For an Interreligious Discernment of Our Time

edited by
Giovanni Rizzi

Mission&Formation

Giovanni Rizzi (ed.)
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On the front cover
Symbolic representation of the Holy Spirit as a dove,
from medieval Monastery of Žiča (Kraljevo, Serbia, 13th cent.)

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Preface[1]

In both the Old and New Testaments, we can identify a process of uninterrupted discernment.[2] It is observed in several contexts, though the discerning authors differ in terms of chronology and circumstances, content and forms of language, as well as according to the individuals or objects involved in the process of discernment.

The religious discernment referred to in this context is not part of the theological debate, which is often confined to the "Theology

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[1] The project has been developed and submitted by a team of professors of the Pontifical Urban University: T. Abraha, É.-N. Bassoumboul, B. Kanakappally, G. Rizzi, G. Sabetta, with the external support of Prof. G. Bellia (Camporotondo Etneo [Ct], January 5, 1948 - Catania, March 12, 2020) and P.F. Fumagalli. Round tables were conducted at the International Center for Mission and Formation (CIAM) in 2017 according to a seminar format. The proceedings, coordinated by Prof. Fr. Fabrizio Meroni, CIAM Director and Secretary General of the Pontifical Missionary Union at the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, delineated all the various aspects of the study assigned to the expertise of each of the professors. The different analyses were subsequently presented for discussion in a final seminar. The study that follows, as well as the individual parts, are the result of the collaboration and approval of the Faculty of the Pontifical Urban University. This volume (with the exception of G. Sabetta's essay) was translated into English by Cristiana Conti, with the collaboration of Jeffrey A. Easton (unless otherwise specified, all quotations are free translations).

[2] The formulation "First Testament" should be avoided because, for Muslims, the Qur'an is the final and conclusive message of the *Miqra'ot* (i.e., Scriptures) of Judaism, and of the Old and New Testaments for Christians. If we were to adopt the expression First Testament in place of the Christian Old Testament, then we would inevitably acknowledge the misperception that after the First Testament, there will be another one and consequently we would legitimize Muslims to believe in the existence of a "Third Testament," i.e., the Qur'an as the ultimate testimony of the two preceding Testaments. As for the expression "Old Testament," it should be considered neither disrespectful nor delegitimizing of the Jewish *Miqra'ot*. This expression is rooted in an unbroken Christian tradition in all the Christian Churches, both western and eastern. Such Christian tradition differs in terms of both the number of sacred texts and the linguistic forms of the different ancient versions of Scripture with regard to the specificity of the Masoretic text in Judaism. Nevertheless, this tradition is characterized by hermeneutics that is focused specifically on Jesus, unlike the Hebrew *Miqra'ot*.

of Religions or *with* Religions." Rather, it reflects current trends in the field, while also maintaining a distinctively Christian-Catholic perspective that does not prioritize an intrinsic natural reason.

Being exhaustive on this subject is practically impossible, and a preliminary biblical approach may be unnecessary. However, one aspect requires further elaboration, namely, discernment within the interreligious sphere.

Discernment is a human activity, even if not entirely human, and deals with the cultural and religious experiences of our time. Viewed from a Christian perspective, the process of discernment focuses on a contemporary secular culture that is marked by an indisputable "laicist" dimension within the "global West," which exists also among the many Jewish faiths (also known as Judaism), Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and traditional African religions. Another similar demarcation of the field is given by an emphasis on the specific role of the ministry of the Vatican Dicastery of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples – to which the Pontifical Urban University also belongs – which calls on us to consider the issue of interreligious discernment in light of the guidelines adopted by the Pontifical Mission Societies, belonging to the same Vatican Dicastery.

A discernment of interreligious experience, especially in the ecclesiastical circumscriptions where the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples operates, which is about to draw lessons from its four hundred years of existence (1622-2022), should also include the galaxy of "religious sects." However, their fragmentation, phenomenology, and straightforward classification would require further elaboration.

Such delimitation of the field in part reflects the framework of *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relations of the Church with Non-Christian Religions of the Second Vatican Council, which was adopted fifty-four years ago at the Council Hall in Rome, on 26 October 1965.[3] That it has endured for a half-century is no small feat,

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[3] The Council document *Nostra Aetate*, as is well known, is the result of an elaborate redaction: paragraph 4, on "Jewish religion" (861-868), provides the starting point for the subsequent Declaration, which, for reasons of completeness, included appropriate references to Hinduism, Buddhism (paragraph 2, 856-858), and "Islamic religion" (paragraph 3, 859-860). The Declaration was then complemented by an "Introduction" on the nature of the Church's relations with non-Christian religions (paragraph 1, 853-855), and by a conclusion on "Universal

considering the pace of the political, cultural, and religious changes taking place in our time. Nevertheless, while the essential and ongoing value of the Council's Declaration must be recognized, it is in keeping with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council to make necessary adjustments.

In itself, opening up discernment to the secular culture, along with its contemporary "laicist" shift in the global West, does not necessarily spill out into other thematic areas, as each religion, Christianity included, engages in different ways with the secular culture of the global West. Moreover, it should be recognized that the latter exerts deep hermeneutical pressure on religions. It is clear to all that secular Western culture presumes to interpret religion as if it had the key to it, seeking to confine its expressions to ancestral or traditional cultural forms, which are today considered inadequate to understand reality. Secular culture, as a global and holistic interpretation of reality, seeks to replace religion itself with a "non-religious religion," one that seeks to be free of preconceived notions. At the same time, it also strives to map out both how and in which context ancient or traditional religions can continue to operate.

The divide between this demand and an awareness of it inevitably leads to unpredictable scenarios, to resistance, and perhaps even to a withdrawal, which is to this day still unthinkable.

GIOVANNI RIZZI

Fraternity" (paragraph 5, 869-871). There are other references on the ecclesiological significance of relations with the Jewish people (Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* 16), and on the continuity and unity of the Christian Scriptures with the Jewish Scriptures as revealed to the peoples of the Mosaic Alliance (Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* 14; P.F. FUMAGALLI, *Dialogo ebraico-cristiano*, Centro Ambrosiano, Milano 2013, 21-22). There is a relevant reference also on the Islamic religion, "In the first place amongst these there are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind" (Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* 16).

For an Interreligious Discernment of Our Time

❖ Giovanni Rizzi

1. A Question of Methodology

The discipline of theology, which is commonly referred to as "Theology of Religions," supplies the basic principles for a challenging task of the kind put forth in this essay. The claim that we can objectively and fairly discuss religions and cultures has now become a "fiction," and is more often than not completely groundless.

The efforts made to present Christian, and Catholic, theology as an objective, philosophically, and theologically justified model for every culture and religion have proven unproductive. Not only is this the result of an inherent and rigid dialectic, but also of a methodological issue, one that has yet to be settled[1] and will not be resolved anytime soon. The dialectical method, historically shown in Exclusivism,[2] Inclusivism,[3] Pluralism,[4] and Interiorism,[5] sought to estab-

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[1] For a comprehensive overview on the question of method, see M. Naro, "Il metodo teologico e la teologia delle religioni," in M. Crociata (ed.), *Teologia delle religioni: la questione del metodo*, Città Nuova, Roma 2006, 13-34.

[2] According to which only the Christian Revelation is to be regarded as genuine and revealed through religion, unlike other religions and cultures.

[3] Christian Revelation in some way also includes other religions and cultures, regardless of whether or not they are aware of it.

[4] Christian Revelation shares with other religions and cultures an understanding of the divine. A synthetic overview of the Exclusivist, Inclusive, and Pluralist theological models, with attention to the Christological and ecclesiological implications in each of the three models, can be found in the essay by C. Molari, "La fede cristiana in tensione tra lo specifico e l'universale," in G. D'Costa (ed.), *La teologia pluralista delle religioni: un mito? L'unicità cristiana riesaminata*, Cittadella, Assisi 1994, 11-48. A more comprehensive review of the state of the theological discussion on the subject was made by A. Cozzi, *Teologia delle religioni*, Facoltà Teologica dell'Italia Settentrionale, www.ftismilano.it/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/05/Cozzi.pdf/.

[5] This formulation was proposed recently by Gerhard Gäde, who has applied

lish one possible theology of religions. Yet it has been challenged, for different reasons, by both Theology and the Magisterium of the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, this method has also shown that different religious forms do not simply overlap.[6] Every religious and cultural system should be able to self-reflect in such a way that, whenever there is convergence to be observed either at the beginning or during the process of discernment, differences in language and systems can ultimately prevail, showing that a fundamental core of distinctiveness continues to exist. In addition, the paradigmatic witness texts of the various religions and cultures cannot be detached from the traditions which supply a specific fundamental and indispensable hermeneutical structure.

With this in mind, any attempt to turn the framework of a "Theology *of* Religions" into that of a "Theology *with* Religions" is at present not merely a demanding task but also one fraught with technical and scientific complexities. It would not solve the problem of the irreducibility of languages and their actual content. The same can be said of a more narrowly defined program of "Theology with a religion or with a (non-Christian) culture," which may be unable to settle the fundamental issue discussed above.

On another level, the activity of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, which has a strong pastoral and operational focus,[7] harness-

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it to the relationship between Christianity and Islam, employing the analogous relationship between Jewish and Christian Scriptures (G. Gäde, *Adorano con noi il Dio unico*, Borla, Roma 2008). Gäde's treatment is similar to the approach of Inclusivism; however, he incurred ecclesiastical sanctions by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which has suspended him from teaching Religious Theology in the Theological Faculties of the Catholic Church.

[6] The articulated treatment of the phenomenon of the non-overlapping of religious languages may be considered emblematic, as highlighted in its application to Islam by G. Rizzardi, *Il linguaggio religioso dell'Islam*, Glossa, Milano 2004; Id., *L'islām: il linguaggio della morale e della spiritualità*, Glossa, Milano 2007.

[7] See also the most recent *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, signed by His Holiness Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Al-Sharif Ahmad Al-Tayyeb in Abu Dhabi, on February 4, 2019. At this stage, the document should be seen as a blueprint that has been approved jointly by both parties, but which has not yet been fully implemented in the Muslim and Christian-Catholic world. Regarding the Christian-Catholic world, it will be essential to enhance our understanding of the whole process by providing the necessary clarifications on the matter, indicating explicitly its hermeneutics and practical methods of discernment. Only then will it be possible to evaluate the experience.

es the people's natural desire to meet and discover their differences in order to work together on shared issues. There is no need to dwell on specific differences and irreducible specificities when it is dialogue and goodwill that promote peaceful, constructive, and stimulating coexistence. Yet in the intentions of its promoters, this dialogue should not suggest that all has been resolved nor that this type of dialectic needs only to occur over a short period of time. The internal logic of cultural and religious systems, not least their different hermeneutics, inevitably leaves critical problems and conflicts unresolved. Unless this situation is fully understood, one risks being left in bitter disillusion, possibly with devastating consequences. A genuine dialogue can begin when we have, from the outset, a precise and complete understanding of the different positions.

In light of what has been described above, it should be clarified that all contributors to this volume are members of the Catholic Church and are in various ways connected to one another. An effort has been made to enable each religion and culture, about which we offer discernment, to fully reflect on itself and in accordance with its own distinctive historical hermeneutics. Doing so does not alter the fact that this reflection is intended as a contribution to the discernment of the modern interreligious world and is consistent with Catholic theological criteria. Most importantly, this discussion should not yield to the simple natural reason (*ratio ut ratio*), but should step back from a Eurocentric Catholic theology or, so to speak, a Western theology. In this context, a "biblical" preamble is necessary to tackle the question of the "Western" perception of Catholic theology over religions and cultures, inasmuch as the latter can in some way speak for themselves, with particular reference to Judaism and Islam. We also wish to explore traditional African religions and Asian cultures and religions, namely Hinduism and Buddhism, on their own terms and within the historical framework that is necessary to fully comprehend them.

There is broad agreement among the contributors to this volume and outside advisors on the need for this research framework to be consistent with the Council's Declaration *Nostra Aetate*. It is agreed that space should be given for further elaboration of African traditional religions, as well as Hinduism and Buddhism.[8] This also ap-

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[8] The Pontifical Urban University belongs to the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and has a long tradition of relations with Africa and Asia.

plies to Islam and Judaism, which were already covered by *Nostra Aetate*, and were then dealt with individually. Even more than fifty years later, their treatment cannot be summarily standardized.

It was deemed appropriate to draw up this distinction for two reasons. First, it is important that academic contributions on traditional African religions, in particular Islam, are grounded in the perspective of African cultures themselves and allow them to speak on their own, in accordance with their particular features and respective understanding of their present historical circumstances.

Second, Hinduism and Buddhism are addressed not only in terms of their historical background and circumstances but also according to their historical relationships with the West and the Christian world. Likewise, in the spirit of mutual and beneficial understanding, our position with respect to the study of Islam and Judaism must be clarified. This does not imply a continuing opposition but indicates rather that we are fully aware of our initial position with regard to our interlocutors.

2. The Biblical Foundation of Interreligious Discernment

A biblical preamble underpins the aforementioned structures of interreligious discernment. The reason is that a Christian approach has already been adopted in this discernment, and it involves both its religious foundation and fundamental text: the Bible. This latter must be understood as the Old Testament, the ultimate realization and definitive hermeneutics of which are found in the New Testament.

Both texts were written in an original language and then enriched by subsequent ancient editions, which were a structural component in the traditions of the Western and Eastern Christian Church. This also implies that the Bible cannot be detached from the founding traditions of the Churches that have accompanied and actualized it over the centuries.

This outline of the biblical Christian tradition offers a nearly straightforward picture of the basic principles of discernment in the Old and New Testaments. A number of these principles may be help-

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This is why we have included in this analysis a separate treatment of traditional African religions, Hinduism, and Buddhism that focuses on the way these traditions have reflected on their past and on their historical and cultural relationship with the Christian and Western world.

ful in the practice of interreligious discernment as established above. Not to the exclusion of other languages, Greek can be taken into consideration as a standard language for both the Old and New Testaments. Indeed, Greek was seminal among the languages in which the Bible was transmitted in Christian traditions from the very beginning, making both constituent parts of the Bible readily accessible. The advantage of Greek lies in its prevalence as a common language, and very often quotations, allusions, and references to the Old Testament in the New Testament are reflective of the *Septuagint* (LXX). The underlying backdrop of this Greek version and its early Jewish hermeneutics never concerned the early Christian Churches, neither in the West nor in the East. Indeed, they used the Septuagint version of the Old Testament as a holy and *inspired* text from a Christian perspective, and employed it widely for liturgy, meditation, and personal prayer. Of particular importance here is the development of the Greek verb *dokimázein*, whose semantic range embraces the idea of "practicing discernment." This verb recurs throughout the Old Testament, and it is possible to track its decisive evolution in the New Testament.

3. Discernment as a *Dokimázein* Operation in both the Old and New Testaments

The selection of the Greek version of the Old Testament in the *Septuagint* will facilitate this study of the verb *dokimázein*.[9] This choice

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[9] In all, there are 36 passages in which the verb appears: Judg 7:4 (*Codex Alexandrinus*); 1 Ezra 9:40 (*Codex Vaticanus*); Job 14:3; Ps 16:3; 25:2; 65:10; 67:31; 80:8; 94:9; 138:1-23; Prov 8:10; 17:3; 27:21; Wis 1:3; 2:19; 3:6; 11:10; Sir 2:5; 24:12 (in a copy of the *Codex Sinaiticus*); 27:5; 31:10.26; 39:34; 42:8; Zech 11:13; Jer 6:27; 9:6; 11:20; 12:3; 17:10; 22:12; 2 Macc 1:34; 2 Macc 4:3; 3 Macc 2:6; 4 Macc 17:12. In addition to these, there are two passages in which the verb does not appear in the *Septuagint* tradition, though it is found in the versions of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion (Gen 42:15; Job 23:10), which translated the text of the Hebrew Bible into Greek; in another instance, only Aquila employs the verb *dokimázein* (Ps 10:4-5). Finally, in the case of Prov 17:3, the *Septuagint*, Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion all use the verb *dokimázein*, which occurs in another three cases assigned to other translators into Greek, who are not identified. (Ps 7:10 and Dan 1:12-14; E. HATCH – H.A. REDPATH, *A Concordance to the Septuagint and the Other Greek Versions of the Old Testament (Including the Apocryphal Books)*, vol. 1, Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, Graz 1971, 340a).

puts us in contact with a literary corpus whose constituent books were composed (i.e., translated and elaborated) within roughly the same chronological milieu, regardless of the disparate chronology of their original Hebrew counterparts.[10] Moreover, the New Testament literature, whose features reflect its original composition in Greek, is chronologically aligned with the literature of part of the corpus of the Septuagint.[11] This narrow focus on the verb *dokimá-*

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[10] The books contained in the literary corpus of the *Septuagint* were written and edited in chronological proximity with one another. The Greek translation of *Judges* may date around 200 BC, while the Greek translation of *1 Ezra*, perhaps from an original Hebrew *Vorlage*, may date to 150-145 BC. The second book of *Maccabees*, on the other hand, seems to have been put down in writing in 110 BC, while *3 Maccabees* and *4 Maccabees* around 30 BC and 80 AD, respectively (N. Fernández Marcos – M.ª V. Spottorno Díaz Caro [eds.], *La Biblia Griega Septuaginta* II. *Libros Históricos*, J.M. Cañas Reíllo, M. López Salvá, I. Delgado Jara [trans.], Ediciones Sígueme, Salamanca 2011, 14). The translations of *Psalms*, *Jobs*, and *Proverbs* may date to the second century BC (N. Fernández Marcos – M.ª V. Spottorno Díaz Caro [eds.], *La Biblia Griega Septuaginta* III. *Libros Poéticos y Sapienciales*, N. Fernández Marcos, M.ª V. Spottorno Díaz Caro, J.M. Cañas Reíllo, M. López Salvá, I. Delgado Jara, A. Piñero Sáenz, L. Miralles Maciá [trans.], Ediciones Sígueme, Salamanca 2013, 9). The composition of *Wisdom* may date back to 27 BC, whereas the Greek translation of *Sirach* from a Hebrew original appears to have been composed in 132-117 BC. The translation of *Zechariah* as part of the Twelve Minor Prophets can be dated to the first half of the second century BC, and the translation of *Jeremiah* to the period 210-117 BC (N. Fernández Marcos – M.ª V. Spottorno Díaz Caro [eds.], *La Biblia Griega Septuaginta* IV. *Libros Proféticos*, N. Fernández Marcos, M.ª V. Spottorno Díaz Caro, J.M. Cañas Reíllo, I. Delgado Jara, M. López Salvá, L. Miralles Maciá [trans.], Ediciones Sígueme, Salamanca 2015, 225). A seminal overview, albeit divergent in certain aspects on the book edition of the corpus of the *Septuagint*, can be found in G. Dorival, « L'achèvement de la Septante dans le judaïsme. Du faveur au rejet », in M. Harl, G. Dorival, O. Munnich (eds.), *La Bible grecque des Septante*, Cerf, Paris 1988, 93.96-97.111. The Greek versions of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion from Hebrew can be dated to roughly the first decades of the second century AD. If we consider the translations from a Hebrew original and the compositions directly written in Greek, it can be assumed that the books of the literary corpus of the *Septuagint* were written between 210 BC and 120 AD.

[11] The verb *dokimázein* occurs at least 21 times in the New Testament: four times in *Luke* (Lk 12:56 [3 times]; 14:19), probably written down in 80 AD; fourteen times in the Pauline letters, written between 54-60 AD (Rom 1:28; 12:2; 14:22; 1 Cor 3:13; 11:28; 16:3; 2 Cor 8:8-22; 13,5; Gal 6:4; Phil 1:10; 1 Thess 2:4 [2 times]; 5:21); once in the Deutero-Pauline letters written in the 80s AD (1 Tim 3:10); and two times in the Catholic epistles, written between the years 80-90 AD (1 Pet 1:7; 1 Jn 4:1).

zein and its meaning of "to practice discernment" obviously sets aside the multifaceted other forms associated with its lexical root. Yet it is sufficient to illustrate the subject of discernment vis-à-vis the context in which the root is used.

4. Discernment as a *Dokimázein* Process in the Old Testament

In the Septuagint and some passages of other ancient Hebrew versions written in Greek, the verb *dokimázein* is used primarily in the following two ways: to describe the activity of *dokimázein* performed by God, and to describe this cognitive operation by man toward other humans or even nature, but not toward God himself. On the other hand, it is God who practices *dokimázein* primarily on his people.[12] This is especially apparent in the book of *Psalms* in which the verb *dokimázein* characterizes God's action when he considers, discerns, judges, and even cleanses the inner self of the person who worships for his own benefit or on behalf of the entire nation. When used in parallel with other verbs, *dokimázein* acquires a metaphorical sense in referring to the process of melting metal ore to purify it from its dregs (in biblical Hebrew the verb *bāḥan* often points to this

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[12] In LXX *Judges* 7:4 of the *Codex Alexandrinus*, before the battle of God against the Midianite oppressors, the Amalekites, and other Eastern peoples, God advises Gideon that he has too many men for the battle and that he should not delude himself into thinking that victory would be the result of his and his men's success. Therefore, the Lord promotes a steady shrinking of the coalition, to the point of saying, "take them down into the water, and I will *test them* for you there." The Greek verb *dokimázein* reinterprets (*kai dokimō autous*) the original Hebrew *wə'eṣrəpennû*, which the Codex Vaticanus translates more literally as "and I will *sift them* for you there." However, the Hebrew original does not refer to a ritual purification but rather to the operation of the smelter who separates metal from slag. Then again, the way in which God's exercise is carried out does not involve any specific operation, suggesting a qualitative selection of warriors. Indeed, whoever laps the water with their tongues like a dog is chosen, and whoever drinks with their hands is excluded (LXX Judg 7:6). That would seem a rather unfavorable test evaluation. In this context, God's *dokimázein* exercise (*Codex Alexandrinus*) points to God's judgment, which is not centered on individuals, but rather aimed at securing that the undertaking's success will be independent of any advantageous abilities of the chosen individuals. Gideon and his warriors must in no way assume that they have any bearing on the anticipated victory.

function). In the biblical text, this activity is generally performed on a person's *heart* and *kidneys*.[13]

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[13] A person who prays can see that such God's operation has already taken place and that no faults have come out of it: "You tried (*edokímasas*) my heart; you visited by night; you grilled me, and no injustice was found in me" (LXX Ps 16[17]:3). Even when the biblical wording becomes a declaration of innocence, it is still God who exercises discernment. The speaker may, however, entreat God to carry out this task, that is, to discern and refine: "Prove me (*okímasón me*), O Lord, and try me; test my kidneys and my heart" (LXX Ps 25[26]:2). By retracing the history of salvation in the collective memory of the people's faith, the speaker may creatively draw on the smelter's metaphor of assessing and refining silver through fire to describe God's divine action in history: "Because you, O God, tested us, you tried us as silver is tried" (LXX Ps 65[66]:10). At times, the Greek version's use of metaphors by the speaker on behalf of the people comes across as a re-interpretation. The theme of God's assessing his people occurs more frequently in passages in which the Hebrew text speaks of silver: "Rebuke the wild animals of the reeds; the gathering of the bulls is among the heifers of the peoples in order that those tested (*dedokimasménous*) by silver not be shut out. Scatter nations that want wars" (LXX Ps 67[68]:31[30]). The "wild animals," "bulls," and "heifers" refer to the pagan nations, whereas the prayer implores that God's people may "not be shut out" because they are "put to the test (*dedokimasménous*) by silver." Even God can recall that among the things he has done for his people is that of keeping them in check: "In affliction you called upon me, and I rescued you; I hearkened to you in a secret spot of a tempest; I tested you (*edokímasás se*) at a water of contention" (LXX Ps 80[81]:8[7]). The last colon of the verse refers to the episode of the water shortage in the Sinai desert at Meribah (LXX Exod 17:7), which has the literal meaning of "contention." Concerning this incident, the overreaction of the people had come to light through the very task with which God had tried to put them to the test (*dokimázein*), to make them come to terms with their inner feelings. The speaker, who has recognized God's action toward them from the start, can say, "O Lord, you examined me (*edokímasás me*) and knew me" (LXX Ps 138[139]:1), and ask that the Lord continues to do so through his life's tests: "Examine me (*dokímasón me*), O God, and know my heart; test me, and know my paths" (LXX Ps 138[139]:23), as if professing his innocence. In Aquila's translation from Hebrew into Greek, God's *dokimázein* activity toward men features even in places where the standard Greek version of the *Septuagint* does not use the same Greek verb to translate Hebrew. This is what Aquila means: "The Lord in his holy shrine; the Lord, his throne in heaven, his eyes focus on th needy; his eyelids examine (= *dokimázein*) the sons of men. The Lord examines (= *dokimázein*) the righteous and the impious, he who loves injustice hates his own life" (Aquila Ps 10,4-5). The verb *dokimázein* appears also in some other variants of the tradition of the *Septuagint* on the *Psalms*, but it is impossible to identify who introduced it into the Greek tradition: "Do let the evil of the sinners cease, and you shall direct the righteous, God is one who tests (= *dokimázein*) hearts and kidneys" (Greek variant in Ps 7,10).

The central idea of God's melting of the human heart, as if he were a smelter who purifies metal, can also be found in *Proverbs*. The presence of this imagery suggests that it was part of a broader wisdom tradition, which was deeply rooted in the everyday life of the Israelites.[14] Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion use this verb in their translations of the same biblical passage. Alongside God's action, in "Wisdom Literature" the personification of "Wisdom," as part and parcel of the divine,[15] also engages in *dokimázein*. In the Greek translations of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion from the Hebrew language, the verb *dokimázein*, occurring in slightly different verbal forms, denotes Job's trust in God who simultaneously scrutinizes the conduct of the righteous man.[16] God's vigilance over the righteous warrants his untimely death, not to be construed as a punishment, but rather as his acceptance into the Kingdom of Heaven.[17]

In "Prophetic Literature," the verb *dokimázein* almost always refers to an activity carried out by God, though occasionally also to the work of his chosen prophet.[18] The ability of God's vision to pen-

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[14] As silver and gold are tried (*dokimázetai*) in a furnace, so are choice hearts with the Lord" (LXX Prov 17:3).

[15] "Take discipline and not silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold (*dedokimasménon*); yes, choose perception instead of pure gold" (LXX Prov 8:10).

[16] "But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me (*dokimázein*), I will come forth as gold" (Job 23:10).

[17] In LXX Wis 3:6 we read, "as gold in the furnace, he tested them (*edokímasen*), and as a sacrificial whole burnt offering, he accepted them" (LXX Wis 3:6). In the Sacred History, which is celebrated in the context of the Easter Haggadah, the Lord is shown as both a father who scrutinizes his children and a harsh king toward his enemies: "For these you put to the test (*edokímasas*) like a father giving a warning (*katadikázōn*), but the others you examined like a stern king passing sentence" (LXX Wis 11:10). Wisdom establishes herself among a people, which the Greek textual tradition of Sirach generally describes as "glorious," and which the second-hand Sinaitic code defines as "scrutinized," which is understood by the Lord: "And I took root among a glorified people (*dedokimasménō*), in the portion of the Lord is my inheritance."

[18] In the Greek version, the prophet Jeremiah is vetted by God and tasked to carry out this same operation not only for his people, according to the Hebrew text, but also for other peoples, as proposed by the Greek text, so that the action of discernment carried out by God on their conduct may be recognized: "I have given you as tester (*dokimastḗn*) among tested peoples (*dedokimasménois*), and you will know me (*en tō̦ dokimásai me*) when I test their way" (LXX Jer 6:27). Against the backdrop of the literary cycle of the enemy from the north, God promises

etrate his people's hearts is also apparent in the peritestamentary literature in the *Septuagint* corpus, where the texts cover certain aspects of sacred history.[19]

In "Wisdom and Prophetic Literature," man is not permitted to scrutinize the behavior of God, as doing so would either challenge God or give an inadequate assessment of his person.[20] In some cir-

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Jeremiah that he will cleanse his people by fire and sift through them, revealing the slags of their evil: "Therefore this is what the Lord says: Behold, I will refine them and test them (*dokimō*), because I will act in the face of the wickedness of the daughter of my people" (LXX Jer 9:7). More than once in the context of Jeremiah's confessions, there emerges both a sapiential and prophetic confession of faith in God who scrutinizes the hearts of the prophet's enemies: "O Lord, when you judge righteously, when you test (*dokimázōn*) kidneys and heart, may I see your avenging on them, because to you I have revealed my plea of right" (LXX Jer 11:20). The prophet Jeremiah, on the other hand, proclaims his innocence, declaring that God knows him and has already examined him in his heart, while hoping that God will purify his enemies on the day of judgment, rather than simply set them aside for slaughter, as the Hebrew text suggests: "And you know me, Lord, you have approved of (*dedokímakas*) my heart before you. Purify them for the day of their slaughter" (LXX Jer 12:3). God explicitly reveals Himself to Jeremiah as one who scrutinizes people's innermost self: "And you, O Lord, you know me; you have tested (*dokimázōn*) my heart before you. Purify them for a day of their slaughter!" (LXX Jer 17:10). The prophet, on the other hand, relies on God to scrutinize people and situations to put his cause before Him: "O Lord, one who tests (*dokimázōn*) what is right, one who understands kidneys and hearts, may I see your avenging among them, because to you I have revealed my defensive pleas" (LXX Jer 20:12).

[19] "You made known your power when with many and diverse punishments you tried (*dokimásas*) bold Pharao, when he had enslaved your people, holy Israel, at which time you made known your great might" (LXX 3 Mac 2:6). Peritestamentary (literature of Jewish origin, with extensions up to the II-III centuries AD); term more appropriate than intertestamentary (temporally between the OT and the NT) and apocryphal (confessional term).

[20] Out in the desert, the people sought to test the Lord, challenging him. In contrast to the original Hebrew, the Greek wording establishes that God promptly showed the consequences of that behavior: "Where your fathers tried me; they put me to the proof (*edokímasan*) and saw my works" (LXX Ps 94:9). Also, in the second half of the book of *Zechariah*, the derisory evaluation made of God's action and person reveals, in the words of God, a threat which is not too subtle: "And the Lord said to me, 'Place them in the smelter, and I will observe whether it is genuine (*dókimon*), as I have been proven for them (*edokimásthēn*).'" And I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord, into the smelter" (LXX Zech 11:13). A comparable and programmatic instruction is found in the book of *Wisdom*: "For crooked thoughts separate from God, and his power, when it is tested (*dokimazoménē*), convicts the foolish" (LXX Wis 1:3). In

cumstances, one's lived experience grants insight into what is neces-
sary for life; such intuition is often represented in the "wisdom tra-
dition."[21] It is also apparent that a man must scrutinize those with
whom he interacts.[22]

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this case, the word "power" refers to God, whereas being "put to the test (*dokima-zoméné*)" evokes Israel's wrongful action in the desert. When the wicked pretend to test a righteous man, in the very sense of tempting and challenging him, they turn into oppressors and persecutors before both God and Wisdom: "Let us af-flict him with insult and torture, that we may learn how reasonable he is and may put his forbearance to the test (*kaì dokimásomen*)" (LXX Wis 2:19).

