is well presented by P. Damboriena, *op. cit.*, pp. 508-22. — The "Statement of the Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians" held at Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, 5-12 August 1976, declares: "34. We recognise also as part of the reality of the Third World the influence of religions and cultures, and the need for Christianity to enter into a dialogue with them in humility. We believe that these religions and cultures have a place in God's universal plan and the Holy Spirit is actively at work among them." IDOC, no. 46 (August 1976) 8.