[21] In the book of *Job*, Elihu makes this basic remark: "Because the ear tries (*dokimázei*) words, and the throat tastes food" (LXX Job 34:3). In the sapiential framework of *Proverbs*, the craft of the smelter can be used as a metaphor for hu-man interaction: "[21] Burning is a test (*dokímion*) for silver and gold, but a man is tested by the mouth of them who praise him. [21a] The heart of a lawless person seeks out evil, but an upright heart seeks out knowledge" (LXX Prov 27:21-21a), even when the Greek version glosses over the original Hebrew formulation. On the oth-er hand, the metaphorical development of the image of the smelter, to indicate man's innermost realization, goes on in the book of *Sirach*: "Because with fire gold is tested (*dokimázetai*), and acceptable people in the furnace of humiliation" (LXX Sir 2:5). Indeed, "A furnace tests (*dokimázei*, the Codex Sinaiticus features the vari-ant of the contracted form *dokimā*) by dipping; thus wine tests hearts in strife of the proud (LXX Sir 31:26). A similar development can be observed in the image of the work of the ceramist: "A kiln tests (*dokimázei*) a potter's vessels, and a per-son's test is in his deliberation" (LXX Sir 27:5). Sometimes, the subject scrutiniz-ing a person is not expressed, with the result that the passive form of *dokimázein* can theoretically be related to God, although, in all likelihood, this is a reference to the very experience of life whose intrinsic laws are never divorced from the divine order for Israel's sages: "Who has been tested (*edokimásthē*) by it and been made perfect? And it will be as a boast for him. Who was able to transgress and did not transgress, and to do evil and did not do so?" (LXX Sir 31,10). A similar case oc-curs in Codex Sinaiticus: "And it is not possible to say, 'This is worse than this,' for all things will be highly esteemed (*dokimasthēsetai*) at a right time" (LXX[S] Sir 39:34). Often, it must be assumed that only over time will one be able to scrutinize an action and approve it: "Do not be ashamed of discipline for the stupid and fool-ish and for the aged guilty of sexual immorality, and you will have truly been trained and will have been approved (*dedokimasménos*) before every living person" (LXX Sir 42:8). Gnomic-sapiential content may also be found in a statement ap-pearing in the peritestamental Jewish literature in the Septuagint corpus: "For then virtue, testing them (*dokimázousa*) for their perseverance, offered rewards. Victo-ry meant incorruptibility in long-lasting life" (LXX 4 Macc 17:12).

[22] In the evolution of the story of Joseph, who is now a high Egyptian digni-tary, he must evaluate his brothers' intentions, given their history. Therefore, Aquila and Symmachus have him say: "In this you shall manifest yourselves (*doki-*

Finally, the Codex Vaticanus of *1 Esdras* provides us with an alternative scenario. On the one hand, the critical edition of the *Septuagint* reads: "And Esdras the chief priest brought the law for the entire multitude, from man to woman, and for all the priests to hear the law, on the new moon of the seventh month" (LXX 1 Esd 9:40).[23] On the other hand, the Codex Vaticanus variant states: "And Esdras the chief priest *scrutinized* (*edokímasen*) the law, for all of the multitude, from men unto women, and all the priests to hear the law, on the new moon of the seventh month" (LXX[B] 1 Esd 9:40). Here, the verb *dokimázein* refers to the priestly and scribal role of Ezra, as he scrutinizes and expounds the Scriptures to the entire congregation convened for the liturgical celebration.

5. An Overall View of the Activity of *Dokimázein* in the Septuagint Corpus

It is clear that the "language of scrutiny" (i.e. *dokimázein*) corresponds primarily to the activity of smelting in which fire removes slag from precious or ordinary metals. This language also could have derived from the activity of the ceramicist or potter who molds his wares by means of fire. We should stress, however, that this language is often used symbolically as an indication of man's capacity to dis-

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masthḗsesthē): by the health of Pharao, you shall not depart from this place unless your younger brother comes here!" Daniel, too, in the eponymous literary cycle, while being confident that compliance with Halakha's dietary requirements poses no health risks, accepts that the superintendent of the Persian court scrutinizes, according to a variant formulation, the validity of this belief: "Do test (= *dokimázein*) your servants over a period of ten days, and let us be given some pulse from the earth to gulp down and water to drink" (LXX Dan 1:12); this way the superintendent has time to evaluate the findings: "And he dealt with them in this manner and tested them for ten days" (LXX Dan 1:14). However, beyond the traditional religious epics of the Jewish world, the task of evaluating facts is also the responsibility of a pagan king: "The king investigated (*dokímasas*) the matter and enclosed the place and made it sacred" (LXX 2 Macc 1:34). On the other hand, the evaluation of one's own staff may not always be accurate: "When his hatred progressed to such a degree that even murders were committed by one of Simon's approved agents (*dedokimasménōn*)" (LXX 2 Macc 4:3).

[23] B.G. WRIGHT – A. PIETERSMA (eds.), *A New English Translation of the Septuagint: And the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included Under That Title*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007.

cern, whether it be spiritual, physical, or moral, although most of the time it is restricted to the role of God, or "Wisdom," over humanity, and especially over God's people. The operation of *dokimázein* may serve as a simple divine oversight such as when God selects men and women not according to any recognizable criteria of quality or skill, but in such a way that dispels the belief that a successful undertaking relies on human ability alone (LXX^A Judg 7:4). The *Psalms*, which are the quintessential expression of Israel's prayer, show that only God can wield any form of *dokimázein*, i.e., discernment, of the human heart. God does this not because he needs to understand man's heart but in order to bring to man's attention the impurities, or slag, within himself that must be purified. It is through this divine discernment that the purification from the slag, as it were, is achieved. Israel's prayer recognizes this truth because it acknowledges either that it has happened before (LXX Ps 16:3; 65:10; 67:31) or that it is revealed when people invoke God in their prayer (LXX Ps 26:2). God himself is the one who reminds his people that he has already looked into their hearts in his sacred history (LXX Ps 80:8). For his part, the man who prays remembers that divine discernment has already taken place in his life (LXX Ps 138:1), and he pleads that God will bring it forth again in the present (LXX Ps 138:23) because God never ceases to be among his people with such profound discernment (Ps 10:4-5; see Greek variant in Ps 7:10). The subsequent Greek translations (LXX – Aquila – Symmachus – Theodotion Prov 17:3) reflect Israel's wisdom tradition and agree with the characterization of Job's faith, acknowledging this truth (Aquila – Symmachus – Theodotion Job 23:10). In the same vein, Israel's wisdom tradition comprehends the meaning of the untimely death of the righteous (LXX Wis 3:6) when it comes to God's discernment, and is capable of distinguishing between a God who behaves like a father, scrutinizing and cleansing his children, and a harsh monarch who judges the oppressors (LXX Wis 11:10). This same "Wisdom" can only blossom among people for whom God has already exercised his discernment (LXX^S Sir 24:12).

The faith of the prophets is no different in this regard. For example, Jeremiah is called to engage in God's discernment by becoming himself "a tester" of peoples (LXX Jer 6:27). In the text, God reassures his prophet that it will be God himself who will carry out the necessary discernment of his people and reveal the impurities in their evil hearts (LXX Jer 9:6). In the confessions of Jeremiah, the

prophet seeks God's judgment on men and nature (LXX Jer 11:20): the prophet knows that God has scrutinized his character, yet rather than calling for the destruction of his enemies (LXX Jer 12:3) he continues to seek justice (LXX Jer 20:12). God, in turn, reassures the prophet that he will continue to exercise his discernment over men and women so that each may be rewarded according to his or her actions (LXX Jer 17:10).

In "Wisdom Literature," personified "Wisdom," as an aspect of the divine, participates in the activity of God's discernment of humanity (LXX Prov 8:10). The theme of God's power to peer into all men and women resurfaces prominently in the sacred history of peritestamentary literature, which is part of the *Septuagint* corpus (LXX 3 Macc 2:6). Man cannot carry out the task of discernment in the same way God does for his people and humanity. If he were to do so, then he would put God to the test and would misjudge him (LXX Ps 94:9), and the implications could be serious. This doctrine is also found in prophetic literature. For example, whenever a contemptuous evaluation of the behavior of God is made, God himself responds with a hardly subtle threat (LXX Zech 11:13). "Wisdom" itself rebukes those who pretend to test her (LXX Wis 1:3). The evildoer seeking to scrutinize and test the righteous becomes an oppressor before God and "Wisdom" (Wis 2:19). There are everyday situations in which experience provides the necessary means to understand how to live (LXX Job 34:3), but far from coming overnight (LXX Prov 27:21), this discernment arises only from a crucible of humiliation and suffering (LXX Sir 2:5).

Adverse experiences or situations thus contribute to a capacity for discernment (Sir 31:26). The very act of speaking is itself a form of discernment (Sir 27:5). To the teachers of Israel, however, the life-experience of a person answers to inherent laws that are never separated from the divine order (31:10). A proper discernment, however (LXX^S Sir 39:34; LXX Sir 42:8), can only arise in due course, as is shown in the peritestamentary literature (LXX 4 Macc 17:12). Men, on the other hand, need to examine the people they interact with; the biblical tradition is replete with examples of this kind. As Egypt's chief dignitary, Joseph looks into his brothers' intentions in light of past experiences (Aquila-Symmachus Gen 42:15). In a variant version of his eponymous cycle, Daniel, although he is certain that compliance with the dietary requirements of the Halakha poses no risk, allows the Persian superintendent to evaluate the validity

of this conviction (LXX Dan 1:12-14). Outside the traditional religious Jewish epic, even a pagan king bears responsibility for assessing events (LXX 2 Macc 1:34). And yet even the evaluation of one's fellow collaborators can be inadequate (LXX 2 Macc 4:3). Against this background, Ezra's task is to review and explain the Scriptures to the whole Congregation, which was called to the liturgical celebration (LXX^B 1 Esd 9:40).

6. Discernment as a *Dokimázein* Process in the New Testament

The New Testament reiterates confidence in discernment, presented once more as God's prerogative, and Christ himself condemns his contemporaries on account of their incapacity to understand their own age. Paul voices this same criticism on many occasions and compels Christians everywhere to examine all decisions with a critical eye. At the programmatic level, the first New Testament text deals with Jesus' rebuke of his generation, reproaching his contemporaries for their lack of understanding of their time. Ultimately, Jesus' presence is the very essence of that discernment.

> [54] Then He also said to the multitudes, "Whenever you see a cloud rising out of the west, immediately you say, 'A shower is coming'; and so it is. [55] And when *you see* the south wind blow, you say, 'There will be hot weather'; and there is. [56] Hypocrites! You can discern the face of the sky and of the earth, but how *is it* you do not discern this time? (Lk 12:54-56, NKJV).

In the original Greek text, the verb *dokimázein* occurs twice in verse 56, conveying the meaning of "perceptiveness" in this context. Jesus refers here to himself as the sign worth discerning. Jesus' universe is made of practical things, as is shown also by the use of the Greek verb *dokimázein* in a passage where a man who buys "five yoke of oxen" is "going to test them" (Lk 14:19, NKJV). When dealing with money, it is indeed recommended to "choose wisely" (the same Greek verb) the people you trust the most (cf. 1 Cor 16:3, NKJV). In the same way, Paul understands that he must carefully vet (the same Greek verb) those whom he can trust (cf. 2 Cor 8:22, NIV).

However, Paul also uses the verb *dokimázein* ("to discern") to indicate an insightful evaluation, especially of Christians (1 Cor 8:8).

Each person should question themselves (*dokimázein*) before Holy Communion (1 Cor 11:28) and should test themselves in order to determine whether they are genuinely faithful (2 Cor 13:5). Such a thorough investigation (*dokimázein*) into oneself prevents comparison with others (Gal 6:4). Either way, everyone's merits (1 Cor 3:13) – for it is God who tries (*dokimázein*) man's heart (1 Thess 2:4) – will be tested (*dokimázein*) against the fire of divine judgment. One must also take into account a certain level of subjectivity acting in good faith when assessing personal behavior, including when it is regarded as favorable (*dokimázein*) (Rom 14:22). Yet pagans' failure to discern God (*dokimázein*, cf. Rom 1:28) constitutes a catastrophic oversight, especially since the Law was intended to assist the Jewish people in discerning (*dokimázein*) whatever was best (cf. Rom 2:18).

Christians everywhere are invited to "discern (*dokimázein*) what is best" in order to "be pure and blameless for the day of Christ" (Phil 1:10, NIV). Paul offers this advice, but with a broader significance, in the First Letter to the Christians of Thessaloniki (now Saloniki): "but test them all; hold on to what is good" (1 Thess 5:21, NIV). Here, the original Greek verb *dokimázein* in the imperative serves as an exhortation. With the meaning of discerning, the process of *dokimázein* is typical of money changers. By bouncing a coin on a table to hear the sound of its rebound, moneychangers were able to estimate the quality of the coin's metal alloy as well as determine its value. Its actual commercial value would partly depend on the low, medium, or high quality of its alloy. That was an essential economic operation that required one to gain first-hand experience in order to discern a coin's authentic value. In the concluding remarks of his letter to the Christians of Thessaloniki (5:12-21), Paul exhorts the Christian community, which he had previously evangelized with Silas and Timothy, to operate like moneychangers in their everyday lives so as to scrutinize and discern all things that are good for them. Such a task engages Christians and their communities in an ever-changing world in which even their personal experiences have an important role to play in dealing with life's challenges.

The most comprehensive advice from Paul to the Roman Christians is reflected in the following aphorisms: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test (*dokimázein*) and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing, and perfect will" (Rom 12:2, NIV). The same advice can be found in Deutero-Pauline writings:

"And find out (*dokimázein*) what pleases the Lord" (Eph 5:10, NIV). Whoever is called to carry out specific tasks in the Christian community, "must first be tested (*dokimázein*); and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons" (1 Tim 3:10, NIV). In the same way, in the traditionally Johannine community, it is recommended not to "believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 Jn 4:1, NIV). After all, "the tested (*dokimázein*) genuineness" of the faith of Christians is such even at the time of persecution (1 Pet 1:7, ESV).

7. Discernment as a *Dokimázein* Exercise in the Old and New Testaments

The choice of Greek as the language of the Old and New Testaments and an explicit and official affirmation that the New Testament supplies the final hermeneutics of the Old Testament provide a backdrop against which we can assume that the primary meaning of the verb *dokimázein* is that of discerning or practicing discernment. One should, however, consider the different nuances that this verb acquires when this operation is carried out by God, "Wisdom," or Jesus. This operation is infallible when it is God who discerns, for God, just like Jesus, does not need to uncover people's hearts or understand their circumstances. God's operation enables people to look at their own inner "slag" and purifies them when they conform to His path. The scope and meaning of life's circumstances become apparent in this way.

Discernment is not as thorough and effective when it is carried out by men; it can be uncertain or misleading. Nevertheless, when discernment between men and women is prompted by Jesus himself, as is observed in the New Testament, it then becomes a reliable exercise. Yet, it cannot be regarded as a purely human exercise, one that is carried out only through experience and reasoning. In writing to the Christians of ancient Thessaloniki, Paul points out the priorities and the context of a lived Christian life that are necessary to exercise discernment:

> [12] Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. [13] Hold them in the highest regard in love because of

their work. Live in peace with each other. [14] And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. [15] Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. [16] Rejoice always, [17] pray continually, [18] give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. [19] Do not quench the Spirit. [20] Do not treat prophecies with contempt [21] but test them all; hold on to what is good (1 Thess 5:12-21, NIV).

If, then, the sign of the times to be discerned in the New Testament is the same, namely Jesus' presence, God's discerning activity of putting each person to the test becomes apparent. This is not because the Lord needs to learn something he does not know about the human heart, but because, through the action of discernment, people can truly realize what lies in their hearts. For their part, Christian communities are called upon to consider carefully that which is good, must be preserved, and is pleasing to God, however much they are confronted by the concrete realities of daily life.

Rediscovering a "Difficult" Task?

❖ Giovanni Rizzi – Giuseppe Bellia

Rather than a difficult task, as it was for Jesus' contemporaries, his disciples, and the very group of the Twelve chosen by him, they are words that are difficult to be received, even today among Christian believers. Then, as now, they are *essential words*, yet they do not align with our expectations, our plans, which instead we wish the Lord would take on. The discordance between expectations and projects, on the one hand – just like those of the Twelve – and Jesus' bringing about the "Kingdom of Heaven" or the "Kingdom of God," on the other hand, led Jesus himself to do something utterly puzzling in the few days before his death:

> [12] Now the next day, when they had come out from Bethany, He was hungry. [13] And seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. [14] In response Jesus said to it, "Let no one eat fruit from you ever again." And His disciples heard *it*. (Mk 11:12-14, NKJV).

Such are the ways in which Jesus speaks of things that, in reality, mean something else. Life demands, without permission, that one "bear fruit out of season." Before long, the Twelve would endure the unbearable: the crucified Messiah. Although Jesus had foreseen this and warned them of it, to believe in the Twelve would have been like expecting a fig tree to bear fruit out of season.

Be that as it may, that metaphor is valid for every new generation of Christians, and it also holds for non-Christians. We are often faced with difficult circumstances and feel powerless! And, in truth, no amount of preparation is ever enough. Difficult situations may pass us by, or they may sometimes strike us relentlessly, leaving us like the fig tree of the parable, unable to bear fruit such that no one will believe in it again.

We ask where the "challenge" lies in a task with which we have been entrusted, a task to which we are resistant and indifferent, which we have seen or talked about so many times but have rejected because we believe it to be overwhelming if not even outdated.

PART I

1. The Beliefs and Illusions of Our Time

Everything is made worse by the concurrent decline of politics. Efforts to jointly run public affairs, economy, finances and society, welfare systems consisting of schools, health care, law enforcement, and so forth, as well as international relations, all seem plagued by scandals, opaque interests of powerful groups and organized crime. The public confidence in these institutions is being questioned. The opportunities available to reform and remedy these shortcomings are not always within everyone's reach. On the contrary, the practice of delegating these sorts of tasks to others, marked by an ever-increasing lack of accountability, contributes to the widening gap between citizens and the state.

The complexity of the issues at play, the very concepts that are necessary to capture both the local and the more global contexts, helps to create a "rebound illiteracy," which is difficult to remedy. Essential information is not always readily available. In the pursuit of partisan interests, propaganda for the sake of gaining support can fatally cause confusion. Aggressive slang and blue-collar language that "everyone understands" has become a nauseating deception, one that promotes laziness and ignorance as well as an inability to engage with the public authentically, since it lacks any commitment to educating people. The dream of a half-century ago, when protest movements were seeking to inspire in new ways, is fading away. The effort of the Second Vatican Council to establish a meaningful dialogue with "the worldly city" with the expectation that the Kingdom of God and the construction of the city of man could walk together, has been severely tested.

Within the Catholic Church itself, the new movements would seem to favour their own jargon, which is designed to reassure their members but is not always discernible to non-members. There is also the impression that each of these new movements tends to present itself simply as "the Church," as if to say, "the Church is us ...

and us alone." These are all-embracing experiences, which are difficult to articulate and perhaps need further growth to attain the Pauline wisdom of feeling part of a larger body which is the Church, where everyone requires the entirety of the body of the Church (cf. 1 Cor 12:14-21).

The definitive universal language of the Council, at least for those belonging to the Catholic Church, has a diminished appeal and, in addition to being half a century old, seems stifled by the urgency, however real or alleged, of issues and situations we often simplistically refer to as "new."

Secularism and "laicism" are contributing to the suffocation of many of the most beautiful forces in the Christian world through aggressive and questionable historical claims. Fierce secularist revisionism on a civilization that is now "too confessional" easily forgets about its skeletons in the closet, including the ones of recent years. Everything seemingly has the power to come back to life in some program or utopia, and be smuggled in as "new culture."

The rise of new political parties, which are generous in promising a total renewal (palingenesis) and in rejecting all that has been achieved so far, puzzles us. Notwithstanding the many *new* faces, such *new* political formations, so-called *new* cultures or utopias, do not only consist of young people. Indeed, to achieve a politically substantial consensus, they need to have a large pool of supporters who are not so young anymore.

We cannot rule out that the systems which these not-so-young advocates originally promoted and helped to create are the same ones they so relentlessly denounce today. If we give some credit to the Latin expression *sapientis est mutare consilium* (lit. "it is characteristic of wise men to change opinion"), then we must recognize that other indicators are pointing to the misleading nature of the many *new* political majorities that are emerging around the world.

2. Between Globalization and the "Domino Effect"

An overall picture of the emerging political movements across the many different and distinct countries and peoples inhabiting our planet is impossible to obtain. However, it is now becoming apparent that globalization, as it did in the recent past when the word had not yet entered into our everyday vocabulary, is also turning into a negative domino effect.

Globalization is not in itself responsible for this negative impact. Indeed, the positive effects of globalization, both intrinsic to and promoted by it, are indisputable. The same theorists who supported globalization, such as those who promoted it financially, have long pointed out that globalization can only function efficiently if its local components cooperate.

However, it would appear that local components now run the risk of not operating harmoniously at a global level. A few examples may illustrate the negative "domino effect" associated with globalization.

In Europe, we can see the rising success of "populist nationalism" as well as "economic and financial sovereignties," which benefit greatly from inadequate governance in every European nation, as well as from an inflow of migrants into these countries, whose entry is often poorly managed in terms of both policymaking and integration.

Still, cross-national relations between the states forming the present European Union are rather fragmentary. The belief that originally inspired the leaders who sought to give shape to the idea that was deemed necessary at the end of the Second World War is progressively fading away. There is a gap between trust and disaffection with the idea of a European Union which is apparent among its constituent states, and is often expressed by political majorities that take either a favourable or oppositional stance with virtually equal numbers on either side.

Moreover, the flow of migrants, far more substantial in Asia (in China, for example) than in Europe or other countries of the Western world, may be the result of several factors, among which underdevelopment, precarious living standards, oppressive political systems, religious discrimination and persecution, the absence of any prospects, and unattainable utopias. It is also challenging for us to gain a holistic view of these phenomena and their causes. The involvement of powerful multinational corporations, financial and political stakeholders that influence political strategies on a global scale whose decision-making headquarters almost always lie far away from the ongoing humanitarian crises, is neither one of the most recent nor determinant factors.

In light of these variously interconnected issues, the lack of fully Christian policymaking is becoming more and more apparent on a global scale.

Typically, the politicians who embody the negative "domino effect" referred to above are just the tip of a dangerous iceberg, if this

trend goes unchecked. Such politicians may reflect broad popular support, though this is not always the case in every context. However, when they do enjoy broad support, it can be potentially dangerous and also indicative of a significant moral decline.

3. Toward a Christian Discernment on the Trends of a "New Western Culture"

The demands of this new culture, which cannot be accepted by a fully lived Christian faith, have now become numerous. It seems as though this culture wants simply to ignore or erase all the risks associated with an "experimentation" on values that deeply, and sometimes irreversibly, affect the human person. The illusion of being able to manipulate reality with scientific or philosophical rigor has replaced any real demonstration. Individual needs, and limits, have morphed into a kind of all-powerful delusion and inviolable right. The line between the handling of critical situations and indiscriminate endorsement of unacceptable ethics has now been entirely obscured. Likewise, the binding force of ethics is being replaced by a subjectivism that is difficult to control. Political, social, cultural, and even scientific institutions seem to have lost the courage to clarify the meaning of the values at stake and the educational responsibilities they ought to bear. The primacy of the outlook of "I want it all, and I want it now" has become an unquestionable ethical principle, and political correctness is the opinion of loud politicians and powerful policymakers operating "behind the scenes."

Christian culture, on the other hand, is not shaped solely by shining models, whether among believers or clergy. Christian values and experiences are deeply felt by many, though not by all, and the Christian utopia fails to exemplify the living testimony of a firm universalism. This situation is making relativism, whereby everything can be changed, altered, and reshaped into something better, ever more convincing.

Less demanding and still more accessible is "indifferentism," that is, living moment-by-moment because, as people say, "there's no guarantee of tomorrow." There is only the here-and-now. If necessary, those who no longer have either delusions or the strength of youth may simply say, "leave me out of it, whatever happens, will happen."

While all of this should be discerned, such a process, from a Christian perspective, cannot take place without an authentic en-

counter with the Lord Jesus. It is not a purely intellectual operation, even if it requires an effort to collect and sift through information, an authentic understanding, yet it no longer represents a perfect and unfailing handbook for solutions. The complexity of life, local political life as well as global, which has now become global calls for action in walking together, and this means a dialogue-based assessment of circumstances. At the same time, the most distinctive Christian contribution is Jesus' watch over such realities: a gaze that is not infrequently severe, but one that is capable of grasping the authenticity of a spontaneous impulse of the heart, a gaze conscious that man alone cannot make a better world. All of humanity's best energies today are summoned, and yet a Christian knows that this will not be enough to bring about the "Kingdom of God on this earth."[1]

However, some basic assumptions have changed since *Gaudium et spes* was published more than half a century ago. In synthesizing past experiences and future challenges, *Gaudium et spes* carried out a very important historical and cultural discernment. If the links between human activity and religion become too narrow, then human, social, and scientific freedom may be hampered (cf. GS 36). However, *Gaudium et spes* went beyond a strictly epistemological debate on scientific research and came to recognize secular views on the meaning of life: "Many look forward to a genuine and total emancipation of humanity wrought solely by human effort; they are convinced

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[1] The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* on the Church in the modern world, promulgated by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, says: "Therefore, while we are warned that it profits a man nothing if he gain the whole world and lose himself, the expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one. For here grows the body of a new human family, a body which even now is able to give some kind of foreshadowing of the new age. Hence, while earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ's kingdom, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the Kingdom of God. For after we have obeyed the Lord, and in His Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom, and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise, we will find them again, but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured, when Christ hands over to the Father: 'A kingdom eternal and universal, a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace'. On this earth that Kingdom is already present in mystery. When the Lord returns it will be brought into full flower" (GS 39).

that the future rule of man over the earth will satisfy every desire of his heart. Nor are there lacking men who despair of any meaning to life and praise the boldness of those who think that human existence is devoid of any inherent significance and strive to confer a total meaning on it by their own ingenuity alone" (GS 10).

Nevertheless, the pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world has itself found unacceptable the belief that temporal autonomy implies that the created world does not depend on God alone and that humans can utilize these independently of their Creator (cf. GS 36). That which then heralded the rise of new ideas has now become commonplace, seen as an irreversible conquest because it has become structural and destined to establish itself through the scientific authority (whether actual or alleged) that underpins it, sustains it, and disseminates it through the unavoidable processes of globalization.

The time has come for an in-depth analysis of the discernment practiced over half a century ago. Knowing that the layperson also needs plain language, the Church must continue to speak to the contemporary world in terms of "solidarity-based humanism."

> Modern man knows all too well that events happening in one part of the world can affect people in other parts of the world, and that no one can truly feel safe in a world where there is suffering or poverty. If in the past the need to care for the well-being of others was perceived as a concern, today that need is central to the political agenda of civil societies.[2]

At the same time, the Church can and should help to design a successful globalized world by identifying weaknesses and assets:

> Our multifaceted and ever-changing contemporary world is going through multiple crises. These crises vary in nature: economic, financial, and labour crises; political, democratic, and equity crises; environmental and natural crises; demographic and migratory crises; and so on. The fallout produced by these crises demonstrates

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[2] G. Versaldi – A. Zani, *Educare all'umanesimo solidale. Per costruire una "civiltà dell'amore" a 50 anni dalla Populorum progressio. Orientamenti*, Congregazione per l'Educazione Cattolica, Roma 2017, 1.

their seriousness on a daily basis. Peace is under constant threat and, besides traditional wars that are fought by regular troops, there is widespread insecurity generated by international terrorism, whose repercussions have given rise to feelings of mutual distrust and hatred. Such conditions favour the development of populist, demagogic feelings that risk aggravating the problems by encouraging a radicalization of the conflict between different cultures. Wars, conflicts, and terrorism are sometimes the cause and other times the effect of economic inequality and the unjust distribution of the goods of creation.

Poverty, unemployment, and exploitation result from such inequality. Statistics from international institutions illustrate the current humanitarian emergency, which also affects the future if we look at the effects of underdevelopment and migration on the younger population. Industrialized societies, all of which have seen an increase in marginalized communities, are not exempt from such dangers. Of particular importance in this context is the complicated phenomenon of migration that extends across the planet, and from its interactions arise a range of outcomes, from conflicts between civilizations to solidarity-based acceptance to intransigent and intolerant populism. We are facing a process that has been opportunely defined as an epoch-making transformation. This process brings into focus a declining humanism, one often founded on a paradigm of indifference. A longer list of problems could be enumerated, but equally, the positive opportunities that the world offers today must not be ignored. The globalization of relationships is also a globalization of solidarity. We have seen many examples of this during the great humanitarian tragedies caused by war or natural disasters: chains of solidarity and charitable initiatives have involved citizens in every corner of the world. Similarly, recent years have seen social initiatives, movements, and associations that have sprung up in favour of more equitable globalization and are sensitive to the needs of disadvantaged people. Most of these initiatives are launched and animated by citizens of wealthier nations, who might otherwise benefit from inequalities, but resolve to uphold the principles of social justice with generosity and perseverance. It is paradoxical that modern man has reached important milestones in his understanding of the forces of nature, science, and technology, but lacks a plan to make everyone's existence equitable and dignified. What has perhaps been lacking to date is the devel-

opment of civic initiatives combined with an educational plan that are capable of demonstrating the benefits of cooperation within a world of solidarity.[3]

The Church, on the other hand, recognizes that the "Kingdom of God," or the "Kingdom of Heaven," does not coincide with humanity's progress. The teacher par excellence, Jesus Himself, walked a path from which no Christian or person of goodwill should imagine they can deviate. Every intellect, every strategy that is worthy of this name may be deemed necessary, but they will be insufficient for what they seek to achieve without passing through Jesus with the blessing of the Father (cf. Mt 14:17-21 and parallels), which enables them to come to full fruition for the benefit of all. This last aspect is at the same time both the ancient and new discernment. It is ancient because it goes back to Jesus' words and praxis, which the pastoral constitution on the Church and the contemporary world did not forget half a century ago.[4] It is likewise new because it must be reaffirmed not only to the contemporary world, which is well aware of how its secularity has turned into a hostile "laicism," but also to Christians, who seek to collaborate with the contemporary world, as if that were enough for the salvation of both.

Christians can and must walk with everyone, and, to whatever extent it is permitted, must go even further. Yet they cannot fool themselves into thinking that they can succeed alone, the way many secular, or laicist ideologies would have it or according to the vision of shallow multi-faith doctrines or do-it-yourself religiosity.

4. Which Strategies Should We Use?

At the end of the twentieth century, some Christian movements had even theorized the use of resistance and armed struggle in the face of oppressive political regimes, or those that advanced explicitly discriminatory and unfair economic and financial policies. In addition

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[3] Ibid., 3-6.

[4] Cf. *Gaudium et spes* 38: "For God's Word, through Whom all things were made, was Himself made flesh and dwelt on the earth of men. Thus He entered the world's history as a perfect man, taking that history up into Himself and summarizing it."

to their ineffective outcomes, the Magisterium of the Church has rejected these strategies because they run counter to its philosophical-theological, and therefore, also its strategic principles. As part of the discussion of moral principles arising from the fifth commandment of the *Decalogue*, as interpreted by the tradition of the Catholic Church, the conditions for a "just war" doctrine, which are strict enough "for legitimate defence by military force," were explicitly indicated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Following the two world wars of the last century, political initiatives by the Churches and in particular by the Catholic Church have grown, resulting in the formation of Christian-Catholic political parties that have been influential and constructively involved in the rather recent political history of the Western world. The outcome of these approaches, however, has not been entirely satisfactory. The precautionary warning of people who believed that the Church ought not to engage in political initiatives fell on deaf ears, on the grounds that these were supposed to be part of the responsibilities Christians willingly assumed. The identification of the Catholic Church with parties of Christian Catholic inspiration in various European countries has, for example, tied the fate of the Catholic Church to that of parties that should have remained simply Catholic-inspired. Their historical-political shortcomings can be linked to ever weightier ethical-moral, economic, and financial compromises at all political levels. The claims that the art of politics is always a compromise and that grassroots movements, even those inspired by Catholicism, cannot navigate the real world of politics without reasonable compromises have proved to be a sham.

The current cultural climate of distrust grounded in the historical bankruptcy of this political experience, undoubtedly in the West, would not seem to recommend our return along the path we took in the middle of the last century. The historical and political experience gained by the Western Churches cannot relate, for example, to Churches in the Near and Middle East, which are strongly constrained either by the State of Israel and by Islamic fundamentalist movements. The existence of Christian-inspired parties in Asian countries still has the potential to play a central role in the very identity of Christian communities.

We must acknowledge that another "Christian" strategy in the West continues to fail. As traditional Christian-Catholic-inspired parties break down, Catholics are caught up in secular political par-

ties, which often oppose one another. Christians' capacity for discernment in politics has indeed proved rather weak. This is especially so in cases in which they defer to political parties' decision-making powers on matters and values that are of particular importance. As a result, they are now no longer able to discern whether the positions adopted are consistent with the person of Jesus and his words. Efforts to maintain a political representation of Christians within a party are clashing with the emerging practice of so-called "intergovernmental deals": political deals struck ahead of the formation of coalition governments that lack appropriate options for Christians. The risk posed by these formations is that the positions Christians occupy may become irrelevant in a party, and should Christians be elected in such coalition governments and operate outside of or against these "intergovernmental deals," they could be silenced, disavowed, or even expelled from the party.[5]

The task of rebuilding a political project that is truly worthy of the person of Jesus and aligns with his words involves the rebuilding of a Christian culture firmly rooted in today's contexts, and one that can carry out a global discernment. The history of European Catholic and Christian movements in the middle of the last century teaches us that such a culture does not rely on large-scale projects and proclamations. This culture entails a process of radical discernment and autonomous formation. This is a coordinated effort by Christian groups to unite their forces to form a Christian culture that is rooted in the specific context of each country.[6]

5. Facing the Challenges of Our Time

The key challenges of our time also include migrations to the West from Africa, the Near and Middle East, the Balkans, and Eastern Europe, that is, from countries that were until recently under the sphere of influence of the USSR. The same challenge is posed by mi-

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[5] Unfortunately, it also seems that the project of the political school of the Archbishop of Milan, Carlo Maria Martini, which was initiated during his episcopal ministry in the diocese, has failed.

[6] One could take as an example the opposition to the fascist movements that had been developed in private circles by Christian intellectuals and then had to concretely participate in the drafting of the Italian Constitution in the immediate post-war period.

grations from the Far East, as well as Latin America. In such a confusing scenario, one cannot easily distinguish between economic migrants and refugees fleeing from political or religious persecution.

It is also important not to confuse macro-migration, which consists of groups that are culturally and religiously similar, with micro-migration, which may be forced or voluntary depending on specific circumstances. We also need to take into account the fact that we face interconnected, frequently overlooked processes that involve globalization and regionalization of migration.

Such a slow shift has occurred over the last twenty years, during which time migrations have become globalized partly due to factors including the urbanization and expansion of the world's metropolitan cities, demographic pressure, a high rate of unemployment, public information, and the transnationalization of migration networks. Such migrations have had the same impact everywhere (migration by formerly sedentary populations, although among the poorer groups, has not yet begun). There are some countries, like those characterized by emerging economies, the so-called BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), that have become more attractive, even though they are sometimes subject to a serious recession.

At the same time, internal migration became rather substantial due to major processes of urbanization: there are more Chinese migrants settling within China itself (about 240 million) than international migrations worldwide. The number of African immigrants who have left the continent has tripled from 1980 to the present day (from 5.5 million to 16 million in 2015), even though the corridor that is growing so rapidly is the one from Africa to Asia: 4.2% more people per year. However, Africa is not the "most mobile" continent. In 2015, out of the 244 million migrants worldwide, 43% were from Asia, 25% from Europe, 15% from Latin America/Caribbean, and only 14% from Africa. About 34 million people migrate to the region, which is 2.8% of the total population of the continent. Nevertheless, Africa is second only to Asia in terms of yearly growth in the share of migrants' movements: 2.7%.[7]

These population movements, now more than ten years old, can shape the false yet widespread perception that migrants may signifi-

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[7] See the 21st Caritas report (December 2016).

cantly alter the ethnolinguistic and religious composition of the countries seen as their final destination or simply located along a transit route. The structural inefficiencies of each European country, however, reveal the challenges of reception, assistance, treatment, and possible integration of new immigrants.[8] The data do not support any of the incendiary rhetoric of populist groups in many European countries. Types of populist rhetoric focused[9] mainly on "keeping afloat to maintain political power" assume serious moral responsibilities by incautiously playing on people's fears, while foregoing a genuine educational opportunity, namely, to understand social issues, however complex they may be.

The rhetoric of an unstoppable migration of impoverished and uprooted Africans is irrational. Every year fewer migrants arrive from Africa; there is no reason to believe that this trend will change in the future, especially from poorer African regions. The idea that Africa's poverty is a consequence of Western indifference and exploitation is equally unsatisfactory. The "West" is certainly guilty of many sins, but to think that immigration is just a pathology caused by global injustice is again insufficient: immigration is not a pathology and, in fact, benefits the receiving countries. The slogan "Let us help them in their homeland," which somehow seeks to bring about greater solidarity between peoples, is only a preliminary step for a more holistic approach. We must not confuse migration with asylum, that is, boats carrying migrants and asylum seekers. The latter seekers make up a small percentage of immigrants. Incoming migrants do not always seek asylum in our country. People who arrive in Italy do not always wish to live in the country, but instead seek to go somewhere else in Europe.

Migrants are often an asset to the host country. Undocumented migrants, often referred to as "illegal immigrants," are mostly women

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[8] Migrants (and non-EU immigrants) are easily perceived as only foreigners from "poor" countries, not from developed countries: being "poor" they are quickly described as threatening, needing assistance, and less sophisticated and civilized than "us," and thus represent a burden that is no longer bearable (cf. M. AMBROSINI, "Troppa accoglienza? Dati e spunti per discutere di immigrazione, asilo, solidarietà," in A. ANGELUCCI, M. BOMBARDIERI, A. CUCINIELLO, D. TACCHINI [eds.], *Chiesa e Islam in Italia. Incontro e dialogo*, EDB, Bologna 2019, 2).

[9] If not more directly of sordid comebacks of Nazi-Fascist or racist ideologies in more or less disguised fashion.

who work for Italian families. These immigrants are often so indispensable that they are overlooked when it comes to checking on legal status in the country. We cannot continue to talk about immigration in generalizations, but rather we need to identify specific categories. This is the only way to counter misinformation and its associated concerns. The reality is represented in this field by mobile European citizens, students, nurses, caregivers, investors, people working in occupations that have been left vacant by Italians, and people fleeing wars and persecutions. The institutions that deal with refugees confirm that 84% of refugees seek asylum in Third World countries, whereas Europe is holding back from its humanitarian commitments.[10]

On the other hand, we cannot overlook the fact that in some cases criminals and drug traffickers can also mix with undocumented migrants. This situation undoubtedly has had an impact, sometimes devastating, on the countries in which migrants have settled or traversed. Moreover, the Islamic State, also known as Isis or *Dāʿiš* (داعش), has been replaced by other Islamic terrorist groups. The Mediterranean has been further destabilized in the wake of the so-called "Arab Spring," which has been further exacerbated by European military interventions in many African countries along the Mediterranean coast, as well as within the African continent.

In the Philippines, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Libya, Nigeria, Myanmar, India, and other Far Eastern countries, Christian and Muslim minorities, including those belonging to different denominations connected to Islamic or Hindu fundamentalist groups, have paid a heavy price in blood. By infiltrating migratory flows and other means, terrorism, especially Islamic fundamentalism, has hit Europe, the United States, Russia, as well as Africa, the Near and Middle East, and the Far East with devastating consequences.

The grip of the global economic and financial crisis, the increasing poverty of many populations, widespread bloody conflicts, including permanent ones, and difficulties in providing basic living conditions, are inevitably and unstoppably pushing thousands and even millions of people toward mass exoduses far greater than the biblical ones, which are legendary in their numbers.

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[10] The remarks gathered here were collected and only partially reformulated from the study of M. Ambrosini, Ibid., 10-11.

As a result, dreams, illusions, desperate needs, cynical calculations, and generous support are inextricably intertwined, but so are the inability and impossibility to manage the phenomena in motion, legitimate fears, clouded selfishness, and unwarranted restrictions.

The coexistence in the same country of different cultures and religions is often perceived as a source of internal instability, and a danger to the safety of everyday life, job security, and the project of life.

The experience of a prolonged period away from one's own country is often accompanied by the experience of being a second-class citizen. The inability to speak one's language limits the ability to express oneself properly and even to be heard and understood. Experiencing a kind of estrangement from a safe environment following traumatic experiences, namely, leaving behind family, friends, culture, and one's homeland, can lead to reactions and vulnerabilities in the immediate and long term. Against this backdrop, ghetto clusters inevitably form. Ghettos attempt somehow to recreate the reality of the original country in a new and different world.

In order to integrate, the immigrant may be expected to accept the cultural and traditional norms of the host country, without changing them or making them their own. Yet just like in other European countries, migrants often feel uprooted, rejected, alienated, and can fail in their integration. This happens when they are employed by other migrants or exploited by gang-masters on the black market and other criminal activities. The effects can go far beyond that.

Of course, "new people" challenge us to find a new balance. Meanwhile, the birth rate and aging rates in many European countries indicate that the sustainability of welfare benefits may increasingly depend on the labour supply of migrants. This is, at least, the case for those who pay taxes regularly.

Tracking and stopping migration flows along the Balkan route, and providing incentives for other EU countries to do the same at their borders, are measures to forestall a perceived domestic political imbalance that is not reflected in reality. Such a policy only delays the response to key issues related to the management of migration flows. Local policymakers are also confronted with internal resistance, only partly due to unwarranted xenophobia.

A little-known fact is that some EU countries, which are not prepared to deal with migration flow in the Balkan and Mediterranean areas, are also struggling with large numbers of migrants or asylum seekers from Eastern Europe, i.e., from countries that are in direct

contact with Russia and its sphere of influence. It is the same old issue of a lack of information or intentional obfuscation.

At the same time, it is equally evident that Italy and Greece are bearing the brunt of the migratory pressure along the Mediterranean route. Besides praiseworthy efforts and good intentions, the way these flows are managed will hopefully improve, but if we fail to understand the reality on the ground, they can also lead in time to a structural collapse.

There is indeed the hope that the policy of improving the internal conditions of the countries from which migratory flows originate and of stabilizing the critical situations in the Mediterranean countries facing the African continent, will bring the desired results of better living conditions while respecting human dignity. We need to engage in a real dialogue about interrelated solutions that can help the people involved effectively and constructively.

What is more, refugee shelters, as they have been configured in some of the landing countries, could not have been imagined at first, much less rapidly constructed to appropriately meet the task, since only after the passage of time has the gravity of the situation been grasped. In addition to the current unsustainable nature of the refugee reception centres, owing to the complexity of their organization and management, there is also the discomfort of refugees who have been received, but still live in a condition of restricted freedom of movement. Also detrimental is the unavailability of some countries to collaborate more directly with the ones affected by the immigration crisis.

The shameful exploitation of migrant reception centres by organized crime, which profits from government funds, is marked by sordid opportunism affecting a system that is still inadequate and incapable of meeting the needs of the people affected. In addition to this, there is the exploitation of migrant workers, which is also part of the squalid opportunism mentioned above.

However, restructuring the migration system to avoid holding people in a country engulfed in war, without considering the need for protection and assistance, will not be easy. Yet safe and legal pathways for migrants and refugees are needed to reduce unnecessary suffering and deaths.

The restructuring necessary to regulate migratory flows involves specific and proper regulations for the actions of humanitarian workers. However, even more challenging is the task of promoting

acceptable living and working conditions in migrants' places of origin and offering alternatives to leave one's land for a better future or attempts at ever more difficult reunifications with loved ones.

The long-standing global phenomenon of migrants is an opportunity for an encounter, one that requires awareness, courage, charity, and responsibility "toward those who suffer and flee," just as "to those who welcome and reach out to them."[11]

As we can see, there are no easy remedies, and whoever tries to simplify problems is either an immoral person, only concerned with his vested interests, disinterested, deluded, or one who knows he is lying.

6. The Religious Component

Migration movements have also brought the religious component to the fore, not just as a defining element of new immigrants, but also as the distinguishing trait of the receiving countries. This twofold religious component is perhaps still poorly understood and dealt with. As far as the religious component of migration movements is concerned, it can be useful to differentiate between religious denominations familiar to Western cultures and traditions and confessions less so, or even hostile to the West in different ways. Most importantly, Christians must discern the religious dimension of the Western world for their responsibility to the world to which they belong. The Western world is increasingly unable to understand the challenges posed by today's multi-religious and multi-ethnic coexistence.

6.1 An Overview of the Religious Component of the Western World

The figure of Pope Francis attracted wide public support and appreciation. However, the religious component of Western Europe has not been able to fully capitalize on it. Meanwhile, the impetus of the present pontifical Magisterium to address sensitive and highly complex pastoral matters has been met with a reserve and sometimes embarrassment, if not opposition. The opposition of some conser-

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[11] See the remarks of BRUNO FORTE, Archbishop of Chieti-Vasto, "La «patria» europea nell'era delle appartenenze fluide" (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, Sunday, August 20, 2017).

vative ecclesiastical circles seems to have significantly damaged the initial enthusiastic consensus around Pope Francis. Strong international pressure, on the sexual abuse even of minors of some fringes of the clergy, has been exploited by conservative ecclesiastical circles, leading to much confusion.

The driving force of Pope Francis' pastoral ministry is still significant in part, at least at the popular and other levels. The strength of his Magisterium lies neither on religious ideologies, nor on the synthesis between powers, but rather on relational humanity.

To illustrate some of the characteristics of the Western "religious component," it may be useful to dwell on four of its critical characteristics, which are less suited to the challenges posed by a "new world": secularism, the breaking of an authentic religious experience, religious indifferentism, and religious inertia.

6.2 Secularism

The very concept of "secularism," which often develops into raw *laïcité*, reveals itself to be inadequate for this emerging new world.

For the sake of clarity, we will distinguish here between secularism and *laïcité* in the French sense. Jeremy Gunn has distinguished between American secularism and French secularism in this way: "Whereas 'religious freedom' in the United States typically bears the nuance of freedom of religion *from* the state, in France *laïcité* often bears the connotation of the state protecting citizens from the *excesses* of religion."[12] An understanding of the nuance behind each term provides an important framework for our exploration of the difference we make here between secularism and *laïcité*.

The claim of neutrality of secularism is ineffective. Its attempt to set the ground rules of coexistence and freely determine the values, compatibilities, and incompatibilities of religions living together

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[12] T. J. GUNN, "Religious Freedom and *Laïcité*: A Comparison of the United States and France," *Brigham Young University Law Review*, vol. 419, 2004, 419-506. In this context, Gunn also explains that "without attempting to provide a comprehensive definition, *laïcité* should be understood as a term that was coined during the first decade of the Third Republic (1870–1940) to identify a particular understanding of the proper relationship between church and state. The *Littré* dictionary identifies the first published use of the term as occurring in 1871" (420-21, note 2).

displays naivety and a lack of clarity, and has the potential to become dangerous, as can already be observed in some instances. In reality, the Western world itself recognizes different types of "*laïcité*."

While the violent reactions of Islamic fundamentalism to the cartoons disparaging Islam published in some Northern European newspapers undoubtedly must be condemned, one should not condemn the feelings of disdain for freedom to "mock religious subjects," which knowingly aims to be offensive in order to correct the "religious excesses" of others. One might do well to recall the aphorism that it is difficult to look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye without paying attention to the "plank" in your own eye, so that at least you can see what you are doing (Mt 7:3-5 and parallels, NIV).

The question we have to ask is whether this way of being ironic, of exercising "religious freedom," is a value so sacred as to shape a new civilization. Are we to believe that Western culture has nothing more emblematic than Voltaire on this issue? Unfortunately, as Catholics, we are used to "tolerating" forms of expression inconsistent with our faith and our religious ethics.

For Christians, patience and meekness matter. They intentionally accept the thought of being insulted as part of an identity they are called to embrace after Jesus. Such acceptance will never mean that they agree with or are indifferent to matters contrary to their beliefs, or that they are afraid to show their disagreement with a "secularist system that is insidiously dictatorial." This state of affairs is perhaps a sort of "historical" victory over past "religious oppression."

The various forms of Islam may find it difficult to understand our "past religious history" as the principle that defines our new civilization. Suffice it to say that even the religious minorities of the Eastern Christian faiths are often at a loss to understand such cultural strains. As some commentators have argued, the Western world as a whole needs time to fully deal with and heal its wounds.

People who do not belong to the Western world, but see it from outside can more readily recognize what is less congenial to them or what does not reflect their values.

We are each defenders of our history and compromises. Such a situation might also allow us to exchange ideas and call things for what they are, speaking frankly about compromises instead of values. No one can teach anything to anyone unless we can learn something from each other. That is one of the most difficult challenges of this emerging "new world."

Western secularism is confident in its authority and ability to assess what a believer of other religious denominations can do with their religious traditions, which are sometimes more than a thousand years old. It is precisely on this point that the naivety of secularism is most evident. For example, in seeking to promote moderate Islamic groups, secularism often fails to understand that nearly a millennium and a half of "Islamic history" cannot be reconciled so easily with the demands of secular culture, a culture that is very recent in Islamic traditions. Muslims instead consider the religious deficiencies of the current secular culture to be one of its most critical limits, proof of a cultural decline that has nothing to teach Islam. Muslims, by contrast, see the Muslim world as the "best of all possible worlds," the "best of all possible communities," that cannot be left for any reason. For that is the very mission of Islam.

The decency and kindness of moderate Muslims should not suggest that they are prepared to give up their religious traditions. It may only be a matter of time, but the continual growth of Muslim communities through the birth rate in the "diaspora" and new migratory arrivals may lead to a less "secular" organization in their presence in Western societies. It is worth noting that the most aggressive interpretations of the *Šarīʿah*, (شريعة) or Quranic law are not yet on the agenda.

Another aspect of the naivety of the secular culture is the notion that the forms of "moderate Islam" are everywhere approved in predominantly Islamic countries. This is a problem of "orthodoxy" in the Sunni, Shiite, and any other denomination of the Islamic world. It will by no means be secularism, which is external to Islam, that will establish any sort of standard Muslim "orthodoxy" for living. No form of secularism can ever claim to be able to achieve widespread and practical access to the Islamic constellation, even through recourse to international bodies which will be in the same position of estrangement and inability to create widespread consensus.

Suffice it to say that even a figure on the world stage as charismatic and sympathetic as Pope Francis may not be able to successfully persuade large numbers of Islamic communities to recognize all points of view, and coexist peacefully with Christian minorities, free of abuses. Against this background, even a more open-minded Islamic government promoting peaceful coexistence between people is unable to ensure full and effective supervision, as recently happened in Egypt.

The same may be said of some non-Islamic countries, in which forms of religious radicalism such as radical Hinduism, as the dominant culture, can often discriminate against other cultures. It is becoming increasingly difficult to preach secular values, particularly after the recent Western attempts to export "democracy" to the Middle and Near East. The Missions of the Catholic Church and the Orthodox and Reformed Churches have much more experience than the new "secularist culture." The Missions are distinguished by martyrs, authentic giants of charity and culture, but also by failures. The new secular "peace missions" are dominated by eager NGOs and other worthy secular groups, but also by military forces, wars, territorial partitions, commercial, and industrial agreements, unsolicited actions, and unrealized good intentions. It is unlikely that such secularism constitutes the best of all possible worlds.

Concerning the utopias of this "*laïcité*," suffice it to say that many Christian communities, which are persecuted in areas where minorities are poorly protected, are often puzzled by Pope Francis' goodwill and openness to other non-Christian religions. This is not because of a failure in providing a more universal pastoral approach, but rather because of the intricacies of a global situation that consists of so many local facets.

It is certainly necessary to give time and assurance to Western secularism, which is "newborn" by historical standards, to develop new approaches to the contemporary world. One cannot blame secularism for all of the existing dysfunctions it has inherited comparatively recently. Secularism certainly does not enable crime organizations, which encumber themselves heavily in different forms in many western and non-western countries, replacing the state when it comes to running the territory of various parts of a country. Neither can one attribute to secularism more broadly the blame for the emergence of oppressive dictatorial regimes, even when these have attempted to wear the mantle of secularism, with the ostensible aim of breaking free from the excesses of "obsolete and unjust" religious systems or, at any rate, those "unsuitable for the needs of the present."

However, when secularism acts as society's moral agent, it inevitably also bears all the responsibilities associated with the function. It inherits the social values of a system but also its internal inequalities. Acting as a moral agent, secularism transitions from the theoretical to the practical sphere with which all the difficulties

caused by disagreements and obstacles of the system, including violent ones, are associated. One can hope that experience does not overwhelm any secularist leader with a chaotic sequence of failures, or that these failures are not presented as either inevitable scenarios, or, worse still, striking achievements. The strength of people, essential for discovering the strength of ideas, inevitably emerges in these processes.

The fledgling secularism has, however, not yet addressed some of its internal ambiguities. International agencies, which should exercise global leadership, are faced with the political interests of major political powers (vetoes, countersanctions, international financial and economic blackmail, and so on), which often dictate the political line in many aspects of life. In the same way, these agencies often conduct megaphone diplomacy for special interest groups. From this perspective, the moral authority of secularism is not always self-evident. Secularism can at times be tough on the powerless, but it can also be indulgent on the powerful and complicit with morally objectionable political majorities. One can wish that the efforts made to achieve a sustainable secular society are right with regard to this and many other forms of injustice. In any event, paradise on earth is for the moment only conceivable in eschatological terms.

To give an idea of what could be considered a form of leadership and power in the face of dysfunction, we can remember the energetic "Enough!" thundered publicly in Sicily by John Paul II against the mafia, without fear of reminding the mafia affiliates: "I am telling the people in charge: repent! The judgment of God shall come to pass one day" (Agrigento, 9 May 1993, facing the Valley of the Temples). The mafia reacted with a string of attacks carried out in Rome and Florence, but "the people" saw that someone said and meant everything that needed to be said and done for them. One regret may be that contemporary secularism neither can, nor would ever appeal to divine judgement!

The powerful words of John Paul II were in any case an indication of a shift in the attention of the Church to the contemporary world. In addition to compassion, which is mentioned and practiced by Pope Francis, John Paul II vividly recalled in plain language Jesus' words about the presence of wolves among us: "Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs among wolves" (Lk 10:3, NKJV). This is not a remote danger, nor is it a sporadic one, nor is

it merely a human judgment. There is a tangible risk that requires caution, rather than violence: "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore, be wise as serpents and harmless as doves" (Mt 10:16, NKJV). It is also a matter of discernment which concerns *laïcité*, very different from secularism, outside the Church: "Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves" (Mt 7:15, NKJV). According to ancient tradition, Paul of Tarsus already carried on this discernment, warning that wolves would infiltrate even the Christian communities: "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock" (Acts 20:29, NKJV).

To remind ourselves of Jesus' words, in this case addressed to one of the petty kings of his time, we can remember what he said in response to the people who told him that Herod Antipas was searching for him to kill him: "Go, tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected'" (Lk 13:32, NJKV). Jesus is not afraid to publicly characterize Herod Antipas as a cunning and dishonest man. He is not afraid of retaliation.

Jesus does not attach any importance to Pilate's threat. He is not intimidated by the fact that Pilate is the representative of the most powerful nation of his day: "[10]Then Pilate said to Him, 'Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have the power to crucify You and the power to release You?' [11]Jesus answered, 'You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given to you from above. Therefore, the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin'" (Jn 19:10-11, NKJV).

Jesus knows that Pilate comprehends absolutely nothing of what is happening and makes no effort to help him to understand God's higher plan; rather, he simply adjusts Pilate's perception of his power as a representative of Rome.

6.3 The Collapse of a Genuine Religious Experience

The collapse of true religious experience is probably the most striking trait of the "West." In numerically different measure but proportionately comparable, we are talking, of course, of the religious experiences of Judaism and Christianity, i.e., the fundamental two-thousand-year-old religious components of the present West. The

fact that the moral legacy of both Judaism and Christianity has been marginalized in the drafting of the EU constitution bears witness to this tragic reality.[13] The breakdown of a genuine religious experience has a long history behind it and continues to happen all over the world. It is not simply a matter of a lack of religious practice, but of a progressive loss of a time-tested religious experience inside the community of the faithful itself, both in Judaism and in Christianity. Cultural, philosophical, political, economic factors, scientific discoveries, progress in the humanities, and the like, are really factors that are external to the religious experience, and ones that are unable to demolish it unless the very quality of the religious experience itself is already being undermined in the eyes of the faithful. This religious experience allows for continuous reconciliation into a new synthesis of the wealth of experience being acquired.[14]

It is a question of a wholly interior balance of the energies to be devoted to the various needs of life, the family, society, the workplace, culture, research and the quality of time to devote to God and so on. When this balance comes down through the hypertrophy or atrophy of some of these necessities, a process of retrogression starts and, for different reasons, regularly affects a genuine religious experience. It does so to the point of pitting it against other vital necessi-

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[13] Some claim that secularism, not in the sense of "laicism," but in that of the separation between religion and state, is an entirely Christian concept and that, following this idea, the reference to the Christian roots of Europe would therefore be implicit. However, we must recognize the proper cultural-historical significance and contribution, besides the religious one, of both the religious experiences of Judaism and Christianity. They were subject to a historical nemesis in the new-born "secularism" of the French Revolution, which was hardly commendable for its inhumane and violent ways, and its bizarre imperialistic imitators. It seems that the Euro-Western culture wishes "to consecrate another altar" also to the "century of the Enlightenment" and to the utopias of the Enlightenment to be placed in its new temple of dreamlike secular utopias.

[14] Yves Congar sees in it one of the essential conditions of "true reform" in the Church, that is, a reform that remains so and does not become schism: that is, an ability not to absolutize one's perception, but rather to stand in solidarity with the whole which is the Church. The belief, says Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, that "the whole is greater than the part" (EG 234-237). Regarding what constitutes true reform, see Y. CONGAR, *Vera e falsa riforma della Chiesa* [1950], 177 ff. (cf. Jaca Book Reprint, Milano 2015).

ties, making it at most subsist in a less than larval form. The problem lies in the fact that the balance of energies dedicated varies from person to person according to their actual ability to self-discipline when allocating their energies.

The effects of the emerging imbalances can vary considerably. They can be devastating at the behavioural, psychophysical, and other levels, not to mention at the religious level. People feel that they can do without the religious experience, supposing that adulthood has, at last, freed them and abdicating their former religious beliefs and confessions. At the same time, highly organized religious confessions hardly ever inertly assent to such defections, for they see the "domino" effect of the contagion in their communities. In such cases, "legal" actions tend to typify all the great highly structured religious experiences. This does not mean that "legal" interventions are always carried out properly.

Of course, the theorization and practice of atheism or strict agnosticism can only be possible in some specially marked personalities. In most cases, various compromises are made, which one might label compensatory, such as traces of individual cultural conservatism, occasional family religious practice, sporadic community religious participation, syncretistic do-it-yourself religiosity, similar to the fashionable New-Age religious forms, and so on. One may also consider other religious experiences, including more ascetic-meditative ones. In such cases, the problem is not about religious growth, but about the transition from lack or deficit of religious experience to one that is generally supplementary, which may be subjectively important but does not say anything about an authentic and original religious experience.

This overview of the causes of the collapse of religious experience can be further expanded to include objectively traumatic experiences in the original context in which they were endured and left behind a deep-seated trauma. In these cases, the reworking of the trauma, aside from being an especially painful experience, can require lengthy and extensive external support.

Yet whatever the causes of the collapse of the original religious experience, its outcomes always lead to a substantial inability and structural inadequacy to discern different religious experiences. As there are no more reliable reference points, other religious experiences are likely to be grouped together in a generic and confusing pantheon of cultural quirks. These tend to be regarded as hectic ves-

tiges of little-evolved cultural phases in comparison to the empowerment one believes he or she has achieved by discarding an original religious experience.

In this way, the process – of equating all religious experiences, presenting them as some kind of pathology or blurred reality against which we would expect consensus on issues, affecting also secular culture, which is instead marked by the breakdown of a true religious experience – continues to progress. The transcendent sounds like a vague language, which could easily be reduced to mere confusion with the purely immanent.

It is difficult to imagine a less suitable culture than this to receive the multi-ethnicity and multi-religiousness of the emerging new world.

6.4 Religious Indifferentism

This is the most widespread and popular form of this expanding lack of any religious experience. For many, life's concerns have stifled an original religious experience (cf. Mt 13:7 and parallels). For others, an exhaustive process of professionalism has entirely dried up this particular domain. With no grudges about the past and no interest in the future and with an eye only toward the present, for that which is available or desirable, many people today feel that the religious experience no longer has anything to say about reality as a whole. Religion is something that is behind us, something that some traumatic experience may perhaps rekindle, but which now holds no interest for us. Progress, modern technologies, complex structures, even if imperfect and limited, utopian expressions of well-being now definitively acquired, or just the appeal of a present driven by the strength of one's youth, all may substitute what was once a defining religious experience. The latter is now deemed unnecessary, if not cumbersome. This is a "Big Brother" swallowing everything, conforming it all. It is perceived as inescapable, bound to engulf any other culture or religious experience that may challenge it.

There is nothing more extraneous to the challenges of the emerging new world than this Euro-Western religious indifferentism. Such religious indifferentism, on the other hand, is not exacting and can easily fool itself into believing that it is the inevitable fate of any different or new religiosity.

6.5 Religious Illiteracy

Religious illiteracy is a type of "return illiteracy"[15] but in the religious sphere, in which there is no documented and therefore genuine religious culture. It responds to the demands of a pseudo-culture in which information is simply provided yet hardly ever properly documented. This information is nearly always sloppy, lacking any scrutiny, and is accompanied only by the assumption that it will be readily accessible and usable. Nevertheless, in this, as in all fields of science and research, the results are only as worthwhile as the time it takes to find and develop them. To express with impunity and arrogance false and silly views, without real debate, to argue in aggressive and offensive language, to silence any interlocutor produce false and absurd assumptions or beliefs. Yet there is no awareness of this absurdity, unless one is jolted by sudden and traumatic awakenings.

Religious illiteracy above all affects the religious tradition to which one belongs, but it also has an impact on the other religious traditions coexisting within our changing world. The fight against "return illiteracy" is neither short-term nor easy, especially when it involves one's own religious tradition. It is not a matter of re-learning something we have lost, as we have done in the past with classic history and literature. Nowadays, a genuine religious education entails a multi-religious and interdisciplinary approach that requires the fundamental rediscovery of our basic religious roots as vital yet not generically cultural experiences.

PART II

1. Four Different Types of Religious Responses to the Challenges of Our Time

In the present discussion, we will not address any social, economic, or structural measures that could be or are currently being implemented by Western countries in response to migratory movements

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[15] "Return illiteracy" is a term that generally describes literate people who, with no exercise, progressively lose the ability to use written language for critical thinking.

and related issues. We will instead discuss four different types of Christian-Catholic responses to the challenges of our time: distinct religious vocabulary for diverse target audiences; pilgrimage to sanctuaries; meeting on the ground; the ecclesiastical Magisterium of the "Meeting of Assisi" and interfaith dialogue.

2. Distinct Religious Vocabulary for Diverse Target Audiences

In the history of both the Church and the local Churches, epoch-making challenges have simultaneously prompted different responses. Throughout this history, various religious communities have devised and promoted a religious vocabulary that has been progressively tailored to the specific challenges of their time. Orders and religious congregations, and more recently institutes of apostolic life, ecclesial groups, and movements have developed different theologies, spiritualities, and ways of living the Christian faith that were articulated through different languages and even toward different goals, depending on their respective cultural resources and adherents. Such diversity is an asset for the local Churches, as it is for the entire Church. This has traditionally been one of the hallmarks of the presence and workings of the Holy Spirit in the Church's history.

Contrasts and controversies between such groups have not been lacking, and the Church's Magisterium has sought to provide some balance – thought not without difficulty – in order to formulate a basis for a more general understanding of the momentous challenges. Significantly, efforts have been made to integrate these groups rather than to create uniformity among their positions. We are witnessing the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church, the Lord's charisma at work.

It is therefore not necessary to switch from one group's language to another with a superficial and misleading fluency. Behind these religious languages lie a background history and specific experiences, which are indispensable assets and calls from the Lord.

If the standardization of globalization today answers to an extreme fragmentation of local cultures, in the face of a homogenizing and dehumanizing process, then in the Catholic sphere the religious solutions to the challenges of our time can and must be different, reflecting the action of the Holy Spirit both in the universal and in the local Churches.

3. Pilgrimage to Sanctuaries

Pilgrimage to sanctuaries is a widespread practice of the Catholic Church and is also common in the Orthodox Churches. The pilgrimage to sanctuaries represents one of the most important expressions of folk spirituality. The pilgrimage should be regarded as "an authentic form of evangelization which always needs to be promoted and enhanced, without minimizing its importance," said Pope Francis. At the conclusion of the Jubilee for *Those Engaged in Pilgrimage Work and for Rectors of Shrines*, he added that in sanctuaries "our people live out their deep spirituality, that piety which has for centuries shaped the faith with simple but very meaningful devotions."[16]

According to the figures released in 2016 by the *Unione Nazionale Italiana Trasporto Ammalati a Lourdes e Santuari Internazionali* (UNITALSI: *National Italian Union for Transporting the Sick to Lourdes and International Shrines*), the profile of the pilgrim visiting Lourdes and other major European, Italian, or Holy Land shrines is changing, with the greater involvement of people in an age group between 13 and 35 years with a history of phobic syndromes, drug addictions, and mental health issues. Also involved are many people who are somewhat unfamiliar with consistent worship practice. The charm of the "sacred place" is in the fact that the "supernatural" seems to displace any orthopraxis or any form of faith, because we need things we cannot find.

Such participation is not a response to a real and genuine theology, but rather is fuelled by devotion, and it often neglects the necessary caution for the authentic Christian faith. This is also a challenge to trendy secularism, and in certain cases, it is also the last resort for unsatisfied and struggling "secularists." Furthermore, this phenomenon of "attendance at shrines" is rarely characterized by a permanent restoration of a true and structured religious experience, one that must have practical repercussions in personal, family, and ecclesial everyday life. This picture may be supplemented by a more

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[16] POPE FRANCIS, *Address on the Jubilee for Those Engaged in Pilgrimage Work and for Rectors of Shrines*, January 21, 2016, www.w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/january/documents/papa-francesco_20160121_giubileo-operatori-santuari.html/.

detailed examination of the changing nature of the pilgrim flow in times of globalization and new media.[17]

4. Finding Each Other on the Ground

In a country, multi-ethnicity and multi-faith relationships must be experienced in everyday life as well.[18] It is not a theological dialogue, but a chance to share specific questions of coexistence, to make them clearer and more explicit. Such a conversation must also include the common people from different religious backgrounds, celebrating together, perhaps even with an "ice cream," to formalize something that already routinely happens on a daily basis. All of this is a lengthy and far-reaching process, undoubtedly fraught with obstacles, such as terrorist attacks, political, economic, and social conflicts in which language barriers play an important role and where awareness and knowledge of "the other's" history (not in a distorted or caricatured way) become increasingly essential.

5. The Ecclesial Magisterium of the Ecumenical and Interreligious Meaning of the "Assisi Meetings"

John Paul II visited Assisi, the city of St. Francis, with Christian and world religious leaders on October 27, 1986, in order to pray for peace. He asked all religions to pray for peace, to pray alongside one another but never against each other. Since then, this type of meeting has spread to other cities and towns, punctuated also by painful times around the world.

During the "Assisi Meetings," people pray together, not one against the other. However, there remain profound differences. Here is a precious opportunity for each person to develop an awareness of themselves and their cultural and religious traditions vis-à-vis

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[17] In a few years at Fatima, foreign pilgrims accounted for 70% of the total visitors, with Italians ranking second after the Spaniards, closely followed by Koreans and Christians from Latin America.

[18] By way of example, the events that took place in Rome on 21-22 September 2016 represented an important step: for the first time, representatives of Islamic organizations in Italy gathered in Rome with the Commission for Interreligious Dialogue of the Italian Episcopal Conference (C.E.I), and for the first time with an express and formal invitation from the latter.

other different cultural and religious traditions. These meetings do not resolve everything; their occurrence is an auspicious occasion to build relationships between the different cultural and religious traditions or to repair existing relationships.

Following the outline of the Council's declaration on non-Christian religions, we can take stock of the situation of African religious traditions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism.

5.1 Praying with Traditional African Religions

When compared to what was envisioned half a century ago, at the time when the Declaration of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council was drafted and approved, the situation of traditional African religions and cultures has been brought into sharper focus in its specific components of religious pluralism, comparing African traditional religions and cultures with each other, and with Christianity, Islam, and Western secular culture, in both a diachronic and synchronic perspective.[19]

To ensure that praying together in Assisi may not boil down to formalistic goodwill, it is certainly important that traditional African religions can express their self-perception and their unique vision to the fullest. This is a discernment that cannot come from the outside, but that demands processing within the African world, in the same way the Christian faith experienced in Africa perceives it. Praying together in Assisi means that all those who pray together should also be aware of the journey and the difficulties others face so that we can welcome it and reciprocate it by sharing and communion.

5.2 Praying with the Great "Eastern Religions"

In line with the framework of *Nostra Aetate*, the "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church with Non-Christian Religions," our picture of Hinduism and Buddhism has been enriched by a better understanding of the specific features of each religious player, which includes the history of their relationship. For example, working to-

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[19] See in this same volume É.-N. Bassoumboul's essay, "Discernment in Traditional Religions/African Cultures," 95-113.

gether to draft a Hindu-Christian dictionary[20] is a sign that positions and times for interfaith dialogue are now ripe for interreligious dialogue. Taking part in joint prayer, knowing that interreligious theological dialogue is underway, brings peace to the prayer itself. The path taken by *Nostra Aetate* up until the recent past can now be readily retraced.[21] Against the background of the great "Eastern religions," such as Hinduism and Buddhism, where it is possible to turn to God, or at least to benefit from inner purification, we plead with God to intervene in our differences and fulfil his task, that each of us may live and advance in his peace.

It should be stressed, however, that Eastern religions have a specific and uncompromising metaphysics that also underlies their ascetical life, which could also be incompatible with the Christian faith.

Religion is the essence of culture and culture is the mantle of religion. When talking to an Indian person, one cannot distinguish between his culture and religion. To ask a Hindu to convert is the same as asking him to sell out his culture; conversely, asking a Western Christian to convert is not perceived as a betrayal of his culture. Besides, Hinduism and Buddhism take a theonomic position, whereas Christianity holds a heteronomic view (i.e., it acts on desires that are not regulated by reason). Perhaps this is where the authentic mission begins.

In the Western context, the translation of Eastern ascetic approaches is often sloppy and exploitative, and seeks to compensate for a lack of original religious experience in the West. The real connection between Eastern religions and Christianity reflects an extremely sensitive experience, often elusive and susceptible to misinterpretation by the West. There are many Westerners who strive to follow similar paths and wish to be regarded as leaders of interreligious dialogue, even though their behaviour can cause confusion and consternation, and often leads to a gnosis devoid of a true religious experience. A fundamental role for the centrality of Christ, with respect to theocentrism, warrants our consideration.

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[20] Cf. K. ACHARYA, M. ITURBE, B. KANAKAPPALLY, G. SABETTA (eds.), *Dizionario Hindu-Cristiano. Luoghi per il dialogo interreligioso*, Urbaniana University Press, Città del Vaticano 2017; English edition: *Hindu-Christian Dictionary: Essential Terms for Inter-religious Dialogue*, Somaiya Publications, Mumbai 2017.

[21] See in this same volume G. Sabetta's essay, *The Journey of Asian Christianities as Missio inter gentes*, 115-186.

Even in these cases, it is only the indigenous Christian communities that have emerged locally throughout history, that can evaluate – and not without effort – to what extent the Eastern religious world can be integrated into Christian life. Yet these formulae cannot be easily understood, for they also took more than a millennium of Christian experience in the "East."

Furthermore, it is evident that recent forms of radicalization in Hinduism, sheltered by specific political powers, have also resulted in the violent rejection of other religions, Christianity included. We must not exclude the possibility that radicalizations resulting in violence may depend largely on the keen perception of a dishonest yet apparent attitude with which the planetary West, where Christianity is considered to be a leading exponent, interacts with Eastern religious and ascetic-spiritual cultures and traditions. Such an attitude is not unlike the one expressed in the Islamic world. Western technological domination is based on a philosophical framework that reinterprets and relegates any other culture or religion to a pre-cultural status.

The feeling of being evaluated and understood in a reductive way is strongly unpleasant and is bound to trigger reactions, including violent ones. At the same time, the Western world, which purports to move away from its religious and cultural roots to open up unconditionally to other cultures, reduces itself to an unintelligible and sometimes grotesque muttering. This, in turn, leads the West to have nothing authentic to give in return.

The sporadic and arbitrary adoption of certain Eastern meditative and ascetic techniques is a much different and somewhat less "harmful" action than entering a diverse and distinct metaphysical and spiritual world.

In the "Assisi Meetings," we can pray for the conversion of others into our faith and pray that the Lord will fulfil His call in each of us in ways and by means that He alone knows.

5.3 Praying with Muslims[22]

We pray with Muslims united in a faith that is only partly concordant in one God. Indeed, Muslims read and interpret both the New

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[22] This section is authored by Tedros Abraha and G. Rizzi.

and Old Testaments, insofar as these can be identified in the stories and characters of the Quranic text. Yet Christians are not readily accepting this, since they are oriented toward a strictly Muhammad-centric and Quranic-centric direction.

According to the Quranic and Muslim tradition, the Sacred Scriptures of Jews and Christians have been "'falsified' in both interpretation and text, whereas the Quran would be the authentic and final divine revelation "descended from heaven" and Muhammad the seal of the prophets. Like the Jews, Christians are held in the Quranic and Muslim tradition to belong to the "People of the Book," but the role of Jesus is very different. On Judgment Day, Jesus himself would claim to have never wanted to be called "Son of God." In the Quran and Muslim tradition, the Trinity is likewise an unacceptable notion of God, specifically because it links other gods to God.

Islam ignores the concept of "person," which is biblical in origin and rooted in the reality of the One and Triune God. In the Arabic language, the word "person" is absent. Arabized Christians in the Middle East have retained the use of the word *aqnūm* (أقنوم), meaning "person" in Aramaic, the language Christ spoke. Within Islam, a person finds his dignity as a "subject" in the *Ummah*, the all-embracing and all-encompassing Muslim community permeating all aspects of a believer's life. Muslims may have benefitted from the Christian concept of person in anthropology.

And yet Islam has come to reside in a largely post-Christian West that has lost sight of this vision of man, and all that constitutes the unacknowledged bedrock of Western civilization, in particular the value of freedom. Having abandoned its Christian heritage, most of the West is not in a position to convey to Muslims all that Christianity had and still has to offer. In Europe, too, Islam faces a decadent society. This problem is primarily a spiritual and cultural one, and it cannot be brushed aside.[23]

In several respects, a problem similar to that identified within Judaism is emerging within the Islamic world. We may ask at this point what the situation is in the Islamic traditions. The Quran distin-

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[23] Cf. « La conscience d'une identité européenne s'est largement forgée dans la confrontation avec l'islam », interview with Annie Laurent, by H. de Begard, « Le rouge et le noir », July 4, 2017, www.lerougeetlenoir.org/opinions/les-inquisitoriales/annie-laurent-la-conscience-d-une-identite-europeenne-s-est-largement-forgee-dans-la-confrontation-avec-l-islam/.

guishes between the Meccan and Medinan verses. In the Meccan verses, Muhammad openly speaks of love, claiming that Jews and Christians alike should be friends, that there is no compulsion in religion, and that God is closer to us. The first part of Muhammad's life, therefore, conveys a spiritual message of reconciliation and openness. When Muhammad leaves Mecca to establish Medina, however, a change occurs. From being a spiritual leader, he becomes the military and political head of state.

Three-quarters of the *Qur'ān* (القرآن, *al-Qur'ān*) is now composed of verses from Medina and may be interpreted literally as a call for war, violence, and a fight against Christians. The Muslims of the ninth and tenth centuries recognized the contradiction and came together in an effort to solve it. They made the now-famous distinction between two types of "abrogated" passages (المنسوخ والناسخ). The Medina verses abrogate those of Mecca.[24] Of course, in the context of contemporary Muslim schools of theology, it will not be an easy hermeneutical task to envisage a comprehensive view.[25] It may be tempting to recommend the adoption of a synchronic and di-

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[24] "We do not abrogate a verse or cause it to be forgotten except that We bring forth [one] better than it or similar to it. Do you not know that Allah is over all things competent?" (Qur'ān 2:106); "Whenever We replace one verse by another verse – and Allah knows what He should reveal – they are wont to say: 'You are nothing but a fabricator (who has invented the Qur'ān)'. The fact is that most of them are ignorant of the Truth" (Qur'ān 16:101).

[25] There are various websites and channels of ministry for Muslims. Qanāt al-Ḥayāt is a very popular broadcaster. Among the prominent names of scholars and preachers on the web, we can mention Robert Spencer, David Wood, Qummus Zakaryas Butros, Rachid (Maghreb convert to the Gospel and very popular apologist), Habib, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Hamed Abd el-Samd. Of interest for findings on copying errors in the Qur'ān is Rachid's episode www.youtube.com/watch?v=07FgkbynIG0 (later removed by the Cairo-Saido Islamic authorities). Al-Azhar monitors such broadcasts, reaching out to millions of followers. But it has turned out to be completely inadequate and ineffective in its sloppy rejoinders. Islam looks to be on the defensive for the first time, at least in the debate in the Arab world. In the face of rigorous analyses on the person of Muhammad, the Qur'ān, the Al-sīra al-Nabawiyya, and all the rest, Islam finds itself thrown off balance. There exists an extensive body of critical studies of Sami Awad Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh. One of his seminal works is: *Le Coran: texte arabe et traduction française par ordre chronologique selon l'Azhar, avec renvoi aux variantes, aux abrogations et aux écrits juifs et chrétiens*, Éditions de l'Aire, Vevey 2008, 579 pages. See also *Introduction to Islamic Law: Foundations, Sources and Principles*, Centre of Arab and Islamic Law 2012.

achronic analytical approach,[26] one that Western cultures regularly apply to their literature.[27] Yet nothing would be more intrusive than what has developed from within the Muslim traditions themselves.

The risk that the "religion of Islam" may be understood by its various branches as the "religion of the sword" is still very high. For obvious reasons of cohabitation in the countries to which Islam has now migrated, the "Muslim diaspora" can construct its identity as a "religion of peace." Yet whether there is genuine consensus regarding this position by all Muslim currents remains an open question, besides the uneasy theological balance within Muslim schools of thought on the heritage of their own traditions.

Islam rejects any literary and historical criticism of its text and formation. One may wonder whether in such a context there can be the sort of genuine and beneficial breakthrough that allows one to relate to Scripture more directly, without being labelled a traitor. According to a dogmatic formulation during the ninth-century Abbasid Caliphate of Baghdad, the Quran has been considered an "un-

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[26] With a gory death sentence for anyone who would dare to do so. These are the facts: the murder of the Catholic Coptic priest from Cairo, Father Adli Khouzam, who was an enthusiastic amateur of comparative analyses of biblical passages with the Qur'ān, which he called *ayat wa-ayat*. He took notes and talked about it widely. In the 1990s, they found him in his room at the convent where he was living, his eyes plucked out, his fingers broken – eyes that had once read and fingers that had once written – and his throat cut. To the Apostolic Nuncio who had asked the government for answers, the response was the threat of blackmail, grounded in the slander of the murdered priest.

[27] The Jesuit Islamologist Samir Khalil Samir recently spoke out on the need for Islam to undertake a profound reform that historicizes the most controversial passages of the Quran and more generally the theology of *ǧihād*. Even in the absence of a centralized Magisterium such as that of the Catholic Church, there are authorities in the Islamic galaxy that can express themselves on the matter. However, alongside the current University of Al-Azhar in Egypt and the various attempts in the course of Islam's history to reform the interpretation of the Quranic texts, Saudi Arabia's efforts to impose its interpretation of Wahabism on a large part of the Islamic world is a major development of the last half-century, resulting from the convergence between Muhammad Ibn'Abd al-Wahab's theology and the political interests of the Saud family. This process is still underway thanks to the economic resources yielded by the oil trade. The Wahabi interpretation of Islam formulates very strict precepts on the condition of women and toward the Shiites and non-Muslims. In Egypt, until the end of the 1960s the veil was worn by very few women in Cairo, and today even Christian girls in working-class districts must wear it if they want to avoid retaliation.

created" book. Owing to its divine status, the Quran is inviolable. Therefore, it cannot be subject to any exegesis involving the humanistic disciplines to which the Bible has been subjected in the Catholic Church. Literary criticism is an impossible task. Muslims may someday dare to undertake scientific research into all aspects concerning the origins of the Quran and its religion, but in the meantime, we continue to face a "traditional" rigor that has never been refuted. This outlook can be interpreted as the expression of a sense of moral superiority on the part of the Islamic believer, whether educated or not.

It should be acknowledged that it is becoming increasingly more difficult for all religious and cultural traditions to find a receptive audience among their own practicing members. By way of example, as an expression of a typical European reality, the Italian context is characterized by a Christian-Catholic majority population. Apart from the real data on the beliefs and religious practices of Italian Christian Catholics, it is by no means certain that the Pontifical Magisterium, or that of the Italian Episcopal Conference, are fully supported by the Christian-Catholic Italian population. If anything, a large number of Christian Catholics display a negative attitude toward the official religious authority. This alone can explain how many Christian Catholics favour political parties that are quite distant from the ethical and moral principles of the Catholic Church on various fronts. No effective tool seems to be available to "manage" such negative opinions, apart from a specific and thorough commitment to dialogue and persuasion, done with respect to individual freedom.

Against this background, it should not be surprising if analogous phenomena occur elsewhere. In countries with a Muslim religious majority, a religiously informed political authority may have the power to pursue policies that are also conciliatory toward other religious minorities, and yet parts of their societies may behave in an entirely different way. An independent observer faces the challenge of assessing the identity of Islam in each country and determining whether it conforms with reality in choosing the most extremist forms, or forms that are less aligned with the prevailing political authority. In any case, the impossibility of achieving a full "capillary" oversight over all the views taken by the local population is self-evident.

Numerous analysts and observers talk cursorily of a moderate Islam. For the Christians of Egypt or Pakistan, moderate Islam is a

mere utopia, if anything, an empty phrase untranslatable into a reality on the ground. Certainly, one must distinguish between the people and the ideology. For the most part, Muslims themselves are open-minded, friendly, and moderate. The ideology in school textbooks, however, is radical. On Fridays, children listen to inciting mosque sermons that assert that "those who abandon the Muslim faith must be put to death, and that one should greet neither a woman nor an infidel." Fortunately, this is not what is actually practiced. However, the Muslim Brothers' group and Salafists demand the implementation of this doctrine, and as moderate Muslims are voiceless, authority often lies with those who claim to represent orthodoxy and truth.

Nowadays, Muslims who have taken from Islam only that which is compatible with modernity and fosters coexistence have no power. Radical Muslims, who apply a literal and sometimes even exploitative interpretation of the Quran, which refuses any dialogue, have a much more damaging influence. This situation presents Muslims with an underlying religious conflict, causing most of them to feel paralyzed as if they were facing major danger without any clue about what to do or which direction to take. They condemn it, though that is still not enough. They seem to have no means of resolving such a dreadful conflict. Admittedly, this process requires a major effort or even a revolution within Islam itself. While condemnation is the task of the politician rather than the Islamic scholar, researchers should know and seriously address exegetical, historical, and epistemological questions if they wish to establish honest and fruitful dialogue. This dialogue, moreover, ought to look beyond the praise of institutions and even ecclesial praise toward the most important and enigmatic praise of all, that of God.

But this is not all. In Egypt and North Africa, Sufism was rejected, and entire libraries were burned down.[28] Sunnis are largely disinterested in Sufism, but Shiʿa Muslims tend to be more receptive to Sufism, and hence more accepting of the mystical movements within the Islamic faith. Yet in this case too, an evaluation of all

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[28] Cf. R. FABIANI, "Intervista a padre Henri Boulad. Come rispondere alla sfida dell'islam in Egitto," *L'Osservatore Romano*, April 12, 2017. Father Henri Boulad is rector of the Jesuit College in Cairo, home to many Muslims and Christians who have studied there, representing a tangible example of coexistence.

these aspects in the Muslim traditions can only come from within the faith itself.

According to Christian tradition, the Quran does not constitute divine revelation. Indeed, it comes after the revelation of the New Testament and adds nothing to the biblical-Christian revelation in the true sense of the word. The Quran affirms some theological and moral aspects of the biblical-Christian revelation, only to a lesser extent and not always adequately. The Christian faith and tradition cannot accept Muhammad as a prophet, either in the Quranic sense or as an external support to biblical prophecy. The Quran and the Muslim tradition accept the concept of the virginal birth of Mary, Jesus' mother, but exclude her involvement in the salvific role of Jesus.

Ironically, the deeper we go into the theological elements of the Quranic language and the speculative and exegetical elements of the classical Muslim tradition, as delineated in the schools of the *Kalām* (Islamic doctrine/theology), the more acute the divergence with the faith and authentic Christian tradition becomes. At the same time, however, there exists a lived Islam, in both popular and scholarly contexts, in which emerge authentic religious principles that easily align with the authentic Christian tradition. This is apparent in both Sunnism and Shiism.

Special attention should be paid to the Sufic traditions, to which the western world is more frequently sympathetic. Yet not even in such cases can the acceptance of Sufism be unconditional in a genuine Christian tradition. It is often not difficult to observe a lack of Christian experience among enthusiastic Western admirers of the Sufic world, being more congenial toward Shiism than Sunnism. Not infrequently, those in the western world who come forward as followers of Sufi traditions and doctrines are Christian converts to Islam, and for them it can be easier to speak a language variously compatible with Christianity.

An authentic Christian experience cannot but respect the religious struggle of others, but it also draws on its own intrinsic experience to appreciate the significance of the positions being expressed. In this perspective, the intuition of the rabbinical tradition that Islam was part of the historical consequences of the Nohachist alliance may be acceptable to Christians, even if it remains an unfulfilled manifestation of it. Christians, moreover, believe that the mystery of the Word of God, made flesh in Jesus Christ, and the breath of the Holy Spirit are already part of the Nohachist alliance. This

does not contradict the patristic doctrine of the "Seeds of the Word" (*Semina verbi*), which has also been recently revived by the Magisterium of the Church regarding the theology of religions.

The late Father Maurice Borrmans (22/10/1925 - 26/12/2017), one of the leading Islamologists of our time and a member of the Society of the Missionaries of Africa – better known as the "White Fathers," – used to say that out of the five billion human beings on our planet, "all created in the image of the Lord," one billion, or "one in five is Muslim": "everywhere in the world we rub elbows with one another, in either the majority or the minority." His keen awareness of irreconcilable Christian differences with Islam, and his academic rigor in comparing Christianity and Islam, made him one of the most dedicated promoters of an Islamic-Christian dialogue that must not consist of unrealistic shallow optimism, unwarranted parallelisms, or utopian irenicism. Dialogue must be sought because the differences between the parts may be enormous and the time even longer.

5.4 Possible Developments within the "Muslim Diaspora"

To some Islamic radicals, Europe and the West represent a battle-ground.[29] Their real clout in the "Muslim diaspora" is founded on ignorance and the petrodollars of rich Arab monarchies. Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood or Tabligh Movement set out strategically to create a deep-rooted Islamic "Ummah" (i.e., the trans-national Islamic community in Arabic), which may represent a genuine "temptation" to the Muslim diaspora. Furthermore, not all "reformist" Islamic movements are making *ğihād* (ج:هاد), (i.e., striving, but also Holy War), even among the Salafists. Fundamentalist influence on "peaceful" movements is also possible. All Salafists re-

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[29] With the defeat and the political-territorial overthrow of ISIS's Caliphate, the ISIS entity does not cease to exist. It does not look as though the financial resources that support its initiatives have been exhausted. Besides the "lone wolves" or the "more or less dormant cells," the combatants of the extinct Caliphate, even though decimated, have relocated, and it is yet to be determined whether the recruitment of new combatants is truly dying out. The new *ğihād* strategy seeks to destabilize Egypt, terrorizing the Muslim communities themselves, to recruit both resolute and ambivalent supporters in a fluid environment among the "ideologically liquid" communities of the Muslim world. The next phase of the strategy could involve the Mediterranean regions of Africa, which lie closer to Europe.

ject both democracy and secularism. Democracy requires that authority lies with the majority and not with God. Salafists may also grant sovereignty to the people; however, neither the people nor parliament can be the source of law because sovereignty lies only with God. The separation of church and state is equally unacceptable. Islam is all-encompassing and designed to regulate the whole life of a Muslim.

Pluralism and diversity in the Muslim community thus can be sacrificed for the sake of uniformity in theology and doctrine.[30]

There is one more element to be taken into consideration. This pertains not only to the formulations of the Quranic *Šarīʿah* (i.e., divine law), but also to the context of its interpretation in the Muslim tradition. This context presupposes careful monitoring of the possible defection of a member of the "Ummah," or simply of a member of the family or clan, to another faith, or, in any case, of conduct that does not conform to Islamic mores. These forms of control are also exerted in the context of the "Muslim diaspora" in Western countries. In countries with a Muslim religious majority, repressive and even criminal actions against family members can be very serious, leading to the death penalty, particularly in the case of "religious apostasy." This is not so everywhere, but even in the "Muslim diaspora" such forms of control can lead to discrimination, with some potentially negative consequences. Some Islamic groups are prepared to debate the question of freedom of conscience, for example, in the Italian "Muslim diaspora," yet there is still no precise and official consensus on this issue. All this is distant not only from the "secular" understanding of conscience, but also from the way Christians see the matter.

The principle according to which an immigrant has to comply with the civil laws of the country where he or she resides should not be taken to mean that a Muslim ought to include those values in his or her religious heritage. A "secular" society, and not the ideological "laicist" version of it, should not be allowed to impose restrictive criteria for discerning a religious tradition more than a thousand years old. The question of how and what should be interpreted in a reli-

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[30] From an interview with Father Laurent Basanese, by V. Edwin: "The Great Menace of Fundamentalism," during the "Jesuits among Muslims Meeting," Dakar, April 2015.

gious tradition becomes an issue only within that very religious tradition. It may be the case in the future that the various forms of Islam will be influenced by the cultures into which their "diaspora" is settled, but there will be no beneficial effect from any external "ideological or theological imposition." On the contrary, in reaction and out of necessity to preserve their own identity, there could arise forms of "traditionalist" rigidity.

A hardening of one's positions or the withdrawal into one's religious tradition, which can be different or even in clear opposition to a "corrupt Western civilization," can also manifest itself in subjects who exhibit a dysfunctional behaviour toward their religious tradition, and at times criminal toward the "secular" society they live in. In certain cases, we are dealing with an absolute lack of real religious experience, marked by a need to preserve an oftentimes faded original identity vis-à-vis the surrounding world. The aggressiveness of these subjects is expected to be inversely proportional to their actual religious experience.

Islamic terrorism, in its various permutations, such as "lone wolves," "dormant cells," and the more organized versions of ISIS, Boko Haram, and so forth, is undoubtedly characterized by the absence of a genuine religious experience or supported by individuals who have superficial religious experiences and therefore can be controlled. Along with this lack of religious experiences, however, one must also include economic, political, and ideological aspects that are controlled by outside organized terrorist groups.

The impact of these aggressive forms of violence varies for ordinary Muslim people, both in their home countries and in the "diaspora." Nevertheless, one cannot overlook the fact that the utopia of the Islamic "Ummah," comprising the best of all possible communities, belongs in part to the Quran and constitutes a cornerstone of the Islamic tradition. Should an Islamic minority in the "diaspora" gradually become quantitatively more significant, more open demands could emerge for an ever-wider application of the *Šarīʿah*, at least initially within the "Ummah." This does not constitute an "automatic" consequence, but it is an outcome that should not be dismissed out of hand.

After yet another terrorist attack, many rush to assert: "This is not Islam." We should clarify that it is becoming a constant to insist that *ǧihādism* is a perversion of Islam or an accident of its secular history. Yet more than a thousand years of historical relations with

Islam seem to contradict such certainties. Furthermore, until the twentieth century, the religion of Muslims was known in the West as "Islamism." In this way, a distinction was made between Islam as a religion and Islam as an ideology. Yet even today, these two dimensions remain inextricably intertwined. There are dozens of verses in the Quran that seem to instruct Muslims to fight, kill, humiliate, and so forth. *Ǧihādists* believe that these are divine instructions. While we must not paint all Muslims with the same brush by suggesting that they all in some way endorse violence, to affirm simplistically that *ǧihādists* misinterpret Islam's teachings is naïve in that it fails to address a much more complex theological and hermeneutical question regarding the interpretation of the Quranic texts and the Muslim traditions that have interpreted them.[31]

It is equally naive to suppose that the "secularization" of the Muslim population, especially the youth, will lead to the self-integration of these groups into the larger society. Indeed, young people are generally more helpless, vulnerable, and less consistent. The Muslim tradition, as transmitted, will not be cancelled over a period of ten years.

Among the Muslim leaders of the "diaspora," a theological synthesis is emerging, which rejects violence and barbarism while opening up to reason. It demonstrates a remarkable and articulated understanding of Western culture, which is also reconcilable with basic Muslim orthodoxy, and which, in this case, also presupposes sophisticated hermeneutics of the Quranic tradition and its schools of interpretations. This could represent an exemplary goal for the whole Muslim "diaspora,"[32] but it will not be an easy task. The distances between Islam and Christianity do not make gestures of shared goodwill impossible, nor do they prevent us from praying that the Lord will carry out his plan in different religious traditions.

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[31] From "La conscience d'une identité européenne s'est largement forgée dans la confrontation avec l'islam," interview with Annie Laurent.

[32] See Dalil Boubakeur's article, rector of the Great Mosque of Paris, "La ragione rifiuta violenze e barbarie," in *L'Osservatore Romano*, August 10, 2017 (reprinted in the magazine *Zenit*, 14/8/2017), referring to his report on August 8 at Ponte di Legno, Brescia province, in the course of the second day of the "Tonalestate" event, titled "Il barbaro. Fatti non foste a vivere come bruti," which focused on the theme of reason.

6. Praying with the Jewish People[33]

We share with the Jewish world at least part of the Bible, which Christians refer to as the Old Testament and Jews as the *Miqra'ot* (lit. "Scripture"). However, we Christians read the Trinitarian Mystery in all the books of the Old Testament, focusing our attention on the specific nature of the mystery of Christ Jesus, God's incarnate Word, and the mysterious action of the Holy Spirit, impelling the believers with "wordless groans" (Rom 8:26, NIV). The Jewish faith rejects this notion for being an inadequate expression of monotheistic faith, and for being incompatible with the literal Hebrew meaning of the biblical texts and with what the rabbinical tradition says about them. Judaism also holds that Christianity itself does not constitute a New Revelation, but is rather the expression of a primeval revelation, a "Noahidism" (i.e., the covenant stipulated between God and Noah, – cf. Gen 9:8-9),[34] which is imperfect and bound to merge into Judaism by the end of time. In contrast to Judaism, we also have a different conception of the "land of Israel,"[35] the original

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[33] This section was authored by G. Rizzi, in consultation with Pier Francesco Fumagalli.

[34] This is God's promise to all of the families of the peoples of the earth and, according to the rabbinical tradition, an alliance that must teach Monotheism in the biblical-Jewish sense, with all of its moral laws contained in the "seven laws of Noah."

[35] Within Judaism itself, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, there existed considerable debate on the question of the return to the "land of the fathers," involving Asher Zvi Ginsberg, nicknamed "Ahad ha-'am'" (one of the people), and Theodor Herzl, the great proponent of Zionism in his book-manifesto *Die Judenstadt* (1896). Ginsberg believed that not just anyone should return into "the land of the fathers," but only those who had a heightened awareness of the moral tasks of Judaism worldwide, leaving aside the question of oppression and intolerance against Jews in the diaspora (see some essays by Ahad ha-'am, written after 1891 and translated into Italian by E. Trevisan Semi: *La verità dalla terra d'Israele; Non è questa la strada*, and so on; see also https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/quot-the-wrong-way-quot-ahad-ha-am). Herzl advocated for the need for Jewish people to return to Palestine to settle the "Jewish question." The precipitous events resulting from the Nazi-Fascist and anti-Jewish measures and the horrors of the Second World War made Herzl's standpoint far more realistic. The Western political powers, victorious in the war, promoted the constitution of the State of Israel (1948) and saw it as a collective "reparation" for the persecuted and murdered Jewish communities. In doing so,

"land of the fathers," which various currents in present-day Judaism already see as the anticipation of the "Kingdom of Heaven," particularly through the existing State of Israel.[36]

To avoid any inappropriate misuse of magisterial language, one should have a deeper understanding of the Jewish tradition in order to refrain from focusing solely on the most recent political developments, ranging from questions about the Holocaust during World War II, the establishment of the State of Israel, and the periodic conflicts involving neighbouring Islamic countries in the Near and Middle East.

There is much more to the Jewish tradition, which has deepened its internal debate since the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment and continues to do so to the present day.

The intra-Jewish debate focuses on the meaning of "tradition" against the backdrop of changing times. If Ernest Renan could accept the idea that there can be found evidence of Spinoza's Jewish background in his early studies, then the same could easily be accepted for a Jewish contemporary philosopher like Ernest Bloch, or for Sigmund Freud, the "founder" of psychoanalysis, who was also Jewish, and for many other distinguished anthropologists and humanists. In other words, while remaining within a hypothetical intra-Jewish debate, what importance should "tradition" may still hold for a Jewish scholar not to be overwhelmed by modern culture? And more in line with Jewish "tradition," to what extent can the "assimilation" of a Jewish person into contemporary society be acceptable?

There is certainly a fundamental divide in attempts to clarify a historical, methodological, and epistemological dilemma in Judaism. This debate revolves around the *Haskalah* (illuminism),

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they helped to severely undermine the relationship with the Arab-Muslim world of the Near and Middle East, which, apart from the question of oil reserves, is now regarded as politically irrelevant. The implications of such imbalance and the interests for energy resources and the subsequent accumulation of political-strategic vested interests external to the area are also evident to the public in the present international political climate.

[36] See also the more nuanced formulation in the recent discussions of the European Rabbis Conference and the Rabbinical Council of America: "Fra Gerusalemme e Roma. Riflessioni a 50 anni dalla *Nostra Aetate*" (https://www.saenotizie.it/sae/attachments/article/935/Fra%20Gerusalemme%20e%20Roma.pdf; see also "Between Jerusalem and Rome. Reflections on 50 Years of *Nostra Aetate*, 2017, www.cjcuc.org/2017/08/31/between-jerusalem-and-rome/).

namely around the bursting of Enlightenment into the Central European Jewish milieu. Far from being settled, the debate is still very much open, as reflected in the highly diversified intra-Jewish dialectic worldwide. The so-called *Haskalah* debate has conclusively shed light on the meaning of the underlying question about "Tradition"[37] in the context of changing times.

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[37] In its more strictly post-Biblical form, especially after the third anti-Roman revolution of 130-135 CE, the Jewish "tradition" structures itself on four systemic and concentric circles, the last of which, in order of time, is the philosophical one. The first systemic circle, "nuclear," is formed by the Torah, as it is read in its entirety in the liturgy, together with the synagogal Haphtaroth (additions), that is, the readings that have been selected in the Former and Latter Prophets; for other texts of the *Miqra'ot* there are special holidays. Around this first "nuclear" systemic circle develops a second systemic circle, constituted by the oral tradition, which soon features a rolling literary corpus that is very consistent and marked by a variety of literary genres: the *targumim* (Aramaic paraphrases of the *Miqra'ot*), the Midrashic Literature (*Midrash*, interpretation), which developed until the late Middle Ages, the Mishnaic Literature (Mishnah, subsequently commented and expanded in the Jerusalem Talmud and Babylonian Talmud), the responses on the *halakhic*-rite issues, codexes of collection and compilation of responses, and so on. The third concentric systemic circle of the Jewish tradition is constituted by Jewish Mysticism, subsequently referred to more generally as *Qabbalah* (literally, "tradition"), whose historical origins go back to before the Christian era, and there are traces of it in the New Testament, in the Tannaitic masters, in the *targumim*, in the rabbinical disputes of the Mishnaic-Talmudic literature, although the most systematic formulations were found only later in the literature of the *Hekhalot* (palaces) and in the *Zohar* (splendor), developing in the great systems of Judaic Mysticism as well as in that of Isaac Luria during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. With its very specific languages, Jewish Mysticism, speculative and practical, continues to refer to the other two systemic circles of Judaism, despite the controversies that the very languages of mysticism stirred up in the Jewish milieu. The last systemic circle is precisely the philosophical one, which engages the master rabbis, especially following the lengthy controversy between Karaites (those who paid attention primarily to the Torah) and Rabbanitis (those who took into account the whole rabbinical tradition), into considering carefully the Greek philosophical languages, given that they had become somewhat established in the Jewish communities, through disputes between Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Greek philosophy, especially among its major representatives such as Aristotle and Plato, became the standard language of different and incompatible religious traditions, each seeking a philosophical language that could account for its religious claims when compared to other religious traditions. The great masters of Rabbinism, such as Saadia, and others, engaged the whole Jewish "Tradition," which is now arranged around the three great concentric systemic circles, taking a position on

It should be stressed, however, that it is not the *Haskalah* that has raised the underlying question. As a matter of fact, it is well-known how Spinoza, literally "excommunicated" from his Jewish community, had already affirmed the right of reason, as he called it, in engaging with "tradition." Before him, already in the ninth century Ḥiwi al-Balkhi, a Jew from Balkh (ancient Khorasan, modern Afghanistan), gave precedence to reason when discussing part of the Jewish "Tradition." By demolishing the nuclear systemic circle of the Torah, in other words, the whole tradition of the *Miqra'ot* (the Sacred Scriptures), al-Balkhi attempted to reformulate the whole Jewish "Tradition." It should also be noted that figures such as Ḥiwi al-Balkhi, Spinoza, and, later on, the proponents of *Haskalah* in Judaism enjoyed positive responses but were also the subject of intense controversies. Many people shared their views, but could not express them with equal clarity.[38] Yet by then, it was already part of the popular culture.

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the various subjects and questions arising within the Jewish communities themselves. Acquiring a philosophical heritage was therefore a moral and pastoral responsibility as well as a necessity for the dialogical coexistence of different religious traditions. Clearly, the depth and consistency of a philosophical system of one of these masters of Judaism played a fundamental role also within the Jewish communities themselves, functioning even apologetically for the "traditional" Jewish heritage. However, the very breadth of thought and the vigorous effort at a synthesis that these "philosophical" masters of Judaism made, went far beyond the most essential needs of the communities themselves and ended up causing an often-unbridgeable gap between their efforts and the actual reception of them among ordinary people. Such a vital relationship between the heritage of the Jewish "Tradition" and changing times is simply not proportionate to Judaism with philosophical thought. European and Western diaspora Jewish communities have influenced the philosophical thought, but have also been influenced by it, sometimes to the extent of leveling off on it, until an "assimilation," which has affected to varying degrees or even entirely the patrimony of the "Rabbinical Tradition," above outlined in the first three large concentric systemic circles. This same trajectory cannot be traced in the Eastern diaspora communities, whereas, at a more popular level, Hasidic Judaism (*ḥasid*, pious) is rooted theoretically in Isaac Luria's system of mysticism.

[38] The same cannot be said of Philo of Alexandria and the Greek philosophy in the Jewish communities of his time. Philonian intermediation with philosophical culture, analogous to that expressed in some of the works in the Christian biblical canon, although not in the Jewish one, had no meaningful impact on the Jewish communities of the time. They instead had important repercussions in Christian traditions.

It is self-evident that an overarching, even philosophical, assessment of the rabbinical tradition can only develop within the Jewish world. This feature, while lacking a Magisterium analogous to that of the Catholic Church, still makes consensus among communities a fundamental part of its progression. One result of such a heritage is that it will not be a difficult task within the complex world of Judaism to find ways to express values that can be shared by the Christian world.[39]

On the other hand, discussions within the contemporary Jewish world moved beyond the realm of *Haskalah*, embracing more recent cultural, social, philosophical, scientific, and political perspectives. Against this background, it is not possible to paint the whole present-day Jewish world with the same brush. There are multiple possibilities, not just between differing degrees of practice in Judaism, but also in terms of mere cultural Judaism, however broadly multifaceted it may be.

6.1 Questions Concerning the Political Situation of the Land of Israel

It would be impossible to discuss the complex issue of the land of Israel and the State of Israel by looking at it merely from a secular, or worse still "laicist," perspective. Indeed, the latter frequently attempts to reduce the Holy Scriptures (*Miqra'ot*) of the Jewish tradition and the Old and New Testaments to relics of the past, "made-up stories,"[40] detached from contemporary realities.

Similarly, a vague religious pluralism, which claims to speak with authority on the matter, though fails to engage in a careful discernment of the values borne by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam con-

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[39] See Joseph Levi's commentary, Chief Rabbi of the Florence's Jewish community, "Alla base dell'umanesimo ebraico," published in *L'Osservatore Romano* on August 11, 2017 and republished by the online magazine *Zenit* on the following August 14. The commentary is based on Levi's address "Il dialogo fra Dio e Abramo: modello per un patto di crescita e fiducia fra Dio e l'umanità," given on August 8 at Ponte di Legno (Brescia), during the event "Tonalestate."

[40] Unfortunately, the expression "made up" cannot be taken to be the mere creation of a shallow subculture, characteristic of the mass media, or the present-day Tech industries. The expression "made up," as a radical debasement of the cultural, religious, and historical content of the Old Testament, has been deployed unsupported by evidence in several critical historical-critical studies that have had a significant impact in academic circles (See M. LIVERANI, *Oltre la Bibbia. Storia antica d'Israele*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2012).

cerning a land all three religions hold as "holy," would be superficial, ill-advised, and would bring about, in the short, medium, and long term, profound injustices and endless suffering.

Equally problematic would to be meet the political and religious controversy that emerged in the Middle East following the tragedy of the Second World War and the creation of the State of Israel in Palestine, with the unilateral use of indiscriminate economic and military power by some present Western superpower aimed at protecting the current State of Israel and deterring real or presumed enemies.

At the same time, equating anti-Semitism with anti-Zionism is likely to create widespread confusion. A relentless indoctrination seeking to promote, through the media and other more ordinary means of diffusion in that culture, the association between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism as the internationally accepted political standard, would generate serious concerns even in moderate circles.

Political Zionism was given an authoritative international legitimization by the United Nations resolution that recognized the State of Israel after the Second World War, even though it had not yet received unanimous endorsement from some observant currents of Judaism. At the time, however, there were already many prominent figures of Rabbinic Judaism who recognized some potential in the emerging Zionist movement. Over the years, more and more observant Jews have joined the ranks of those who see in the State of Israel the "inklings" of the messianic kingdom and have therefore increasingly endorsed Zionist policies as part of the new State of Israel, this time based on biblical and Jewish-Rabbinic theology.

The issues of securing Israel's borders and internal protection have been established as a legitimate concern in Western public perception vis-à-vis the tragic recent events of the Holocaust, perpetrated by the Nazi-Fascists and ignored for a long time during the years of the Second World War by the "Western coalition" against the Axis powers. Disbelief, reticence, as well as deliberate declassification of the Jewish question, were somehow 'remedied' with an overwhelming silencing of the Palestinian question.

The West had essentially dismissed as irrelevant the needs and aspirations of the Arab-Muslim population, not only in the Palestinian area, but also in the Near and Middle East, and it has neglected almost completely both Islam and the Far East. The few dissenting voices in Western countries that took issue with this new state of affairs were completely ignored.

In reality, the collateral damage of the Arab-Israeli conflict had been largely underestimated. The conflict has gradually become emblematic of the wider Muslim world's struggle against the West and has ignited violent Islamic radicalism. The political and military setbacks of such radicalism have further complicated the fight against it and made it ideologically stronger, both in Muslim countries and in Europe itself, causing severe repercussions for the Churches of the Near, Middle, and Far East.

6.2 The Necessary Discernment between Judaism and Zionism

Since biblical times, the land of Israel, the exact boundaries of which appear to shift in biblical literature,[41] has always been a reference point for the historical and religious identities of the Jewish world. The land that the Lord meant to give to Abraham and the patriarchs belongs to the mission to which the Lord Himself called the patriarchs and the people who would arise from them.[42] Outside of that

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[41] On the biblical and extra-biblical sources for the geography, also political, of the land of Israel in the Old Testament, see the volume of P. A. KASWALDER, *Onomastica biblica*, Franciscan Printing Press, Jerusalem 2002, 17-37.

[42] For Abraham: Gen 12:7 (the land of Canaan); Gen 13:14-15; Gen 15:18-19 (from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates); Gen 17:8 (all the land of Canaan). Addressing all the Israelites at Horeb: Deut 1:7-8 ([7]Start out and make your way to the hill country of the Amorites and to all their neighbors in the Arabah, the hill country, the Shephelah, the Negeb, the seacoast, the land of the Canaanites, and Lebanon, as far as the Great River, the river Euphrates. [8]See, I place the land at your disposal. Go, take possession of the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to assign to them and to their heirs after them, NJPS). The land that Moses was shown before he died: Deut 34:1-4 ([1]Moses went up from the steppes of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the summit of Pisgah, opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan; [2]all Naphtali; the land of Ephraim and Manasseh; the whole land of Judah as far as the Western Sea; [3]the Negeb; and the Plain – the Valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees – as far as Zoar. [4]And the Lord said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, 'I will assign it to your offspring.' I have let you see it with your own eyes, but you shall not cross there." NJPS). To Joshua: Josh 1:2-4 ([2]"My servant Moses is dead. Prepare to cross the Jordan, together with all this people, into the land that I am giving to the Israelites. [3]Every spot on which your foot treads I give to you, as I promised Moses. [4]Your territory shall extend from the wilderness and the Lebanon to the Great River, the River Euphrates [on the east] – the whole Hittite country – and up to the Mediterranean Sea on the west." NJPS).

land, not yet even delineated by boundaries, none of the patriarchs could live even if necessity compelled the patriarchs individually to leave, they still had to reach an awareness that outside that land which the Lord had given them, they could not survive and had to retrace their steps.[43]

The stories of the patriarchs are mirrored in those of the Jewish people. For example, Egypt, a place of refuge from a devastating famine, would become an inhospitable land,[44] and Jacob and Joseph would leave behind instructions for their bones to be buried in the "land of the fathers."[45] For the Jewish people, who continue to self-identify with the Exodus generation through the celebration of Passover,[46] the return to the "promised land" was a return to God's original call. The gift of the "promised land to the fathers" comes from divine initiative, even if, in both the deliverance from Egyptian bondage and the conquest of the land, this divine initiative has been deployed as part of a gradual plan aimed at persuading the enemies of God's people rather than destroying them without any alternatives.[47]

In the "promised land," possessed at last, the people he had called would be able to dwell, provided that they complied with the fundamental stipulations set out in the pact that bound them to their Lord. Their failure to keep these obligations, which included the proper treatment of foreigners,[48] would result in the "exile" of the Israelites from that land at the hands of foreign powers, acting on God's behalf. The "exile" was seen as a non-final punishment.[49]

The call to return to the "land of the fathers" finds echoes in the biblical tradition as in that of the Babylonian "exile,"[50] in the cele-

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[43] Abraham went down to Egypt due to a famine but was forced to return (cf. Gen 12:10-13:1); due to a famine, Isaac went to dwell in a foreign land, but had to depart (cf. Gen 26:1-17); Jacob-Israel, due to a famine, consented to go down to Egypt with all of his children, but only with the Lord's consent (cf. Gen 46:1-4).

[44] Cf. Exod 1:1-22.

[45] For Jacob, cf. Gen 47:29-31 and Gen 48:29-32; for Joseph, cf. Gen 50:24-25.

[46] Cf. Exod 12:25.

[47] Cf. Wis 11:15-12, 22.

[48] Cf. Exod 22,20; Lev 19:33-34; Deut 24:17-22; Deut 27:19.

[49] For the Kingdom of Israel, cf. 2 Kgs 17:7-23; for the Kingdom of Judah, cf. 2 Kgs 24:20.

[50] Cf. Isa 55:12-13.

bration of the epic of the return itself[51] as well as in other prophetic voices that followed it.[52]

Nevertheless, there were two distinct features of the "sacred history" in this new phase. The continued existence of a Jewish diaspora,[53] outside the ancient "land of the fathers" but with a fundamental relationship with it and with the city of Jerusalem and its reconstructed temple,[54] was not felt to be a form of disobedience toward God's call of return to the "land of the fathers." Any effort to re-establish a Jewish state in the "land of the fathers" was no longer consistent with the call to leadership of the house of David,[55] such that the divine covenant with the house of David was to be understood in the sense of messianic expectation.

When and how the messianic hope would be fulfilled, that is to say, the time when the "Kingdom of Heaven" would come, a kingdom marked by restored independence and sovereignty in the "land of the fathers," became the subject of controversies. These were crystallized in ideological currents and revolutionary movements,[56] un-

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[51] Cf. Ezra1:1-4.

[52] The prophetic task of rebuilding the cultic community in the "land of the fathers," as described in the Books of Isaiah 56-66, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, is to be understood in this sense.

[53] See Tobit's "Song of Praise," in Tob 13:2-9.

[54] See again Tobit's "Song of Praise," in Tob 13,10-18.

[55] The epic of the priestly family of Maccabees resulted in the first Neo-Jewish dynasty of the Hasmoneans, however, without linking it to the Davidic dynasty. Similarly, there is no reference to the Davidic dynasty in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, as there is in 1-2 Chronicles.

[56] The first anti-Roman Palestinian Jewish revolution took place between 66-70 CE, with the epilogue of the tragic resistance of the revolutionaries in Masada in 73 CE; the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem in 70 CE had serious consequences for the whole Jewish world. The second anti-Roman Jewish revolt, arising from the conflicts between the various ethnic-religious minorities in Alexandria, took place between 115-117 under the emperor Trajan, ending with the military campaign led by General Lucio Quieto, working for Rome, who crushed the revolution, leading to significant repercussions for the Jewish diaspora in Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean. The third Jewish revolution, which was still Palestinian and had a "messianic" character, while not unanimously supported by all the Jewish currents of the time, took place between 130-135 CE under Emperor Hadrian, and caused serious damage to the Palestinian Jewish communities, while Jerusalem was reconstituted as Aelia Capitolina, on the ancient route of the Roman camp, which besieged it at the time.

til the tragic end of the controversial affair of Simon bar Kokhba (lit. "son of the star"), as he was called by those who considered him a messianic figure, or Simon bar Koziba or Kozba (lit. "son of the lie") to anyone who did not see him as such.

About a century or so before the third Jewish revolt against Rome, there can still be observed in the *Acts of the Apostles*, even among Jesus' disciples, a comparable expectation to those of the various forms of contemporary Judaism: "Then they gathered around him and asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'" (Acts 1:6, NIV). And Jesus' answer, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority" (Acts 1:7, NIV), may be considered analogous to the direction the Pharisaic rabbinic tradition would later give to the messianic-apocalyptic currents. These were almost completely removed from the *Mishnah* (mid-third century CE), with the sole exception of *Mishnah Sotah* 9,15. In any case, the messianic-apocalyptic promises, which included the question of the sovereignty of the "land of the fathers," were permanently consigned to Jewish eschatology, with no other historical implications.

This does not detract from the fact that the question of the "land of the fathers," or of the "land of Israel," has retained its currency in all the various forms of Jewish eschatology that have been developed over time and up to the present day. For historical Israel, to be able to reach the "land of Israel" has traditionally brought about, as in the myth of Atlas, a renewed sense of one's mission among the pagans.

The historicization of the question of the "land of Israel," with the creation of the modern State of Israel (1948) seems to be an anomaly when compared to the more entrenched traditions of Judaism. A definitive and authoritative assessment of this issue for Judaism can only come from a theological debate within Judaism itself.

On the other hand, there is a specific discernment that the Christian tradition recognizes in the New Testament, notably in the *Epistle to the Hebrews*. By boiling down the meaning of the story of the Patriarchs, the New-Testamentary interpretation affirms:

> [13] All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. [14] People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. [15] If they had been

thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. [16] Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them (Heb 11:13-16, NIV).

Thereafter, outlining the faith of the biblical Israelites, the *Epistle to the Hebrews* concludes:

> [39]These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, [40]since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect (Heb 11:39-40, NIV).

All of this refers to an eschatological fulfilment of the divine promises on "earth," a fulfilment that can neither exclude the non-Jews nor be against them, as is affirmed even by Paul about the mystery of Israel's faithlessness in the person of Jesus: "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: a part of Israel has experienced a hardening until the full number of the Gentiles has come in" (Rom 11:25, NIV).

In *Revelation* as well, the new Jerusalem descending from heaven, the "Bride of the Lamb" which reconciles the theme of the earth and the temple, epitomizes the eschatological fulfilment of all the divine promises: "*The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city*" (Rev 22:3, NIV). Even the promise on "earth" goes through the person of Jesus.

An awareness of the distance between Judaism and Christianity in this respect does not prevent people from praying that the Lord may fulfil the work undertaken at the beginning of both religious faiths.

7. The Representative Character and Relevance of the "Assisi Meetings"

The "Assisi Meetings" are undoubtedly necessary, and yet they call on each religious faith and ascetic-spiritual tradition, each participant and everyone who feels represented there, to partake of the time and ways of the Lord. We cannot overlook the fact that many groups of Christians, Jews, Muslims, and the followers of other religious and ascetic-spiritual traditions may feel they have no represen-

tation in these kinds of meetings. Furthermore, even considering the differences and discriminations that exist in particular ethnic-political contexts, religious factors may play a central role in highlighting outstanding conflicts, including those of a very different nature. This reality may turn the "Assisi meetings" into events that are confusing and difficult to reconcile with people's painful experiences. Still, while acknowledging both the existence and the pain of such negative experiences, the effort to seek communion should not be considered futile. Precisely for this reason, when something appears difficult, if not impossible, to us, we should always remember that "no word from God will ever fail" (Lk 1:37, NIV). That is a faith that we all can and must share.

7.1 Interreligious Dialogue

The potential afforded by interreligious dialogue depends in part on the quality of specialized studies. This can be achieved not by simply relying on ready-made formulations in one's respective religious traditions, but by working with acuity, rigor, and integrity in an interdisciplinary quest. An in-depth knowledge of different religious and cultural traditions is an essential skill when communicating with people from different religious and cultural traditions.

At present, another essential milestone seems to have been met. Apart from the differences individual religious and cultural traditions carry within themselves when they confront each other, it is imperative to keep channels of communication open. This should be done not by expecting to reach definitive conclusions, but by persistently welcoming that which is tentative. This is the way to strive for the best.

In addition to exchanges among scholars belonging to different religious and cultural traditions, the channels of communication may be maintained through dialogue in everyday life. This happens in small steps, such as when people come together to understand and collaborate, in constructive reciprocal cooperation.

The qualified religious institutions of the respective religious traditions certainly are tasked with keeping alive all official channels of communication, through patient mediation and mutual understanding for the common good of each religious and cultural tradition.

7.2 Is Evangelization Over?

One might think that Jesus' command, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mk 16:15, NKJV), has now run its course and no longer holds relevance.[57] Coexistence, inter-religious dialogue, participation, the "Assisi Meetings," God's presence in the various religious and ascetic-spiritual traditions, and the global phenomenon of secularization, all may lead one to believe that direct Christian evangelization is out of date at this point, if not inappropriate. We are led to believe that it is reasonable for the Christian faith to be confined to the ecclesial circle to which it belongs.

Jewish people themselves have formally and explicitly called upon the Catholic Church to refrain from any form of Christian evangelization in their communities. Equally, Muslim people would simply refuse it, while the great "Eastern religions" and ascetic-spiritual traditions may mock similar naiveté, or feel insulted by it, or even embed the meaning of Christian evangelization into their dialectical theology. The secularization of the Western world is itself largely at odds with any form of religious "meddling" that is foreign to "laicism." For many people, Christianity is something that has already been tried, failed, and is now obsolete, no longer repeatable either in its various forms of worship or in its unrealistic theological doctrines, and even less so today in its "indemonstrable" ethical requirements.

We live in this world, but we are not asked to identify with it, or to be like it! Christians do not need to passively settle for unacceptable forms of reductionism. For us Christians, it is the quality of the Christian experience that gives meaning to everything else. No one gives what they do not have.

Our primary task is therefore to achieve internal reform, seeking to recover our personal, familial, communal, and ecclesial spiritual strength. This may be easier to accomplish in newly formed ecclesial movements, but the wear and tear caused by the passage of time and the test of endurance can be indispensable resources for everyone.

As a general rule of thumb, we should follow the principle provided by the book of *Numbers*: "Wherever the cloud settled, the Israelites encamped" (Num 9:17, NIV).

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[57] The section on *Is evangelization over?* was written by G. Rizzi and G. Bellia.

The experience of the Churches and communities that have lived for centuries as minorities in a religious world as diverse as, for example, the Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Chinese world, can offer a valuable lesson for the Western Christian Churches. The recent evils of the almost vanished 'Islamic Caliphate', sometimes known as Isis, can lead some people to conclude that it is impossible to coexist with Islam.

Yet, in spite of the controversial and radical narratives made by some public commentators, the fourteen hundred years' worth of historical relations between Christian and Muslim minorities are far more than what has been written from a contentious Western perspective, in which reside few traces of a lived Christian experience.

For the fearful and sometimes spiritually impoverished Churches of the Western world, there are many positive aspects to be found when engaging in a genuine dialogue with the Christian Churches and communities of, for instance, Pakistan, Indonesia, India, and China, or with the Coptic communities of Egypt.

Nevertheless, each person has an inner dimension of discernment to reflect on, and from which we can learn the proper attitude to assume as Christians and Christian communities who effectively constitute a minority even in a Western world that is strongly secularized, "laicist," and grappling with an ever-increasing multi-ethnic and multi-religious world.

For one thing, we are called to reconnect with ordinary people. This idea is strongly emphasized in Pope Francis' appeal to "go out to the peripheries of the world," which urges us to step out of the orderly and organized networks of ecclesial structures, that is, dioceses, parishes, religious communities, ecclesial groups, movements, and so on. This does not mean that the "Kingdom of God" is the same thing as a commitment to man, but it is impossible to speak to the man of our time without engaging with contemporary humanity. However, the whole body of the Church cannot become one part with a single function (1 Cor 12:14-21). Those whom the Lord calls to "go out to the peripheries of the world," inspired and assisted by Him, should always "be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks them to give the reason for the hope that they have" (1 Pt 3:15, NIV).

On the contrary, anyone who thinks that direct evangelization is no longer necessary should be concerned regarding the quality of his or her Christian experience. Similarly, anyone who no longer feels

inclined to evangelize a world that is ex-Christian, post-Christian, or even non-Christian, and retreats into his or her own small parochial reality ought to be concerned about the depths of his or her Christian experience.

There is a time for everything, a time to connect with people and a time to rekindle one's Christian experience, a time to converse and a time to evangelize,[58] *Qoheleth* would say today (Qoh 3:1 ff.).

7.3 Some Recurring Challenges

Jesus revealed Himself as the fulfilment of Scriptures. He announced this in a Jewish religious world, which was the earliest addressee of God's promises, where familiarity with the Scriptures was largely conveyed through a rich oral tradition. Jesus associated the announcement of Himself, the "Kingdom of Heaven," and "God" with "signs," wonders, and healings. He intended to inspire confidence in Him, promoting that faith among people who saw a prelude to the action of the Spirit and the work of the Father. In turn, He gave an analogous task to the "Twelve" (Mt 10:1 and parallels) and also to an enlarged group of seventy-two followers, thereby extending this subsidiary mandate to all believers (Lk 10:1). By doing so, he has laid out the framework of the universal missionary office for all creatures to the end of time (Mt 28:19-20 and parallels). Such a mission represents a guiding principle of discernment for all, for everyone, including those who do not accept Christ or are too fearful to admit that they do recognize Him.

Jesus, on the other hand, did not equate the "Kingdom of Heaven" with a utopian and instant solution to every person's problems. His various "signs," and at times those of his disciples in subsequent periods of the Church, have never served the needs of mankind completely. These "signs" have alluded to a more important reality, Jesus Himself, the action of the Holy Spirit, the Father's love. Mak-

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[58] According to Pope Francis' Magisterium, evangelizing "is a kind of preaching which falls to each of us as a daily responsibility. It has to do with bringing the Gospel to the people we meet, whether they be our neighbours or complete strangers. [...] Being a disciple means being constantly ready to bring the love of Jesus to others, and this can happen unexpectedly and in any place: on the street, in a city square, during work, on a journey" (EG 127; cf. JOHN PAUL II's *Evangelium Vitae*, 29).

ing humanity dive into this experience represents Jesus' mission and the mission of the Church.

The danger for the religious men and women of the Church, and above all for Christians who have not cultivated a lifelong relationship with Christ, would be a hasty engagement with man in order to overcome the obstacle of rejecting the person of Jesus and the Trinitarian mystery. Our dedication to our fellow human beings can and should be maintained, but Christians must never deprive themselves of the experience of the mystery underpinning their commitment. Their experience would suffer from it, and they would suddenly misrepresent their commitment to humanity until abandoning it altogether. Alas, there is no practical recipe to combine human commitment with the need to announce and convey Christ's mystery.

We cannot regard as a simply secular or personal choice any commitment to a dialogue with the Jewish or Muslim world or with "Eastern religions" or with any of the Christian confessions of the Reformed or Orthodox Churches. In the context of secularism, there would be an inability to fully understand all the specificities of the different faiths and traditions. The ability to be consistent over time may be lacking in the case of a commitment to an interreligious dialogue that stems from a purely individual decision.

While not downplaying the importance of such a commitment, it is necessary to be very clear and forthright concerning the vocational background of this kind of commitment. Yet alongside the personal motivation for some or all of the different religious worlds, there are also some tangible indicators, such as, for example, life situations, long-standing relationships and experiences, rigorous research, as well as the acquisition over time of knowledge of both one's religious tradition and the traditions of others.

Furthermore, the local Church, as well as the religious family to which one belongs, is specifically tasked with this. Therefore, when realizing a genuine vocation in interreligious or ecumenical dialogue, one should not step away from the local Church or his or her religious family, which has already embraced that special kind of calling. In other words, the fundamental principles of one's affiliation with a Church or religious family[59] should not and must not be circum-

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[59] In this context, the correspondence between Maurice Borrmans and Christian de Chergé is undoubtedly significant. The letters show that the senior Islam-

scribed. With these fundamental principles in mind, any path suggested by a practical life can be seen as part of the divine plan, however effective or successful it may be. It is simply a matter of accepting a vocation, not to affirm oneself, but to fully trust in God's plan.

Gnosis is another frequently recurring challenge in the context of an inadequate, or in any case inherently impoverished, religious experience. In *gnosis* verbosity prevails, which, while resulting from rational and systematic analysis, remains essentially unable to present effectively and insightfully the mystery of faith for which it claims to be the bearer.

On the contrary, the mystery of faith fades away in these cases, whereas a human construction, one that is technically structured but still very human, prevails. This is a lack of true religious inspiration and can also affect religious leaders and faiths which are not necessarily of "gnostic" origin. The deficiency of *gnosis* can also characterize the theological and systematic exposition of traditional religions to varying degrees depending on the level of religious experience or the theologian's lack thereof. All religious faiths should be able to tap into their respective heritage in a thorough, harmonious, and scrupulous fashion. They should be able to ensure not just the mnemonic transfer of their religious heritage, but also its effective assimilation, sustained by a vibrant, spiritual, judicious, and religious experience of tradition. A fairly lengthy process of formation must be taken into consideration.

Besides, one other frequent danger is posed by the need to reduce the wealth of religious heritage to something that can be easily accessible and possibly even summarized in a few sentences. Whereas excessive verbosity may indicate that there is a lack of true religious experience, the opposite is also true today. The desire to simplify

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ologist of the Missionaries of Africa not only served as a "theological" advisor to his young Cistercian alumnus, but also advised him not to "act as a lone knight"; on the other hand, the young Cistercian, who would later die as a martyr, was always faithful to his superiors, when they urged him not to be too pushy with his confreres of his community regarding the importance of the ongoing dialogical exchange with some local Muslims. It was only then that Christian de Chergé could effectively lead his community to the fulfillment of a very special vocation, without being unnecessarily overbearing (cf. CH. DE CHERGÉ, *Lettere a un amico fraterno*, edited by M. BORRMANS, Urbaniana University Press, Città del Vaticano 2017, 171.228).

quickly and cheaply the heritage of one's religious faith risks exposing us to short-term assimilation, which is devoid of the necessary time required to gain adequate knowledge of our faith. The latter must be counterbalanced by a living experience that is both sapiential and prayerful.

A further risk has emerged today, albeit unexpected, which results from the media streamlining of Pope Francis' personality and Magisterium, namely reducing these to a purely horizontal form of social relationality with his call to "go to the peripheries of the world," and thereby reducing or sidelining everything else. It seems that in a similar interpretative confusion, authoritative figures of the Catholic Church have also incurred this sort of misunderstanding. If we take all of Francis' pastoral contributions in the field seriously, we can say that things are not like that. Particularly in this case we must apply *Qoheleth*'s wisdom, which affirms that there is a time for everything (Qoh 3:1), such that nothing can happen in the world unless there is diligent discernment, with a personal, familial, communal, and, more broadly, ecclesial dimension.

8. Some Features of Christian Discernment of Present Time[60]

The ultimate sign of the times is the mystery of Christ, the person of Jesus (Lk 12:54-56), whose presence must be discerned in real life situations if we are to conform to the Father's plans and draw on the energy and grace that the Holy Spirit ensures in the Church.[61]

This discernment, on the other hand, requires a considerable commitment, concerning the contemporary challenges, priorities, and contexts the Lord assigns to each one and the energies that must be allocated for the task which the Lord Himself has concretely proposed.

8.1 A Framework for the Challenges of Our Time

The framework required for the challenges of our time calls for a real, cultural commitment to the quality, accuracy, and depth of the

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[60] This section is authored by G. Rizzi and G. Bellia.

[61] For *Ad Gentes* 4, "the Holy Spirit makes the entire Church 'one in communion and in ministering; He equips her with various gifts of a hierarchical and charismatic nature,' [...] and instilling into the hearts of the faithful the same mission spirit which impelled Christ Himself."

information to be sought out and acquired. This is something that cannot be done in isolation today as it requires a combination of many competencies, alongside the effort of finding and accessing reliable documentation.

The focal point of the process outlined thus far is the impact of migration movements, in terms of the different religions involved, the West, and its secular culture, which also tends toward "laicism." Such an impact presupposes two aspects, namely, the identity of the non-Christian religions represented in the migration movements and the present reality of Christianity and Judaism in the West, both of which constitute its original founding cultural and religious identity.

It would be necessary, however, to have access to the real data on the economy and on the geopolitical strategies in place at the global as well as the local level. Yet along with serious doubts that the actual data are ultimately difficult to obtain, only indirect indications of this picture of the challenges of our time remain, subject to variables that are currently out of reach.

The religious picture of the Western world appears to be sharper and is characterized predominantly by a lay, secularized culture, one that is prone to relegating the religious dimension to the private and individual sphere, to the point that it is an increasingly poor interlocutor with the secular culture and political power. The Western propensity to delegate the formulation of ethical and moral values to philosophical thinking, which excludes the values instilled by religions over thousands of years, is fairly obvious. The metaphysical presupposition of it consists precisely in absolute autonomy in decision-making, based on practicality and convenience, which may be corrected along the way. Progress in all fields of science and technology is little by little replacing any metaphysics or religion.

As a result, the cultural context of the West features a series of elements among which is a widespread "secularism" tending to degenerate into "laicism," the breakdown of a genuine religious experience, religious indifferentism, and religious illiteracy. Christian discernment here cannot blindly accept this Western secularist state of affairs for the sake of "tolerance." Various elements of Western secularism have become irreconcilable with Christianity itself. Yet Christian discernment does not advocate a cultural war to demolish a different culture or non-culture. Christians will continue to bear witness to Jesus' ultimate word and deeds, beyond which it is impossi-

ble to proceed. One cannot renounce His faith, without turning into a renegade, "a Judas," if we were to use the language of the Gospel, or an apostate, adopting a post-evangelical vocabulary.

It is, therefore, time for Christians in the West to witness, rather than to evangelize directly. Through the ministry and the Magisterium of Pope Francis, now the breath of the Holy Spirit is an invitation for Christians to reach the peripheries of the world, to encounter the poor, the rejected, and the forgotten, including, for example, the "laicists." This must be done with the knowledge that the "Kingdom of Heaven," announced and brought about by Christians themselves, is not the same as the "secularist" utopias of our time. Rather, everything must go through Christ Jesus' loving hands as a blessing to the Father (Mt 14:17-21). Such faith alone seems linguistically preposterous to contemporary Western culture. It represents, however, the actual strength of the Christian faith. In this final encounter, Christian witness and evangelization cannot be only an individual and private practice, but they must benefit from the power of the community of believers, coming together in the name of the Lord, which in turn ensures His presence among them. We are not speaking, in fact, of a clash between crowds, like armies, but of obedience to the word of Jesus, beyond which one cannot and should not go.

8.2 A Christological Insight

Christian discernment must, however, go even deeper in each believer. Everyone is urged to discern whether he or she considers Jesus' mandate to evangelize an outdated enterprise. In other words, each person should discern whether there exists within themselves any feelings of indifference or apathy toward evangelization, and whether the survival of their faith suffices. Should such symptoms be felt within oneself, one would have to fear for the firmness of their faith, for a lukewarm relationship with Christ, one that is more theological and cultural or traditionalist than alive, and one that lacks any authentic love.

The present time demands that this inner discernment of Christians lead them to conversion. This is necessary to establish a genuine and constructive relationship with Western secularism and the non-Christian faiths, which are also represented in the migration movements toward the West.

To be converted to Christ and hence be open to evangelization requires time and space suitable for personal and community prayer, the use of the sacraments, and so on.

8.3 The Discernment on the Times for Christian Action

At the same time, in this state of conversion, specific to each one of the many vocations or gifts the Spirit ensures to the Church, we can identify the concrete priorities that each ecclesial community will have to discern: a time to remain in silence at the side of the non-believer or the believer of a different religious faith; a time for dialogue in everyday life; a time for cooperation; a time for debate on religious faith; a time to bear witness to one's Christian faith; and a time for straightforward evangelization.

We are not talking about a tactic or strategy to proselytize.[62] There can be no dialogue with any religion, or with any type of non-belief, unless there is an understanding of one's own identity. Proselytism is a disingenuous way of evangelization, because evangelization is not about convincing anyone,[63] but rather helping them to recognize the Lord's work in them, thereby accompanying their action, selflessly, and with love and decisiveness. One is moved toward evangelization because the Lord knocks on the doors of people's hearts, and the Holy Spirit sets people in motion, while the figure of Christ Jesus becomes progressively both meaningful and indispensable. Only in this way can the words of the evangelizer arrive at the right time for those who are ready to receive them.

This timing is impossible to forecast in advance and cannot be decided solely by reason. Such times mature in a relationship with Christ, proportionally to the ripening of the figure of Christ in each believer and the ecclesial communities. Christians are not the

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[62] In *Evangelii Gaudium* 14, Francis quotes Benedict XVI, for whom "the Church does not engage in proselytism. Instead, she grows by '*attraction*'" (BENEDICT XVI, *Homily at the Holy Mass for the Inauguration of the 5th General Conference of the Bishops of Latin American and the Caribbean*, Shrine "La Aparecida," May 13, 2007, www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20070513_conference-brazil.html); AAS 99 [2007]).

[63] Ignatius of Antioch emphasizes that evangelization is not a work of persuasion, but contemplation of greatness.

ones who determine these times, but it is the Spirit of the Lord Jesus that makes them known.

Each one of these times may be long, lasting an entire lifetime or generations or even more, but it is essential that the encounter and love for Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate human expression of the Trinitarian love, remain strong. The experience of Charles de Foucauld in this case holds true. Following repeated efforts to evangelize Muslims among the Tuareg people, Charles became aware that his time was not right for evangelization, but rather for being by their side, for loving them as a hermit who celebrates and experiences the Eucharist, for nothing in return. He thus understood the momentous limitations of his time, in terms of human promotion, as a necessary and effective precondition for evangelization.

8.4 Discernment and In-Depth Knowledge of Non-Christian Religions

A few summarized and often somewhat biased compendia in which one would wish to synthesize the non-Christian religious identities, or the attitudes that Christians should adopt are inadequate when dealing with non-Christian individuals or communities. As in the relationship with any person, community, or culture, understanding the interlocutor requires an authentic knowledge of people's history, religious beliefs, and values. It would also be important to know languages to make it easier for the interlocutor to make himself or herself fully understood by someone with a different culture and religious faith. Furthermore, knowledge of languages, indispensable for refugees and immigrants, will probably continue to be an advantage enjoyed only by a select group of people, and this is especially the case in the West. Then again, reaching out to the peripheries of the world is not for everyone and cannot always occur in the same way.

8.5 Discernment and Collaboration with Governmental Authorities

Unfortunately, the political discussion often descends into disputes and/or political talk, intended for everyone but most often serving for political propaganda. Christian discernment should be strong enough to resist power, by recognizing its footprint in the political arena. It will certainly not be difficult to recognize that the word of the Lord Jesus, beyond which one cannot and should not go, is no longer compatible with the behaviour and political programs of parties or coalitions.

Christian discernment, while not expecting the Christian community to establish its own political party, should not allow any party or political coalition to act as its proxy. The imperatives of the experience of Christ Jesus cannot be bargained for, and opposition may develop into a genuinely positive collaboration. Where possible, collaboration with governmental authorities is necessary, but it is likewise necessary to make known anything that goes against our religious faith, avoiding hostility, accepting political setbacks, and offering alternatives or appropriate adjustments. Dialectics and dialogue are common practice in cooperating with political authorities.[64]

8.6 An Open-Ended Epilogue

As the New Testament already indicated, in addition to the essential, unchanging mark of the times which is Christ Jesus through the imperatives of His person and Word, discernment, frequently expressed in the Greek texts of the New Testament by the verb *dokimázein*, is a task that for Christians never came to an end. Indeed, discernment is linked to the action of the Holy Spirit throughout the concrete history of humanity over time. Christians are therefore called to be vigilant and to keep watch and pray lest they fall into temptation (Mt 26:41) when they are confident about themselves and about their "certainties," which may instead be illusions.

Human history, like the history of religions, is always in motion, and constancy is never possible. One can grow but can also regress. Christians and Christian communities may walk with their broken brothers and sisters like fellow travellers along the same road that Jesus and the disciples of Emmaus took (Lk 24:13-24), but they may also walk with the people of their time, aware of their own shortcomings (2 Cor 4:7) yet empowered by their prophetic calling.

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[64] Pope Francis does not want "a Church concerned with being at the centre" (EG 49), and warns against the temptation of "not to be humble, disinterested and blessed" (POPE FRANCIS, *Address of the Holy Father. Meeting with the Participants in the 5th Convention of the Italian Church*, November 10, 2015, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco_20151110_firenze-convegno-chiesa-italiana.html). Moreover, he argues that "before the evils or problems of the Church it is useless to seek solutions in conservatism and fundamentalism, in the restoration of obsolete practices and forms that even culturally lack the capacity to be meaningful" (FRANCIS, *Address to the representatives of the Fifth Conference*; Regno-att. 10, 2015, 692).

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In the context of this work on discernment within the interreligious phenomenon against the backdrop of a global secular but also "laicist" culture, we have also touched on traditional African and Asian religions and cultures, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism.

In many ways, the framework of non-Christian religions mentioned here reflects the approach of the Council's Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, as already noted above. Furthermore, dealing with African religions and cultures, Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as Islam and Judaism, is a task that concerns the *Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples*, within which ecclesiastical constituencies of all these non-Christian religions exist.

The *Pontifical Urban University*, belonging to the same Congregation, is also involved in this area, training theologians and pastoral ministers coming from territories where these religions are to varying degrees embedded.

Accordingly, we felt it necessary to supplement the picture thus far offered on discernment with two separate essays, covering the discernment of the religions and cultures of Africa and Asia.

The Notion of Discernment among the Traditional Religions/African Cultures

❖ Étienne-Noël Bassoumboul

While the title of this essay may seem presumptuous for reasons that seem legitimate, it should be emphasized that one of the main aims of this analysis is to understand how Traditional African Religions (TAR)[1] are defined, and in what ways they differ in terms of culture and tradition. When we speak of traditional religions in the plural, we seek to indicate plurality and, possibly, polysemy. This, however, is not the theme at issue here. Starting mainly from two pieces of data of paradigmatic importance, we will attempt to better comprehend the meaning of discernment in these cultural and religious areas, rather than trying to find a concept that is equivalent or corresponds, in one way or another, to the biblical Hebrew root *bjn* or the Greek verb *dokimázein*.[2]

The first paradigm to be studied here is the cultural or religious world of the *Mbɔk Liaa* peoples. Beginning with the etymological concept of *Mbɔk*, and that of *Mbɔmbɔk* derived from it, we deduce that, anthropologically speaking, the being itself emerges as a discerner, since lacking discernment is tantamount to being non-existent. This is briefly illustrated below against the backdrop of the cultural celebration of marriage by the *Basaa* people.

The second paradigm is that of the Diallobé in present-day Senegal. This will be explored by examining the work of Cheikh Hamidou Kane, *L'aventure ambiguë*.[3]

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[1] Cf. J. Pirotte (ed.), « La religion africain réhabilitée ? Regards changeants sur le fait religieux africain », *Histoire et Missions chrétiennes*, n. 3, 2007. The contributions included in the volume reveal this complexity and confusion.

[2] For these two concepts, in Hebrew and Greek, see G. Rizzi's extensive and relevant contribution in this volume.

[3] Ch. Hamidou Kane, *L'aventure ambiguë*, Présence Africaine, Paris 1961.

1. Discernment According to the People of Mbɔk Liaa

The *Mbɔk Liaa* include peoples of southern Cameroon whose origin can be traced back to a particular rock called *Ngɔk lituɓa* or *Ngɔk lipɔndɔ*. They consist of the *Basaa*, *Bati*, and *Mpoo* peoples.

According to a legend, the words *lituɓa* and *lipɔndɔ* refer to a rocky cave that represented a gateway into the cliff where their ancestors had lived for generations.[4] It seems, however, that the site was used as a sanctuary[5] long before they migrated to southern Cameroon. There is no word for religion in the language family of the *ɓasaa*, *ɓati*, and *Mpoo* people. However, they do list *Mbɔk* as their religion. Indeed, the designation *Mbɔk Liaa*, or the "religion of the Rock peoples," encompasses the notion of *Liaa* as a synonym for *Ngɔk lituɓa* or *Ngɔk lipɔndɔ*.

It should be noted at the outset that the idea of religion does not entail a strictly sacred aspect that stands in opposition to the profane.[6] Indeed, dualism is a concept that is both unknown and unimaginable for the people of *Mbɔk Liaa*, as it is in the entire *Ebuntu* universe.

In contrast, *Mbɔk* is essentially predicated as a single and indissoluble socio-religious system, which is not experienced as an inextricable whole, but rather with an understanding that there is a duplicity of being and existence. Before introducing this religious aspect, it will prove useful to consider briefly the etymology of the concept of *Mbɔk*.

1.1 The Etymology of Mbɔk[7]

Mbɔk comes from the root *ɓɔ*, which as a verb means "to discern" or "to scrutinize." This is the verb used specifically to denote the func-

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[4] Cf. E. Konde, *Cameroon. Traumas of the Body Politic. Um Nyobe's Radical Nationalism! Ahidjo's Older Order! Biya's New Deal! Yondo Black & FruNdi's Multipartism!*, Xlibris Publishing, Bloomington (IN) 2015.

[5] Cf. J. Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests. Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison (WI) 1990, 129-136.

[6] Cf. B. Nyom, *Le sacré et l'unité de l'homme chez les Bantu du Sud-Cameroun*, Thèse de doctorat en Théologie, Lille 1964; S.R. Dibong, *Ngog Lituba. L'inconfort de la croix*, Éditions Kiyikaat, Montréal 2015.

[7] Cf. R. Ndebi Biya, *Être, pouvoir et génération : le système du Mbok chez les Basa du Sud-Cameroun*, L'Harmattan (Points de vue), Paris 1987; É.-N. Bassou-

tion of the members of the fraternities of the four-eyed men.[8] These members are tasked with discerning and interpreting all the perceived signs and heard words before making a sound assessment of a problem. Even in modern, everyday language, the verb *ɓɔ* is employed to mean "to scrutinize, discern, sense." This latter meaning, "to sense," is perhaps prevalent today. It likewise provides evidence of linguistic impoverishment, as often occurs across all cultures, and the manifestation of an anthropological, cultural, and religious decline of *Mbɔk Liaa*'s culture. The lexeme *ɓɔ* can also be found in the language *basaa* as a third person plural pronoun.[9]

The connection is that the discernment (*liɓɔ*)[10] applies to *ɓɔ* as a people, for the sake of promoting their enrichment, growth, and general development, as well as the full realization of each one. The second verb deriving from the concept of *Mbɔk* is *ɓɔk*, which means "to set or arrange something in order; to organize, sort, store, rearrange." This implies a serious commitment to diagnose, if possible, any existing disorder, and to discern its causes and find appropriate ways to remedy it.[11] The aim is to restore the order that is not only social but above all cosmic and even meta-cosmic, that is, a harmony through communion with God, who is recognized in the totalitarian system of *Mbɔk* as the Creator, not only because he created heaven and earth, but also because he maintains control over *Mbɔk*.

MBOUL, *Le pouvoir socio-politique du Mbombog dans la société traditionnelle des Basaa du Sud-Cameroun*, Mémoire d'Anthropologie philosophique, Douala 1994; MBOMBOG NKOTH BISSECK, « Mbog : la cosmovision africaine universaliste dans le contexte de la mondialisation.» This volume essay is available here: www.cccb.org/rcs_gene/bisseck.pdf.

[8] Cf. J. BAYIGA, *L'Homme-qui-voit-la-nuit et l'existence du Basa. Essai sur un aspect de l'existentialisme africain*, Thèse de doctorat, Strasbourg 1967.

[9] The use of personal pronouns in the *basaa* language plays a key role. Gender cannot be distinguished as in Indo-European languages, and this suggests a radically unified social understanding, harmoniously intertwined between male and female. *ɓɔ* refers to the crowd, that is, people who are both conjugation and union, a kind of hendiadys consisting of men and women, with no hierarchy, no distinction. Instead, they are the people in essence.

[10] According to the grammar of the language of *basaa*, this concept deriving from the verb *ɓɔ* functions as a noun through the use of the article.

[11] All this takes place during a cultic ritual called *say*. The concept itself indicates, also in the Christian language of the Basaa, a consecration to God or a blessing in God's name. There is no secular usage.

Despite the differences, the notion of *Mbɔk* is related to the number *ɓoo* ("nine") and to the concepts of *Mɓoo* ("seed"), *ɓoo* ("that which is decayed") and *ɓoo* ("to burst"). According to the gematria *ɓasaa*, the number nine denotes perfection of being, which results from the combination of four (the number for woman) and five (the number for man). This completeness is what constitutes *ɓɔ* (lit., "they," the people), i.e., the entirety of males and females.

With regard to the number nine, the following proverb is very significant: *likaŋ li lɛl ɓe ɓoo*, which translates as "mystery is no greater than nine." This proverb condenses in a few words the sapiential experience of the people of *Mbɔk Liaa*. This means that the being can scrutinize as far as the ninth dimension of mystery, though it cannot look further than nine, which is the prerogative of the divine. It follows that in the culture of *Mbɔk Liaa*, discernment is to abide by and follow the order of reality, as manifested in the distinction of the sacred and the profane, and to respect these domains.[12]

It also follows that discernment for the peoples of *Mbɔk Liaa* integrates a reality of finitude as defined by the symbolic limits of the number nine. This perhaps indicates an affinity between the concept of *Mbɔk* and that of *mboo* (i.e., the seed), because *Mbɔk Liaa* expresses a culture based on integral human development. This development stems from the ability to recognize and reject what can potentially impede full human realization and its harmony and cohesiveness with the cosmos.

1.2 The Mbɔk Liaa: Another Way of Being in the World

For the people of *Mbɔk Liaa*, *Mbɔk* originally referred to the universe,[13] hat is, all that exists both in mystery and complexity. The term *Mbɔk* is equivalent to that of "universe" according to its Latin etymology, *unum* plus *versum*, that is, the convergence of all elements to form a whole. The *Mbɔk* therefore molds and shapes the face of man in his specificity, as an entity different from any other

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[12] Cf. B. Nyom, *Le sacré et l'unité de l'homme chez le Bantu du Sud-Cameroun*.

[13] Cf. Th. Mayi Matip, *L'univers de la Parole*, Clé, Yaoundé 1983; R. Ndebi Biya, *Être, pouvoir et génération : le système du Mbok chez les Basa du Sud-Cameroun* ; M. Nkoth Bisseck, «Mbog : la cosmovision africaine universaliste dans le contexte de la mondialisation».

component of the cosmos. It is therefore the *Mbɔk* that sets man apart from other beings. Hence, it defines the life of each of its members in customs and traditions, as well as in the initiation rituals which mark the existence of each individual.

The *Mbɔk* transforms, provides for, maintains, sustains, and constantly and permanently nourishes the *basaa*. If we can draw some conclusions on what has been discussed so far, the etymology of *Mbɔk* seems to suggest that this cultural and religious heritage, representing the religion and piety of the people emerging from *Ngɔk lituɓa* or *Ngɔk lipɔndɔ*, is essentially based on discernment.

For the people of *Mbɔk Liaa*, *Mbɔk* is the cosmic and social norm, regulating the life of the *basaa*. The *Mbɔk* holds this authority by virtue of its divine origin. The people of *Mbɔk Liaa* see it as a vehicle through which God inculcates universal norms.

The *Mbɔk*, therefore, supplies a comprehensive vision of creation, in other words, a school of life, a school understood according to the Greek etymological sense of this word, where the noun *scholè* and the verb *scholein* point to the fundamental question about life itself that gives it its true meaning and purpose.

The notion of *Mbɔk* may also be parallel to the Jewish *hokmah*, which indicates the immanent law in all things, being embedded in both society and every *basaa*. Such law defines morality and social ethics, as well as the specific tasks, functions, and responsibilities of each member of *Mbɔk Liaa* according to their class and socio-religious function, their age and gender, as well as their basic human rights. All of this makes *Mbɔk* a two-dimensional reality, which is both communal and private.

In *Mbɔk*, the social and the religious are intimately connected. As noted earlier, this culture relies on duality rather than dualism and indeed opposes the latter precisely because the harmony and symmetry between religious and profane are paramount.[14] This harmony depends on the family, social, or community balance.[15] There is

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[14] On this topic, see the studies of B. NYOM, *Le sacré et l'unité de l'homme chez le Bantu du Sud-Cameroun*, and J. BAYIGA, *L'Homme-qui-voit-la-nuit et l'existence du Basa. Essai sur un aspect de l'existentialisme africain*.

[15] On harmony within the community, see E. NGUE, *Structures humaines et vivre-ensemble chrétien. Éssai d'ecclésiologie en milieu basaa (Sud-Cameroun),* Thèse de doctorat, Université de Strasbourg 1981.

no doubt that the *Mbɔk* concerns the whole life of the *basaa*, circumscribing his or her worldly existence.[16]

On the other hand, the duality of *Mbɔk* is dominated by orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy, since what matters the most are neither beliefs nor symbols, but ethical behavior whereby the underlying beliefs can be perceived by the soul as its driving force. This is where discernment gives this ethical behavior the qualification of ethics, which is to say proper to the extent that it combines the secular and religious dimensions.

Just like in Judaism,[17] the family plays a fundamental role.[18] The *Mbɔk* does not concern itself so much with potential conversions from other social and religious backgrounds, but it focuses on education, first and foremost among young people, following a ritual calendar.

This is why children are unknowingly taught, either spontaneously or naturally, to behave and are told the "why" (i.e., the reason) and the "for what" (i.e., the purpose) of any behavior.[19]

According to the principles of *Mbɔk*, parents are therefore urged to demonstrate for their children the ideal of being human in the world, on the basis of their respective cosmovision, which itself reflects their grasp of pancosmic interaction.[20]

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[16] On the concept of "how to be in the world," see P. RICOEUR, *Temps et récit*, Seuil, Paris 1983.

[17] Cf. R. DE VAUX, *Les institutions de l'Ancien Testament*, vol. 1, Cerf, Paris 1958, 37-87.

[18] Cf. S. EPEA, *Le message chrétien et visage de l'homme chez les Basa, Bantus du Sud-Cameroun*, Thèse de doctorat, Université de Strasbourg 1978, (Éditions L'Harmattan, Paris 1982) ; E. NGUE, *Structures humaines et vivre-ensemble chrétien. Essai d'ecclésiologie en milieu basaa*.

[19] The two studies mentioned above also deal with the educational dimension. On this subject, see also MBOG BASSONG, *Le savoir africain. Essai sur la théorie de la connaissance*, Éditions Kiyikaat, Montréal 2013.

[20] See the doctoral thesis on pancosmic communication by N. BOUMTJE, as well as his thesis in Philosophy: *De la manipulation à la communication métaphyique et pancosmique*, Pontifical Urban University, Rome 1980. The thesis was later published with the title: *La loi de l'homologie et la communication pancosmique et mystique*, Nouvelles Éditions Africaines, Paris 1982.

1.3 The Mbɔmbɔk[21]

Parents, particularly the father, embody the essence of being in the world and are tasked with inculcating it in their children. The paternal figure draws on the supreme ideal which, according to the culture of the peoples of the *Mbɔk Liaa*, is *Mbɔmbɔk*. The significance of this persona within the different groups *Basaa*, *Bati*, and *Mpoo* stems from the etymology of the concept above mentioned. The notion of *Mbɔmbɔok* has its origins in the creation of *Mbɔk Mbɔk*, whose contraction is said to have given rise to *Mbɔmbɔk*.

Such contraction exemplifies what is excellent, since *Mbɔmbɔk* is a perfect manifestation of everything that is contained in *Mbɔk*, beginning with the *scrutatio*, or discernment. In this context, *Mbɔmbɔk* is viewed as the face (*mbɔm*) of *Mbɔk*, which means watchman, the one acting as a lookout to advise the community of any new developments in society and to keep it on the right path.

For this reason, *Mbɔmbɔok* is *mbɔ* (he who discerns, scrutinizes), *mbɔk* (universe, cosmos, society), and also the *mboo* (the seed) of *mbɔk*, because the emergence of *mbɔk* as society relies entirely on its discernment. When the latter is just, society prospers, when inequitable, it crumbles. Accordingly, in its role of religious and temporal authority, *Mbɔmbɔk* safeguards all the relationships of its community, not only horizontal relationships, i.e., among its different members, and its ecological, and symbolic environment[22], but also with its ancestors, the "What is not visible" and God.

Undoubtedly, the same logic, with nuances, holds true at the family level in which the *pater familias* exercises the powers of *Mbɔmbɔk*. Children are gradually familiarized with the art of discernment, which is essential to the culture of *Mbɔk* as the traditional religion of the people of *Mbɔk Liaa*, the *Basaa*, *Bati*, and *Mpoo*.

1.4 Marriage in the Mbɔk Liaa Culture

Marriage celebration in the culture of *Mbɔk Liaa* comprises five main stages: 1) the prearrangement; 2) the proposal; 3) a marriage

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[21] Cf. É.-N. Bassoumboul, *Le pouvoir socio-politique du Mbombog dans la société traditionnelle des Basaa du Sud-Cameroun.*

[22] Cf. M. Nkoth Bisseck, « Mbog : la cosmovision africaine universaliste dans le contexte de la mondialisation. »

dowry from the fiancé's family; 4) the wedding celebration itself, which is followed by a celebratory dinner; and 5) the marriage dowry, as part of the bride's family contribution.

From the perspective of discernment in African religions or cultures, we will focus our attention on the first two points, drawing primarily on that which illustrates the theme, and limiting the analysis to what aids in understanding the central role of discernment in *basaa* culture and religion. The way of carrying out the girl's "prearrangement" varies in form between the *Basaa-Bati-Mpoo* society of some decades ago and now, but the basics are retained and are based on the art of discernment.

It is indeed a time of learning from both parties. However, the time of the girl and her family is more relevant, given the role that women play in the culture of *Mbɔk Liaa*. As an illustration, suffice it to say that an unmarried man is regarded as a slave under *Mbɔk*'s constitution.[23]

The search would begin once a girl gives her consent. At that point, she would be tested on her morality and checked for any pathologies.[24] This explains the saying that, "if one marries an epileptic girl, it means that he has got no relatives in the girl's home village."

Concerning the young man, his genealogy and cultural background are examined. Moreover, since an uncircumcised man can neither negotiate marriage nor marry a *Basaa-Bati-Mpoo*[25] girl, it would be essential to verify that he is circumcised.

The central subject of the investigation for the two concerned parties is genealogy. It is here that discernment is exercised. It is not a matter of mere curiosity, but rather an inquiry to ascertain whether there may be a blood relationship, i.e., kinship, to avoid incest, which is considered a crime against the norms of society, but especially against the will of the Creator.

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[23] Cf. S. EPEA, *Le message chrétien et visage de l'homme chez les Basa, Bantus du Sud-Cameroun*. The importance of women in *Mbɔk* culture is the main theme of the novel by J.-B. YAMB, *Ngo Yogo: la femme qui changea le destin d'une famille*, Éditions Veritas, Douala 2013.

[24] Unfortunately, in traditional *basaa* society women were always to blame when couples were unable to procreate.

[25] The requirement of circumcision is no longer complied with. Globalization has taken over, along with the living desire of *Basaa-Bati-Mpoo* women to marry and give birth, as this bestows a prestigious social status.

For this reason, on the wedding day, the spokespersons of both families publicly disclose their genealogy, so that neither the woman nor the man's side is left wondering.

The discernment through genealogies aims to safeguard against transgressing *Mbɔk*'s philosophy and wisdom on marriage. This is a matter, first and foremost, between two families and two individuals.

In addition, it leads to an enlargement of the two families and the prevention of possible intra-ethnic conflicts, according to the principle that no one goes to war with his daughter-in-law's and/or son-in-law's people.

2. Diallobé Culture: an African Islamic Paradigm

The Diallobé are Muslims, and their society is marked by both a radical adherence to tradition and a remarkable internal organization. The Diallobé are likely part of the *peul* culture, which is nomadic, and that explains why they are found in several African countries, primarily along the western part of the continent. As mentioned in the introduction, the present discussion draws on the literary work of Cheikh Hamidou Kane, entitled *Ambiguous Adventure* (*L'aventure ambiguë*).

In Kane's novel, the Diallobé culture is contrasted with Western culture, something that will be discussed later. The encounter of the two cultures is discussed in different ways by the novel's protagonists, and in due course the question of discernment is revealed and highlighted, as is demonstrated in this passage:

> "If I told them to go to the new school," he said at last, "they would go *en masse*. They would learn all the ways of joining wood to wood which we do not know. But, learning, they would also forget. Would what they learn be worth as much as what they would forget? I should like to ask you: can one learn this without forgetting that, and is what one learns worth what one forgets?"[26]

The political organization of the Diallobé is based on the chiefdom model, with the variation that it involves a more pluralistic and

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[26] HAMIDOU KANE, *Ambiguous Adventure*, trans. K. Woods, Heinemann, Heinemann, London 1972, 30.

participatory political system including the chief of the Diallobé, the Master of the Diallobé and the Most Royal Lady, who form a kind of African triumvirate. Still, the chief is at the heart of their society. That is why in Kane's novel, Thierno, the Diallobé's Master, relies on an emissary of the chief: "So long as my body obeys me I shall always respond to the chief," he said. "So tell him that I am following you, if it please God."[27]

As the Master himself says, the chief is the embodiment of society, and therefore he ought to receive others who come to him with advice or a point of view, rather than going himself to solicit advice from others.[28] In this way, the Master exemplifies the essential worldview of the Diallobé: the temporal sphere goes hand in hand with the religious/spiritual one. Realizing this, the Most Royal Lady explains to the Master that his brother, the chief of the Diallobé, represents his country's beating heart, whereas he, the Master, is its conscience.[29]

Kane describes the plight of these people during the period of the independence of present-day Senegal. The Diallobé people were deeply rooted in their ancestral traditions and Islam, for which the Quranic school *le Foyer-Ardent* (lit., "the burning hearth," Kane's name for the Quranic school) possessed great prestige among them at that time. There, the selected or admitted children, the chosen ones, particularly the offspring of important families, were taught about life's true meaning, that is, taught to live in God and for God, giving no regard to material possessions.

For this reason, in the Diallobé culture discernment is firmly rooted in Islam.

2.1 Traditional Training of Diallobé Youth at the *Foyer-Ardent*

Master Thierno, the spiritual leader of the community and guardian of the formation at the *Foyer-Ardent*, points out that this education is part of the Diallobé tradition and implicitly conveys its joy. Here, he briefly outlines its educational and pedagogical methodology:

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[27] Ibid., 27.
[28] Ibid., 35.
[29] Ibid., 37.

> In the time of his adolescence the children of the great families – of whom he was one – would still be living their time of youth far from the aristocratic milieu from which they had sprung, anonymous and poor among the people, and on this people's alms. At the end of this period of companionship (*compagnonnage*), they would return from their long peregrination among books and men, both learned and democratic, seasoned in body and clear of mind.[30]

Like in every other Quranic school in the Islamic world, the youth at the *Foyer-Ardent* were trained primarily in Quranic knowledge. Kane speaks of the experience of Samba Diallo, a cousin of the chief and the Most Royal Lady. His work opens with the following two phrases, which does well to capture what was studied in the *Foyer-Ardent*: "That day, Thierno had beaten him again. And yet Samba Diallo knew his sacred verse." A third phrase is very revealing to understand not only what went on, but also the structure of the educational system: "It was only that he had made a slip of the tongue. Thierno had jumped up as if he had stepped on one of the white-hot paving stones of the gehenna promised to evil-doers."[31]

The delivery, the step that no disciple could avoid, was accuracy in the repetition of God's Word:

> Be accurate in repeating the Word of your Lord. [...] These words have been veritably pronounced by the Master of the World. And you, miserable lump of earthly mold that you are, when you have the honor of repeating them after Him, you go so far as to profane them by your carelessness.[32]

Alongside this aspect of education, another approach relied entirely on divine providence, without trusting in one's certainty:

> While seeking God, the disciples would know no other way of supporting life than by begging, whatever their parents' wealth might be.[33]

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[30] Ibid., 21.
[31] Ibid., 3.
[32] Ibid., 4.
[33] Ibid., 13.

It seems that personal security and stability can lead to human self-glorification, and paganism is nearly always found at work here. According to Master Thierno, the belief in God, as Islam teaches, is inconsistent with all forms of self-exaltation, and is even incompatible with humility and especially with the self-humiliation on which religion is founded.[34]

In one of his dialogues with the Diallobé chief, he formulates in the following terms the training offered at the *Foyer-Ardent* school:

> At the Glowing Hearth, what we teach the children is God. What they forget is themselves, their bodies, and the futile dream which hardens with age and stifles the spirit. So, what they learn is worth infinitely more than what they forget.[35]

The Western society in Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*, based largely on France, which colonized the Diallobé country, is a world where man not only sets himself free from God, but seeks to be like him at all costs, whether in his thoughts or innovations and achievements. This is the world of science, the world of man's self-exaltation, which does not entail the worship of God as Master Thierno teaches in the land of the Diallobé.

Observing the development of this society alongside that of the Diallobé, Samba Diallo grew disillusioned that God appeared more interested in rewarding the former materially, even though they have rejected him.

The author wants to persuade his reader that Western society has been going through a profound crisis since the seventeenth century, the age of experimental science and the era of rationalism, especially over faith. This victory was affirmed and consolidated in the centuries that followed: the eighteenth century with its Enlightenment, the nineteenth with the Industrial Revolution, which led to enslaving capitalism that gave birth to colonialism, something that the country of the Diallobé, like all of Africa, had to face. According to the author:

> The West is in process of overturning these simple ideas, of which we are part and parcel. They began, timidly, by relegating God to a

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[34] Ibid., 28.
[35] Ibid., 31.

place 'between inverted commas.' Then, two centuries later, having acquired more assurance, they decreed, 'God is dead.' From that day dates the era of frenzied toil. Nietzsche is the contemporary of the industrial revolution. God was no longer there to measure and justify man's activity [...]. But now see: the West is on the point of being able to do without man in the production of work. [...] Man has never been so unhappy as at this moment when he is accumulating so much.[36]

Indeed, in the Western society described by the author, interpersonal relationships have an economic and ideological nature. The feeling of belonging to the human family and God no longer exists.

This is a totally changed worldview compared to Aristotle's, Augustine's, and Pascal's philosophy that had previously guided it. This is now a society rooted in the philosophy of Descartes, out of which new anthropocentric anthropology also emerged, one that conveys and promotes the secularization of the world, that is, a world that has entirely exchanged God for science. Man ceases to trust and hope in God in any sphere, relying exclusively on his ingenuity. What cannot be seen does not exist.

The Diallobé and all of Cheikh Hamidou Kane's readers can see the effects of this science: thanks to him, the Diallobé and all of Africa have been defeated and colonized. However, such a sad fate has not resulted in an inevitable surrender of the defeated Diallobé to the victorious Western culture. Confronted with the new existential, historical reality, and the encounter with France or the West, the emphasis has been placed on discernment as a way of proceeding and orienting the Diallobé, as well as all African peoples strongly rooted in Islam.

2.2 The Diallobé Meeting with the Colonizing France

What must be stressed in this encounter is that of the school, referred to as the new school, which is no longer the education offered by the *Foyer-Ardent*, but the one offered by the French or Westerners, which aims to teach "men only to join wood to wood – to make

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[36] Ibid., 91-92.

wooden buildings... ."[37] Cheikh Hamidou Kane explains how the Diallobé family came to join this new school that was to change their cosmovision, a process already apparent in the cultural heterogeneity between the two peoples.

From the words of some of the characters in the novel, we can see that the course taken by this *école étrangère* is primarily articulated from two directions, one from within, the other from outside.

2.3 Motivation from the Outside

The author recounts Master Thierno's meeting with Samba Diallo's father, who was with his son for a short stay in the land of the Diallobé. Also present on this occasion were the Chief of the Diallobé and the principal of the foreign school. Master Thierno asked his counterpart: "Monsieur School Principal," the teacher was saying, "what new good are you teaching men's sons, to make them desert our glowing hearths for the benefit of your schools?" The principal's response was timely: "Nothing, revered master – or almost nothing."[38] Master Thierno then asked the Chief of the Diallobé: "You yourself, chief of the Diallobé, does it not go against the grain with you to send your children to the foreign school?" His answer was: "Unless there is pressure, I shall persist in the refusal to do that, master, if it please God."

The principal, who attended the foreign school agreed with the position of the Chief of the Diallobé:

> I am quite of your opinion, chief – it was the principal of the school who was speaking – I have sent my son to the school only because I could not do otherwise. We have gone there ourselves only under pressure. Our refusal, then, is certain [...]. The question is disturbing, nevertheless. We reject the foreign school in order to remain ourselves, and to preserve for God the place He holds in our hearts. But we still have enough force to resist the school, and enough substance to remain ourselves.[39]

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[37] « L'école (étrangère) apprend aux hommes seulement à lier le bois au bois [...] pour faire des édifices de bois. » The author explains that in the language of the Diallobé, the concept of "school" means "wood" (Ibid., 17).

[38] Ibid., 8.

[39] Ibid., 9.

A further example of an external direction of influence can be found in the conversations between the Knight, Samba Diallo's father, and Mr. Paul Lacroix. They share the same office space. The latter succeeds in persuading his colleague of the benefits of foreign schooling, captivated by the scientific disciplines that were taught. He explains why he permits his son to go to that school in this way:

> I have sent my son to the school because the external which you have checked was slowly seeping through us and destroying us. […] The external is aggressive. If man does not conquer it, then it destroys man, and makes him a victim of tragedy. A sore which is neglected does not heal but becomes infected to the point of gangrene. A child who is not educated goes backward. A society which is not governed destroys itself. The West sets up science against the invading chaos, sets it up like a barricade.[40]

However, the Knight's openness to the new school and its science does not come without some trepidation. In his opinion, science must cohabit, coexist alongside faith in God, or else it has no meaning. Failure to do so means that God must intervene, as he asserts in his prayer: "God in Whom I believe, if we are not to succeed, let the Apocalypse come! Take away from us that liberty of which we shall not have known how to make use. May Thy hand fall heavily, then, upon the great unconsciousness."[41]

2.4 Motivation from Within

The following statement by the Most Royal Lady, which sounds like a confession, speaks volumes: "I, the Most Royal Lady, do not like the foreign school. I detest it. My opinion, nevertheless, is that we should send our children there."[42] This position does not come without hesitation or caution, which he explains to his brother, the Chief, and Thierno, the Master of Diallobé:

> The foreign school is the new form of the war which those who have come here are waging, and we must send our élite there, ex-

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[40] Ibid., 71.
[41] Ibid., 73.
[42] Ibid., 41.

pecting that all the country will follow them. It is well that once more the élite should lead the way. If there is a risk, they are the best prepared to cope successfully with it, because they are the most firmly attached to what they are. If there is good to be drawn from it, they should also be the first to acquire that.[43]

The Most Royal Lady's motivation comes from an awareness of the Diallobé people's defeat in the war against the French. According to her, the secret of the latter's victory lies in their school, which teaches them *the art of winning a victory without justification*. Consequently, her decision to reform the educational system reflects her strong desire to secure a victory for the Diallobé people in an eventual battle against their enemies, particularly the French.

Yet the Most Royal Lady's strategic geopolitical approach shows a clear sense of discernment. This becomes apparent when she recognizes that "the school in which I would place our children will kill in them what today we love and rightly conserve with care."[44] In another discussion, she brings the people into a process of discernment so that they can embrace her choice and judgment, acknowledging their challenges:

> "I am like your baby, Coumba." She pointed to the child, while they all watched her. "Look at him. He is learning to walk. He does not know where he is going. He only knows that he should lift one foot and put it ahead, then that he should lift the other and put it in front of the first."[45]

What emerges in the procedure of the Most Royal Lady is a break with the Islamic and cultural traditions of the Diallobé, which forces her to embrace a foreign school, inspiring in her a hope for a brighter future, albeit without guarantees. The break has already come about as a result of positions that are inconsistent with either Islam or the Diallobé culture. We must emphasize some unquestionable aspects of the novel. Most importantly, the decision-making meeting between Master Thierno, the Knight, the Chief of the Di-

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[43] Ibid., 34.
[44] Ibid., 41-42.
[45] Ibid., 41.

allobé, and the Most Royal Lady. This latter's idea does not appear as an opinion that is subject to collective scrutiny, but rather as an imposition and a decision. The role of the Chief and the Master is not only questioned, but is even trampled upon.

This leads to a near coup d'état approach by the Most Royal Lady, when she forcibly takes away her cousin Samba Diallo from Master Thierno. A second aspect that expresses a religious and cultural break is that the Most Royal Lady's resolution lacks a sound Quranic justification, instead of validating an external appeal, the one of the West which she intends to oppose. A third aspect consists of the Most Royal Lady's role in convening the public assembly of the Diallobé.

Women and children are also there, in contrast to Diallobé customs. She recognizes this herself, when she opens her speech and justifies the presence of women: "I have done something which is not pleasing to us and which is not in accordance with our customs. I have asked the women to come to this meeting today."[46] The crowd's reaction to the Most Royal Lady is also highly significant, as it is unlike the traditional circular shape, a symbol of communion, a symbol of the universe marked by peace and the desire to protect oneself.[47]

We can say that the crowd collaborates, no doubt voluntarily, in the violation of the Most Royal Lady by taking a different disposition symbolizing the weakness of her option. Two setbacks end the plot. One is the split of the Diallobé community into two camps: one in favor of openness (the progressives), and the other in opposition to it (the conservatives).

The second setback is that of the entire society represented by the novel's hero Samba Diallo. It is his discernment that allows us to evaluate what has led to the acquiescence to the foreign school and, thanks to him, to Western culture. Certainly, Samba Diallo's revolution is not the revolution of an atheist, but that of a believer who is in shock as he cannot accept what he sees as divine logic. His is the disappointment of a person who strongly believed in intercultural dialogue as a force that can enrich both sides. Yet the hero learns instead that Western culture does not tolerate foreign values.

During his time living in France, Samba Diallo frequently deviated from the orthodoxy of his original faith, while expecting that

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[46] Ibid., 40-41.
[47] Cf. Ibid., 36.

his counterparts on the other side would make the same sacrifices. However, this turned out to be a very disappointing expectation. In the end, he was asked to renounce his religion altogether, despite knowing full well that the values now offered to him were only partial, in that they only reflected one aspect of being and existing.

3. Conclusion

Both of the paradigms on which the present analysis is based offer insights into the current situation in Africa, or at least in part of it. These show how the art of discernment constitutes an ontological dimension of traditional African cultures or religions. What does the adjective "traditional" refer to? Does it imply, perhaps, archaeology and nostalgia? Would it define an African distinctiveness, even though this is shared with other peoples, and thus can lead to homology? Perhaps this is not the case at all.

The two paradigms, which are perhaps irrelevant when compared to Africa's highly diverse religions, reveal that the problem of Africa has been and always will be related to its capacity to discern, taking into account the signs of the times and places. Failure to heed this lesson means that there can be no true grasp of what is drawn from humanity's common heritage. To acquire this knowledge, the question, indeed the guiding principle, must be an awareness of *who*? This is a question of recognition, and an approach that prizes diversity when applying the applicable law of homology and is justified by the shared humanity with all other races with which African peoples share their existence.

The encounter with these races has revealed how inadequate the discernment in African cultures is. One perceives a total, or near-total, failure, both in politics and religion, in technology and commerce, and in education and everyday life. Before the advent of globalization, Africa dissolved, lacked in being, for in everything it mirrors fashionable phenomena, existing in order to be like others, forsaking itself yet never being able to be anything but itself. The consequence is an existential plagiarism. As the saying goes, "he who does not cherish memory can never improve the present and can never project himself." We must start again from discernment, but only after establishing solid foundations, that is, we must not expect anything unless we find in the local culture a "preparedness," a "pierre d'attente," for it is an economy of growth, of full human real-

ization, and also of salvation. Only in this context, then, can we speak of an economy of maturation, founded on integration through the twofold process of transformation and purification.[48] Only this type of discernment, which always renews itself, will raise up the Africa of today and all historical epochs.

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[48] Cf. *Nostra Aetate.* This is the direction in which our study of African catechisms is oriented: É.-N. BASSOUMBOUL, « Les catéchismes africains: le problème du langage de la foi », *Urbaniana University Journal*, LXX, n. 3, 2017.

The Journey of Asian Christianities as *Missio inter gentes*

❖ Gaetano Sabetta

Over the years, exotic tales and marvellous fables have fuelled in the Western imaginary the idea of a romanticised Asia, the birthplace of most of the world's ancient and pristine religions and cultures. Going beyond Orientalism, that is, the incorporation or assimilation of non-Western life-forms into pre-established Western philosophical and scientific frames of knowledge,[1] Asia still remains a continent marked by a kaleidoscope of religions, cultures, and philosophies, many of which are more ancient than Christianity. Asia is also the birthplace of most of them: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism (Indic religions); Confucianism, Taoism, and Shintoism (East Asia religions); Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (West Asia religions). Besides these, there is a multitude of Tribal religions.

When we arrive at the history of Christianity in Asia things get complicated. Although historians agree that before the end of the first century Christianity was present in India and China, Asian Christianity became a "lost Christianity," since the dominant history of Christianity has always been Eurocentric. Only a post-colonial reading of Asian Christianities is able to recover their lost voices, since it deconstructs the conventional frames of interpretation thus opening the gates for new understandings.[2] These develop around

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[1] Cf. E. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Penguin, London 1991; Id., "Orientalism and After: An Interview with Edward Said," *Radical Philosophy*, n. 63, Spring 1993, 22-32; W. Halbfass, *India and Europe. An Essay in Philosophical Understanding*, MLBD, Delhi 1990; E. Franco – K. Preisendanz (eds.), *Beyond Orientalism. The Work of Wilhelm Halbfass and its Impact on India and Cross-Cultural Studies*, MLBD, Delhi 2007; R. King, *Orientalism and Religion. Post-Colonial Theory, India and "The Mystical East,"* Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1999.

[2] F. Wilfred, "Asian Christianities and Theologies through the Lens of Postcolonialism," *Concilium*, vol. 54, n. 1, 2018, 15-26.

the consciousness that Christianity springs in each context in dialogue with the local culture. Through the dialogical process, the central concern (the Christ event as present in the Scriptures) is expressed on a local level. It is clear, for instance, that the Islamic context is crucial in Pakistan and Indonesia just as the Buddhist context is in Thailand, and they affect Christianity. Of course, Christian influence over the context is also present, thus it is better to think in terms of a two-way dialogue of Asian Christian communities with the local cultures.

Keeping in mind the above premises, this essay will give a brief account of Hinduism and Buddhism, before addressing their historical and current interaction with Christianity, mainly from a Christian point of view. Lastly, taking into account the Asian context, it will evaluate possible ways of meaningful presence of the Christian communities in the Asian milieu.

I. HINDUISM & BUDDHISM: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

1. The Journey of the Hindu Mind

It should be clear right from the beginning that every religion must be approached as a composite and diversified reality, taking in account its historical development, socio-cultural milieu, and current existence. This is all the more true in the case of Hinduism, which remains an umbrella term mostly used by non-Hindus to talk about the many and different *sampradāyas* (religio-cultural traditions) that evolved over the centuries across the Indian sub-continent. Coalescing gradually over a period of five thousand years, Hinduism has absorbed all the religious and cultural movements of India; but, unlike other world religions (Christianity, Buddhism, Islam), it has neither a founder, nor a central authority, nor a common creed, nor a dogmatic teaching accepted by all.[3] *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads*, *Bhagavadgītā*, *Mahābharata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, different *Purāṇas*, the poetry of the *Bhakti* movements, and the books belonging to the six orthodox schools of philosophy, are "all authoritative, but none is exclusively so."[4] These diverse schools of thought have different points of view on

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[3] Cf. A.C. BOUQUET, *Hinduism*, Hutchinson & Co., London 1966[3], 13-17.
[4] K.M. SEN, *Hinduism*, Penguin, London 2005, xxiv.

significant ontological, epistemological, and ethical aspects, yet it is still possible to envisage a distinct Hindu identity in the *Vedas* (common source, accepted or rejected), in the *karma-saṃsāra* (cycle of birth-rebirth and transmigration), in *varṇāśrama dharma* (responsibilities regarding caste duty and stages of life), and in *mokṣa* (liberation). Notwithstanding its differences, there is a great unity in Hinduism, so much so that it was indeed one of the most important factors in preserving the unity of India. It is precisely this 'unity in diversity', this eclectic range of doctrines and practices – from pantheism to panenthesim and agnosticism, from faith in reincarnation and multiple divine manifestations to caste system, from *jñāna-mārga* to *bhakti-mārga* passing through *karma-mārga*, none of these being an obligatory credo for a Hindu – that makes the question of identity extremely burning especially today. We shall return to this point later, only after giving a short sketch of the journey of the Hindu mind.[5]

1.1. Beginnings

The earliest known Indian civilization is the Indus Valley Civilization (*Harappa*). Quite advanced already by 2500 BC, this urban civilization slowly decayed, perhaps because of consecutive waves of migration (some scholar speaks of the so-called "theory of invasion") by people who called themselves *Aryan*, who spoke a language from which Sanskrit is derived, and whose religion was that found in the *Ṛgveda*. This period was marked by cosmocentrism. Natural forces, eventually identified as "Vedic divinities," were the principal actors on the scene, dynamically affecting human life. Most of the Vedic gods were elemental. Forces of nature like the sun, moon, fire, storm, cosmos, were therefore divinized in an attempt to express the inexpressible mysteries of life. This process eventually gave rise to the flowering of innumerable myths, which seem to share similarities with European counterparts, especially the Iranian *Avesta*, Greek and Roman literature, and even Teutonic and Nordic tales.

Life, experienced as a network of relationships between human beings, divinities, and natural forces, characterizes the theocentrism of the second period. The center of life becomes the ritual (*yajna*),

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[5] Cf. R. THAPAR, *A History of India*, 2 vols., Penguin India, New Delhi 1990.

related to the great cosmic and primordial sacrifice (*Ṛgveda* X 90), while the method of worship seems to have been the performance of sacrifices in the open air, around a fire. One important indication of the gradual unification of India was the progressive merging of Vedic and Harappan religious mythologies; in this way, by the beginning of the first millennium BC, the Vedic religion absorbed the ideas of renunciation and asceticism, which were originally far outside its worldview. On the social level, the emphasis on ritual seemed to facilitate the affirmation of criteria based on the concepts of "purity" and "impurity." As a consequence, social stratification developed around those considered 'pure' because of their direct relation to the ritual activities. This group dominated the 'impure', whose functions pertain to ordinary life.

Over and against an excessive ritualism, the third period of Hinduism is anthropocentric and internal. The person reaches a kind of inner maturity. Going beyond the external layers of the human person (rituals), reflection is made on its essence (*ātman*), which is not different from *brahman*, the all-pervading God. The message of the *Upaniṣad* (seventh-sixth centuries BC) focuses on the non-duality between *ātman*, the Self, the innermost center of the human being, and *brahman*, the Absolute, the ultimate Ground of everything, as encapsulated in the famous formula "Thou art That" (*Tat tvam asi*) (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VI.8.7).[6] This idea, which encapsulates most of the Hindu religious thought of this period, was later developed by Śaṅkara into the doctrine of *advaita* (non-duality); this is a monistic doctrine that denies the existence of the world as distinct from God.

1.2 Classical and Modern Period

The *Bhagavadgītā* has a slightly different interpretation of the *Upaniṣadic* teaching. Composed a few centuries after the *Upaniṣad* (second century BC), it does not focus on the unreality of the world, but on the human being's duties in the world. It asserts the indestructibility of the soul, emphasizes the duties of every human being, and

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[6] R. SAKRIKAR, "Mahāvākyas-Momentous Propositions," in K. ACHARYA, M. ITURBE, B. KANAKAPPALLY, G. SABETTA (eds.), *Hindu-Christian Dictionary. Essentials Terms for Inter-religious Dialogue*, Somaiya Publications, Mumbai 2017, 139-140.

puts forward selfless work as an ideal. It is in this fourth period, between 800 and 500 BC, that the main foundations of modern Hinduism are laid. A new synthesis between divine human and cosmos is reached. The Absolute is approached and worshipped as a personal deity, a moral code of conduct emerges, and the future trends of religion were largely determined. Meanwhile, Buddhism and Jainism emerged. Both traditions make use of the Hindu metaphysic (reincarnation), even though the emphasis is changed, since they develop the Hindu ideals of renunciation, knowledge, and love. By this time India had become largely Buddhist, especially from the third century under the emperor Aśoka.

Even though Hinduism later regained predominance, Buddhism left considerable influences on Hinduism, in terms of mythology, metaphysical ideas, and moral code. This is the period in which a rich reflection on the way the human person may reach God developed, and the triple way (*mārga*) composed of *karma* (commitment to action), *jñāna* (knowledge), and *bhakti* (loving devotion) was proposed. Some schools of thought (*sampradāyas*), like the *advaita* vedantists, emphasize the path of knowledge, while many of the other movements take the path of loving devotion, even exuberant devotion toward God (*śrī-vaiṣṇava, pāñcarātra, puṣṭi marga, gauḍīya-vaiṣṇava*). The idea of divine manifestation (*avatāra*), especially Kṛṣṇā and Rāma, emerged, and this helps *bhakti*, for it is easier for people to love a personal God than the all-pervading abstract *brahman* of the *Upaniṣads*. Reinforced by the Muslim *sufi* tradition, the *bhakti* movement was particularly flourishing in the Middle Ages, and helped Hinduism to evolve into a popular religiosity. It is possible to refer, for instance, to the great poet-saint Kabir, who although born into a Muslim household, rejected any sectarian identification and devoted himself to the praise of an abstract (*nirguṇa*) divine essence he referred to as Rāma, coming to be known as the apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity.[7]

However, this was also a period of fecund philosophical reflection that gave birth to the six orthodox philosophical systems (*saddarśanas*) and to great commentators, who offer different religious

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[7] Cf. A. BIGELOW, "Muslim-Hindu Dialogue," in C. CORNILLE (ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, Wiley-Blackwell, London 2013, 279-295.

interpretations of various Hindu religious texts, especially the so-called triple canon (*prasthānatraya*): *Upaniṣad, Brahma-sūtra*, and *Bhagavadgītā*. In this evolutionary phase, a considerable complex Hindu system of values crystallized. Linked to the four stages of life (*āśramas*) – *brahmacarya*, the period of discipline and education; *gārhasthya*, the life of the householder and active worker; *vā-naprasthya*, retreat for the loosening of bonds; and *sannyāsa,* the life of a hermit –, the ideal Hindu life "includes knowledge, it embraces active work, it emphasizes sacrifice and service to others, and it culminates in renunciation."[8]

As has been particularly emphasized by the *Bhagavadgītā*, the great work on Hindu morality, selfless service to others was no less important than renunciation in the complex Hindu system of values. Mahatma Gandhi found his ideal of service in *Bhagavadgītā* II, 54-72, which describes the human being "who has this firmly founded wisdom (*sthitaprajña*), whose being is steadfast in spirit." Untroubled in the midst of sorrow, free from greed and eager desire, detached, at peace with the surroundings, living a simple life of frugality and sobriety, *sthitaprajña*'s code of conduct endured and continued its influence over countless Hindu generations. There are of course always universal human values, such as love, kindness, and truthfulness, but a human being's specific pursuits are supposed to correspond to his/her age and temperament, as in the case of the different approaches to the Supreme.

Therefore, to properly appreciate the Hindu system of values, it is essential to understand its basic assumption of the many paths to the Ultimate, since ethics and ontology are related. It is not by chance that *dharma* and religion are not precisely the same, and that Hindus speak of *sanātanadharma* as "a way of life." *Dharma* has to do more with the nature and behavior of human beings, than with their beliefs.[9] Therefore, while Hinduism gives absolute liberty in the world of thought, it enjoins a strict code of practice, since apparently conflicting ways to reach God may be nothing more than the manifold aspects of the same Ultimate Reality.[10] Therefore, other-

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[8] K.M. Sen, *Hinduism*, 14.

[9] Cf. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London 1949[8] [1927], 77-92.

[10] Cf. K.M. Sen, *Hinduism*, 27-30.

worldliness cannot be the only Hindu value; active material service is as part and parcel of the Hindu life, as contemplation and spirituality.[11] It is worth recalling some beautiful verses of Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitānjali*:

> Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee! He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the pathmaker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust. Put of thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil! Deliverance? Where is this deliverance to be found? Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him the bonds of creation; he is bound with us all forever. Come out of thy meditations and leave aside thy flowers and incense What harm is there if thy clothes become tattered and stained? Meet him and stand by him in toil and in sweat of thy brow.[12]

1.3 Contemporary Context

Shaken by globalization and influenced by its encounter with Islam and Christianity, contemporary Hinduism is struggling for its self-understanding.[13] Consequently, the relevant and disputed question still remains: "Who is really a Hindu?" The pluralistic perspective was advanced by the famous independence activist Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920), who developed a working formula that was found to be adequate and satisfactory by the Supreme Court of India in its 2nd July 1995 judgment on the matter of the Ramakrishna Mission's petition to be declared a non-Hindu minority religion under the Indian Constitution: "Acceptance of the Vedas with reverence; recognition of the fact that the means or ways to salvation are diverse; and the realization of the truth that the number of gods to be worshipped is large, that indeed is the distinguishing feature of

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[11] Ibid., 12-16.

[12] R. Tagore, *Gitānjali*, www.sacred-texts.com/hin/tagore/gitnjali.htm.

[13] Cf. R. Rinehart (ed.), *Contemporary Hinduism. Ritual, Culture, and Practice*, ABC-CLIO, Oxford 2004; D. Smith, *Hinduism and Modernity*, Blackwell Publishing, New Delhi 2003.

Hindu religion."[14] In the same vein, Shashi Tharoor's current plea is to take back Hinduism (threatened by Hindutva, "a malign distortion of Hinduism"[15]): "A religion of astonishing breadth and range of belief; a religion that acknowledges all ways of worshipping God as equally valid – indeed, the only major religion in the world that does not claim to be the only true religion. [...] [since] Hinduism, with its openness, its respect for variety, its acceptance of all other faiths, is one religion that has always been able to assert itself without threatening others."[16]

His assertation that "this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning,"[17] is appropriate when we consider that some Hindus, shifting between a re-reading of the ancient *sanātanadharma* in its actual context and the urge to seize political power, are in tune with the Hindutva ideology, which denies the kind of Hinduism practiced by the vast majority of Hindus. From this perspective, pluralism and diversity no longer constitute the deeper fabric of Hindu identity, but rather, sectarianism, exclusion, and a dogmatic view of Hinduism are privileged at the expense of the Christian and Muslim minorities. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966) is credited with founding the concept of Hindutva – literally 'Hinduness'. He selected the term *Hindutva* to describe the quality of being a Hindu in terms of

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[14] SUPREME COURT OF INDIA, *Complete Judgment of the Supreme Court of India*, July 2, 1995, www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=5047/.

[15] S. THAROOR, *Why I am a Hindu*, Aleph Book Company, Delhi 2018, 271. Prataph Bhanu Mehta speaks of crisis in the evolution of Hinduism, since "increasingly, being a Hindu is coming to be identified with participation in the creation of a communal identity that can now fully, and often furiously, discharge its role in history. It is an identity constituted by a sense of injury, a sense of always having been on the losing side, a sense of innocent victimhood. But of greater import is the fact that Hindu identity, in so many ways, is coming to rest upon a sense of resentment. It can no longer define itself by its achievements, the vitality of its thoughts and the creativity of its aspirations," P.B. MEHTA, "The Crisis within Hinduism," *The Hindu*, March 23, 2002, as quoted by F. MACHADO, "Fifty Years of Hindu-Christian Dialogue Following Nostra Aetate," in W. LAROUSSE (ed.), *Dialogue with Religions in Asia and Interreligious Marriage*, FABC Papers, n. 153, 2015, www.fabc.org/fabc%20papers/FABC%20Papers%20153.pdf.

[16] Ibid., 269.

[17] W. CHURCHILL, *The End of the Beginning*, November 10, 1942, www.churchill-society-london.org.uk/EndoBegn.html.

territory, race, and religion, or more importantly, in ethnic, cultural, and political terms.

> A Hindu, therefore, [...] is he who looks upon the land that extends [...] from the Indus to the Seas, as the land of his forefathers – his Fatherland (Pitribhu); who inherit the blood of that race whose first discernible source could be traced to the Vedic Saprasindhus [...] who has inherited and claims as his own the culture of that race as expressed chiefly in their common classical language Sanskrit and expressed by a common history, a common literature, art and architecture, law and jurisprudence, rites and rituals, ceremonies and sacraments [...]; and above all, address his land, this Sindhus-than as his Holy land (Punyabhu), as the land of his prophets and seers, of his godmen and gurus, the land of piety and pilgrimage. These are the essentials of Hindutva – a *common nation* (Rasthra), a *common race* (Jati) and a *common civilization* (Sanskriti).[18]

In sum, Savarkar defined Hindus as those who consider India – even though Sindhustan is larger than the Indian sub-continent of today – their holy land (*punyabhumi*) and the land of their ancestors (*pitrubhumi*). Naturally, these characteristics cannot be applied to Muslims and Christians, who comprise alien communities in India. He writes:

> That is why in the case of some of our Mohammedan or Christian countrymen who had originally been forcibly converted to a non-Hindu religion and who consequently have inherited along with Hindus, a common Fatherland and a greater part of the wealth of a common culture – language, law, customs, folklore and history – are not and cannot be recognized as Hindus. For though Hindustan to them is Fatherland as to any other Hindu yet it is not to them a Holy land too. Their Holy land is far off in Arabia and Palestine.[19]

Conceived by Savarkar as the unifying socio-cultural and religious background of all Hindus, Hindutva "is not identical with

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[18] V.D. SAVARKAR, *Hindutva. Who is a Hindu?*, Veer Savarkar Prakashan, Bombay 1969[5] [1923], 115 (italic added).
[19] Ibid., 113.

what is vaguely indicated by the term Hinduism," since the latter "is only a derivate, a fraction, a part of Hindutva," but becomes the animating principle of a Hindu nation (Hindu Rashtra)[20]. It was slowly becoming clear, as confirmed by the publications of M.S. Golwalkar (1906-1973),[21] the man who advanced Savarkar's dream, that the national regeneration of the Hindu nation could only come about through the revival of its Hinduness. As the head of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sang (RSS), Golwalkar became a passionate advocate of "cultural nationalism" as opposed to territorial nationalism[22] and, moreover, to the "civic nationalism enshrined in the Constitution of India"[23]: as Jawaharlal Nerhu had long recognized, majoritarian communalism is a fundamental threat to Indian pluralist democracy.

A recent document of the Indian Theological Association (ITA) has articulated a theological response to the precarious situation of the religious minorities in general and of the Christian minority in particular.[24] According to the document, the vulnerability of the religious minorities (Muslim and Christians) has worsened because of the policies and programs, not to mention the covert and overt actions, of the present Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, which is guided by the Hindutva ideology of the RSS and its affiliates, and for which these two minorities are a threat to their establishment of the 'Hindu cultural nationalism'. In reality, there has been a series of atrocities against them, especially in the last twenty years, as in the case of the Godhra communal violence of 2002 in Gujarat, which took the lives of 700 Muslims, or the burning of Graham Staines and his two sons in 1998, or the Karnatata violence in

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[20] Cf. Ibid., 3-4.

[21] Cf. M.S. GOLWALKAR, *Bunch of Thoughts*, Vikrama Prakashan, Bangalore 1968[4].

[22] "Our concept of Hindu Nation is not a mere bundle of political and economic rights. It is essentially a cultural one. Our ancient and sublime cultural values of life form its life-breath. And it is only an intense rejuvenation of the spirit of our culture that can give us a true vision of our national life, and a fruitful direction to all our nation today" (Ibid., 22).

[23] Cf. S. THAROOR, *Why I am a Hindu*, 147.

[24] INDIAN THEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, "Toward a Theology of Christian Minority in the Indian Scenario Today," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, vol. 81, n. 1, 2017, 29-42.

2008, where about 200 churches were vandalized, to mention just a few instances. It is obvious that anti-Christian slogans, such as "agents of conversion," "outsiders," and "members of a foreign religion" are uttered not by the real votaries of genuine *sanātanadharma*, the great majority of Hindu population, but by people who are simple "tools in the hands of those who manipulate Hindu religious sentiments in order to achieve political and economic power and to enslave the poor and marginalized as well as to discriminate against the minorities and dehumanize Dalits."[25]

This has become all the more clear since the unleashing of violence against the minorities and the *ghar wapsi* (return home or re-conversion) project of the Hindu fundamentalist group, both of which are intended to establish a cultural nationalism that would reinforce the caste-system and stop the marginalized groups from asserting their inalienable rights to live as dignified humans as guaranteed by the Constitution. Most of the Hindutva organizations seem to have been, from a psychological analysis, deeply hurt by the indiscriminate condemnation of Hindu doctrines and practices by Christian missionaries in the past, a trend which unfortunately continues today in some Christian sects.

In this context, the Church should not be entrapped in a ghetto mentality, or respond in a communal manner to the challenges posed by the Hindu fanatics, but should assert her identity as Indian Christians in dialogue with the other religions and continue with her mission of service to the nation in different fields such as education, health care, socio-economic development, and empowerment of weaker sections. Moreover, the Church should be an apostle of peace and reconciliation, and contribute to the healing of the society. Christians need to network with secular and religious like-minded groups to defeat the Hindutva agenda and its project of a cultural nationalism for the nation, and to give prominence to the interreligious and intercultural aspect of her mission, both within and in the vast reality outside.

According to the ITA,

> An inter-textual reading of the sacred scriptures of the different religions in India along with the Indian Constitution is an urgent

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[25] Ibid., 31.

need today in order to galvanize their secular potentials to fight against the growing fundamentalism and to strengthen the democratic fabric of the nation [...] [but] We also have to address fundamentalist tendencies within our own communities [...] Preachers in the charismatic movements must refrain from belittling other religions [...] Instead of remaining a peripheral activity, interreligious meetings must become a flowering of dialogue of daily life in a particular locality. The good practice of sharing meals with members of other communities during festivals may be promoted further. Our educational institutions need to form interreligious and intercultural cells and train students to live with and appreciate the differences [...] Christian theologians have the responsibility to promote interreligious and intercultural living through their writings in journal, newspapers and social media.[26]

Indeed, in their effort to navigate the current scenario, Indian Christian communities need to identify an interreligious field of activities, to discern a dialogical way, freed from all possible naiveties and fundamentalist attitudes, and to open a space of potential authentic coexistence among different communities. This is precisely the meaning of the following affirmation, which shows the whole interreligious potential in diluting communal tensions and fostering harmony among believers:

Interreligious dialogue has an important role in freeing the believers from the clutches of extremist standpoints and enabling them to build bridges between diverse religious communities. Every religious community must come out of its exclusivist mindset and welcome others with great openness. Faith convictions should be distinguished from moral values, even though they are interrelated. It is, therefore, possible for people of different faith traditions to arrive at a consensus with regard to moral imperatives for personal and social conduct. Dialogue of life and dialogue of liberative praxis can bring people together to stand in solidarity with the oppressed in their struggles and jointly contribute to making of a more equitable nation.[27]

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[26] Ibid., 39-40.
[27] Ibid., 41.

2. The Dharma of Buddha in Motion (Dharmachakra Pravartana)

Throughout its long and complex history, Buddhism, the religion practiced by the followers of Gautama Buddha, has been capable of moving from one culture to another, and from one country to another. Along with Christianity and Islam, it is one of the few traditions which shows a universal outlook, a missionary dynamism and the peculiar ability to cross the boundaries of societies and cultures. Born in India – the founder lived about 500 years before Jesus Christ – today it is widely practiced in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Korea, and Japan. Moreover, it has a strong influence in China, Tibet, and Vietnam, and an increasing presence in Europe and North America.[28] Marked by great diversity, none of the historical forms of Buddhism is easily comprehended, unless one is prepared to survey the entire local tradition from beginning to end.

Emerging as a nonconformist movement (*Śramaṇa*) from the prevailing Hindu religion, Buddhism slowly became influential as a protest against the dominant priestly power. In the hierarchical Indian society, it fought for reform and egalitarianism. Against the Hindu speculative power, it searched for an anti-speculative stand, as in the case of the absence of a permanent self (the doctrine of *anattā*). Moreover, while against the authority of the *Vedas*, the most sacred scriptures of the Hindus, it affirmed the primacy of experience. Despite these discontinuities, a closer reading of Buddha's teachings and early Buddhism betrays the presence of Vedic elements, and of Hindu devotionalism (*bhakti*), especially later Mahāyāna Buddhism. Likewise, the absorption of folk beliefs and practices became common, as the Buddhist tradition spread southward across Southeast Asia and northward into Central Asia (Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea, Japan). The encounter of Buddhism with the Chinese indigenous traditions remain perhaps the most fascinating chapter in this continuous metamorphosis, since it requires a thorough understanding of Daoism and Confucianism.[29]

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[28] Cf. T. Yoshinori, *Buddhist Spirituality*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishing House, Delhi 1985; M. G. Fonner, G.R. Sing, F. Ponchaud, A. Khin, G.P.V. Somaratna, "Buddhism," in S. W. Sunquist (ed.), A *Dictionary of Asian Christianity*, Eerdmans, Cambridge 2001, 98-104.

[29] Cf. M. Poceski, *Introducing Chinese Religions*, Routledge, London-New York 2009, 112-162.

To take refuge in the three realities – the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṅga, the "three jewels" – is perhaps the easier way to define, at least initially, what Buddhism represents to its followers.[30] The Buddha (literally, the "Enlightened One") refers primarily to the historical figure of Siddhārta Gautama. He belonged to the Śākya clan and is also remembered as Śākyamuni (the hermit of the Śākya). He delivered his first sermon as the "Enlightened One" in Bodh Gaya, near Varanasi, and preached his message of salvation – a middle-path between the two extremes of self-mortification and self-indulgence – for almost forty years before his death (*mahā-parinirvāṇa*). In the course of time, some branches of Mahāyāna Buddhism slowly began a process of deification. Not only did he come to be worshipped as divinity, but he was also believed to have reached *Buddhahood* (the Buddha-nature) in the last of his many births. In this sense, there were various Buddhas living in different places at all times, as recounted in the *Jataka* mythology. Moreover, the same term "Buddha" was understood as the ultimate goal toward which all beings must strive. A perfect reality, preexisting all historical Buddhas, *Buddhahood* was then understood by Mahāyāna Buddhism as a "universal human vocation."[31]

The Dharma is the teaching, the vision of reality taught by the Buddha, as recorded in the sacred scriptures of Buddhism. After Buddha's death, his teachings were preserved and transmitted to succeeding generations in oral form. More than two centuries passed before the oral corpus was compiled in the Pali and Sanskrit languages: the *Tripiṭaka*, the Pali Canon, and the many Sanskrit treatises of the Mahāyāna schools in the North later spread to other countries and were translated into local languages. The most famous formulation of the Dharma is known as the *Four Noble Truths*, expounded by Gautama's first discourse delivered near Varanasi:

> The Noble truth of Suffering (Dukkha) is this: birth is suffering; aging is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering; association with unpleasant is suffering; dissociation from the pleasant is suf-

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[30] Cf. H. OLDENBERG, *Buddha. His Life, His Doctrine, His Order*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishing House, Delhi 1977.

[31] T. YOSHINORI, *Buddhist Spirituality*, xv.

fering; not to get what one wants is suffering – in brief, the five ag-
gregates of attachment are suffering.
The Noble Truth of the Origin of suffering is this: it is this thirst
(craving) which produces re-existence and re-becoming, bound up
with passionate greed. It finds fresh delight now here and now
there, namely, thirst for sense-pleasure; thirst for existence and be-
coming; thirst for non-existence (self-annihilation).
The Noble Truth of Cessation of suffering is this: it is the complete
cessation of that very thirst, giving up, renouncing it, emancipating
oneself from it, detaching oneself from it.
The Noble Truth of the Path leading to the Cessation of suffering
is this: it is simply the Noble Eightfold Path, namely right view;
right thought; right speech; right action; right livelihood; right ef-
fort; right mindfulness; right concentration.[32]

Often a stumbling block, the universality of suffering (First No-
ble Truth), more than a piece of willful pessimism, appears to be the
discovery of advanced spiritual insight. The solution to this suffer-
ing is to enter into this world ablaze with an all-consuming fire (Sec-
ond Noble Truth), and slowly to reduce and remove the firewood,
in order to enter into the bliss of *nirvāṇa* (Third Noble Truth) by
following the Eightfold Path (Fourth Noble Truth). As a way to reg-
ulate one's conduct, the Eightfold Path leads to that wisdom, that
experience of bliss (*nirvāṇa*), which removes ignorance. Hence,
nirvāṇa is not nothingness, or the annihilation of the self, but,
through a blissful experience of profound *dependent co-origination*,
it marks the annihilation of the illusory self.

According to *Theravāda* Buddhism, *nirvāṇa* can be achieved by
following the Eightfold Path; the emphasis lays on self-control and
self-emancipation, since everyone has to work out his/her salvation
for themselves: *arhat* is precisely that man or woman who has gained
insight into the true nature of being and becoming. In Mahāyāna
Buddhism, the emphasis shifts to the glorified Buddha as a divine
being full of grace and mercy. This belief in the *Bodhisattva*, who,
out of compassion, postpones his *nirvāṇa* in order to help others to
reach that point, gradually led to the affirmation of different celes-

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[32] *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*, in W. RAHULA, *What the Buddha Taught*
(revised edition), Grove Press, New York 1974, 93.

tial beings. Spanning the entire gamut of these *Avalokiteśvara* (*Guānyīn* in Chinese, *Kannon* in Japanese) and *Amitābha* (*Amida Nyorai* in Japanese), Buddhas dwell in a cosmic paradise called the Pure Land.

A different but no less profound way to capture the Buddhist second jewel is the so-called *Threefold Seal of Dharma*: the impermanence of all conditioned things (*aniccā*); the universality of suffering (*dukkhā*); and the absence of a permanent self (*anattā*).[33] Different sources talk of a fourth seal, namely, the tranquility and indescribability of *nirvāṇa*. According to Rahula, Buddhism is unique in the history of human thought in denying the existence of a substantial self:

> According to the teaching of the Buddha, the idea of self is and imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality, and it produces harmful thoughts of 'me' and 'mine', selfish desire, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism, and other defilements, impurities and problems. It is the source of all the troubles in the world from personal conflicts to wars between nations. In short, to this false view can be traced all evil in the world.[34]

The third jewel, the Saṅga, refers to the community of those who follow the Buddha and the Dharma. Different traditions arose within the well-defined community of monks at Mahasangha. One of these was the *Theravāda* school, which originally comprised 12 branches. The only surviving branch today is known as Hinayana, or "small vehicle," a derogatory term invented by its opponent. It is mostly dominant in southern Asia (Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand), and its main scriptures are the Pali Canon. The second school, the *Mahāsāṃghika* school, consists of 6 branches, which came to be known as Mahāyāna and are mostly present in China, Japan (Zen Buddhism, from China), Vietnam,

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[33] "'All created things perish', he who knows and sees this becomes passive in pain; this is the way of purity (277). 'All created things are grief and pain', he who knows and sees this becomes passive in pain; this is the way that leads to purity (278); 'All forms are unreal', he who knows and sees this becomes passive in pain; this is the way that leads to purity (279)," in F. Max Müller (trans.), *The Dhammapada*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishing House, Delhi 2004 [1881], 68-69.

[34] W. Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 51.

Korea, Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet (Lamaism). Originally in Sanskrit, their scriptural texts survive now only in Chinese, Tibetan, and other local languages.

Today, Buddhists represent about 7% of the world's total population, and half of the world's Buddhists live in China. Outside China, the largest Buddhist populations are in Thailand (13%), Japan (9%), Myanmar (8%), Sri Lanka (3%), Vietnam (3%), Cambodia (3%), South Korea (2%), India (2%), and Malaysia (1%).[35]

As Buddhism spread outside India, variations in its doctrine developed. Within Chinese history, Buddhism was undoubtedly the most significant and influential among the religious traditions that originated outside China. Along the Silk-Road, the first Buddhist missionaries and followers, mostly associated with the Mahāyāna tradition, came to China approximately at the beginning of the Common Era through Central Asian varieties of Buddhism. Incisive critiques, such as the institution of monasticism, and the emphasis on individual salvation and transcendence of the world, so at odds with the prevalent Confucian-inspired social and religious customs, were some of the arduous obstacles Buddhism encountered while penetrating the Chinese reality. Likewise, the formidable language gap, which prevented the communication between indigenous and foreigner groups, and increased the complexity of translating the Sanskrit texts into the Chinese language, made a great deal of separation. At the same time, it took an extended period of indigenous interpretation and selective appropriation before the Chinese could master the full range of Buddhist beliefs and practices. Nevertheless, the foundation was laid for the establishment of a unique Chinese form of Buddhism.

The reunification of the Chinese empire under the Sui dynasty (589-618) and the succeeding Tang dynasty (618-907), projected Buddhism as the most powerful and influential religious and intellectual tradition in the Chinese empire, sidelining Confucianism and Daoism. The main schools of Chinese Buddhism (Tiantai, Huayan, Chan, Pure Land) were also formed during this era. Bud-

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[35] Pew Research Center, *The Global Religious Landscape. A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Major Religions Groups as of 2010*, December 2012, 31-33, www.assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2014/01/global-religion-full.pdf.

dhism's decline arrived with the affirmation of the Neo-Confucian revival under the Song dynasty (960-1279), and was manifest when the latter was officially recognized as a state orthodox religion during the fourteenth century.[36]

Influenced by shamanism, spirits, and ancestor worship, Buddhism in Korea, along with Confucianism, was introduced from China at the beginning of the Common Era. In Japan, it was influenced by Shinto and Confucianism, and has given rise to important religious movements such as the Soka Gakkai, with Buddhist roots and founded in 1931 on the Lotus Sutra of Nichiren (1222-1282), and the Rissho Kosei-Kai, based on Mahāyāna Buddhism.[37]

Even though Cambodia knew Mahāyāna Buddhism before the Common Era, during the following centuries Buddhism spread across the country along with Brahmanism. The latter was instrumental to the expansion of the Angkorian empire (ninth to fifteenth century). Only in the thirteenth century was Tamalinda, son of King Jayavarman VII, sent to Sri Lanka to be ordained as a Buddhist monk according to the *Theravāda* tradition. He supported and revived the long-lasting presence of this tradition in the country so that it became the state religion, finally putting an end to the religious instability that had characterized the nation. The Buddhist monks, who counted for about 1% of the total population in 1970, almost disappeared during the Khmer Rouge period (1975-1979). It was only as of 1980 onward that Buddhism began to gain ground, and the Cambodian Constitution declared it the religion of the state in 1993.[38]

In Myanmar (Burma) almost 90% of the population is Buddhist. Myanmar oral traditions claim that Buddhism reached the country while Buddha was still alive. According to them, Buddha visited the country four times and established important places of pilgrimage in Aparanta (Upper Myanmar) and Arakan. In addition, two of his disciples, Taphusa and Ballikha, after receiving eight sacred hairs of the Buddha directly from him, went back to Myanmar and enshrined the heirs in a stupa which is now the great Shwedagon Pago-

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[36] Cf. M. POCESKI, *Introducing Chinese Religions*, 115-135.

[37] Cf. C. BUSQUET, *Incontrarsi nell'amore. Una lettura cristiana di Nikkō Niwano*, Città Nuova, Roma 2009, 17-43.

[38] Cf. I. HARRIS, *Cambodian Buddhism. History and Practice*, University of Hawai Press, Honolulu 2005.

da in Yangon. The *Mahāvaṃsa*, a Sinhalese chronicle on the history of Buddhism, mentions the dispersal of missionaries in order to spread the teaching of the Buddha that occurred during the Third Buddhist Council held in India in the year 232 BCE by Emperor Aśoka. Some of them were sent to Aparanta, where 60,000 women were ordained, and so by the sixth century Buddhism was present in most of Upper Myanmar. Later, Buddha's teachings spread quickly throughout the entire country after the conversion to *Theravāda* Buddhism of King Anawratha (1044-1077). The last two Buddhist councils were held in Myanmar. The fifth council (1868-1871) sought to redact the Pali *Tripiṭaka*, now engraved on marble slabs preserved in the Mandalay city, while the sixth council (1954), held in Yangon under the patronage of the prime minister U Nu, revised and edited all the original texts and commentaries in Burmese Pali script, and distributed them to all the people of Myanmar.[39]

A nation with an ethnically Burman and religiously Buddhist majority, Myanmar also comprises a large minority of Muslims and members of other religious traditions. Over the last few years, while the country has been struggling with a host of political and socio-economic challenges related to the transition, the violence between religious groups has become a crucial phenomenon, particularly with the rise of the 969 movement and the MaBaTha (the Organization for the protection of Race and Religion). These Buddhist nationalist groups, with the aim of protecting and promoting Buddhist values and tradition, articulate a national discourse and project an identity in which there is no place for foreign elements within or outside the country. Their rhetoric is particularly harsh toward the Muslim ethnic community known as Rohingya.

Communal tensions, nationalistic tendencies, and monastic political mobilization, seen as an extension of past anti-colonial movements rooted in the traditional role of the monastic community to defend the religion, seem to be some of the decisive factors guiding the current religious and political scenario in Myanmar. Of course, an alternative picture is still possible, since *Theravāda* Buddhism and Myanmar Buddhists' understanding of these teachings contain potential seeds able to promote religious pluralism and communal

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[39] Cf. R. Bischoff, *Buddhism in Myanmar. A Short History*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy 2005.

harmony. However, this Buddhist counterargument is unlikely to bring an end to communal violence, unless it is complemented by a wide range of political, economic, and legal reforms.[40]

Buddhism has been a prominent force in Sri Lanka since the third century BCE. The Pali chronicles attribute to Aśoka's son Mahindra the introduction of Buddhism to Ceylon from the Indian sub-continent. Despite this official date, it is reasonable to believe that information about Buddha and his teachings had reached the island earlier. The idea of establishing Buddhism as an institution in a particular country was first conceived by Aśoka himself. He was the first to adopt it as a state religion, and to start a great spiritual conquest (*Dharma-vijaya*). In this sense, Buddhism is probably the first missionary religion and Aśoka the first King to send out people to convert other countries. Under King Devānampia Tissa (307-267 BCE) Buddhism was introduced in the land and for the next forty years he worked to advance the new faith. According to the historical poem *Mahāvaṃsa*, the single most important text of Lankan origin, which covers the period from the arrival of King Vijaya from India in 543 BCE to the British government in 1815, Tamils migrated from South India (or invaded the island?) from about the first century BCE, bringing with them Jainism, Saivism, and village deity worship.[41]

There remains little consensus among scholar regarding the origin and presence of the Tamils in the island. Some scholars ascribe them Nagas origins, while others believe in different minor invasion waves culminating in the creation of the Tamil kingdom on the seventh century.[42] Whatever solution is chosen, Sri Lanka's first settlers arrived from North India from the sixth century BCE and later developed into the Sinhalese group, whereas the Tamils arrived from South India from the first century BCE.

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[40] Cf. M.J. WALTON – S. HAYWARD, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar*, Policy Studies East-West Center, Honolulu 2014.

[41] Cf. R. WALPOLA, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon. From 3rd century BC to 10th century AC*, M.D. Gunasena & Co., Colombo 1966²; H.R. PERERA, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka. A Short History*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy 1988.

[42] Cf. K. INDRAPALA, "Tamil Identity in Ancient Sri Lanka," in J.C. HOLT (ed.), *The Sri Lanka Reader. History, Culture, Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham-London 2011, 69-75.

Although descendants of migrants from India, the two major racial groups differ ethically, linguistically, and in religion. The effects still resonate from the civil war between the majority Sinhalese, represented by the Sri Lankan Government, and the minority Tamils, primarily the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which started in 1983 and ended in 2009.[43] The Sinhalese, 74% of the total population, speak Sinhalese and are Buddhists. The Tamil (18%), mostly concentrated in the North, speak Tamil and are Hindu. There is also a small portion of Tamil-speaking Muslims (7%). Although there are legends that connect Christianity in Sri Lanka to the evangelization of the apostle Thomas, and some archeological evidence in the North Central Province shows that Christians were a powerful minority in the sixth and seventh century CE, these communities, unfortunately, disappeared. The present form of Christianity began with the arrival of the Franciscans and Jesuits in the Portuguese period (1505-1658), and endured with the Reformed Churches under the Dutch domination (1638-1796) and British rule (1796-1948). Today, Christians (7%) are equally divided among the two major ethnic groups.[44]

This brief introduction to two of the most important Asian religions provides essential background for a new understanding of the Christian presence among the people of Asia. Asian Christians hold in their hands the future of the Christian mission in Asia. Moving beyond past confrontational and judgmental approaches, they are called to be on mission among and with the different peoples of Asia. Hence, their meaningful presence and the genesis of a new Church entail a dialogical encounter with other believers, the possible mutual collaboration for the common good, and a transparent, evangelically lived, and respectful proclamation of Jesus and his Kingdom. These sentiments will guide the approach of the second part of the chapter, in which we will explore the dialogical encounter between Hindus and Christians, on the one hand, and Buddhists and Christians, on the other.

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[43] M. DEEGALLE (ed.), *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka*, Routledge, London-New York 2006.

[44] G.P.V. SOMARATNA, "Sri Lanka," in S. W. SUNQUIST (ed.), A *Dictionary of Asian Christianity*, 794-796.

II. DISCOVERING THE OTHER

1. Hindus & Christians

1.1 Pre-Colonial Period

For the early centuries of the Common Era, the ancient Thomas Christian communities of South India lived culturally and existentially in relation to other religious communities, especially Hindus, who constituted the large majority. Mostly belonging to high caste Hindus, they did not abandon their social and cultural customs, but kept almost all the Hindu ceremonies linked to birth, marriage, and death, though ascribing to some of them a Christian signification. They followed the liturgy of the East Syrian Rite and the Syriac language, but they gave to it a local flavor, since indigenous customs were integrated into the celebration of marriage or baptism. Most of the churches were organized according to the architectural style of the Hindu temples, and in many of the religious festivals the musical instruments and umbrellas were those employed for Hindu festivals.[45] Christians in faith, they were attached to the Hindu way of life to such an extent that they have been described as "Hindu in culture, Christian in religion and Oriental in worship."[46]

Despite the apparent lack of documentation or evidence of theological reflection regarding ways of adaptation or inculturation to the local traditions, one scholarly view maintains the following: "[These Christian communities] did not see any contradiction between their faith life and the socio-cultural practices they shared with their neighbors. Their lived experience is indicative of the attitude that acceptance of the Christian faith does not imply the rejection of one's culture."[47] The decrees of the Synod of Diamper (1599), held by the Latin Christians to normalize certain "errors" or "abuses" supposed to be found among the Thomas Christians, make

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[45] Cf. A. AMALADASS, "Dialogue between Hindus and the St. Thomas Christians," in H. COWARD (ed.), *Hindu-Christian Dialogue. Perspectives and Encounters*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishing House, Delhi 1993, 13-16 [13-28].

[46] P. PODIPARA, "Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, Oriental in Worship," in G. MENACHEY (ed.), *The St. Thomas Christian Encyclopaedia of India*, vol. 2, St. Thomas Christian Encyclopaedia of India, Trichur 1973, 111 [107-112].

[47] J. KUTTIANIMATTATHIL, *Practice and Theology of Interreligious Dialogue*, Kristu Jyoti Publications, Bangalore 1998, 14.

it possible to glimpse some of their practices. For instance, Thomas Christians seemed to recognize that all religions were capable of facilitating the encounter with God and helping their respective believers to attain salvation. The Synod condemned this approach, declaring, "Each one can be saved in his law, all laws are right. This is fully erroneous and a most shameful heresy. There is no law in which we may be saved except the law of Christ our Saviour."[48]

1.2 Colonial Period

When the Portuguese landed in South India in 1498, later followed by the Dutch, the French, and finally the British, the plurality of religions was a vivid reality in the Indian context. Social and cultural interactions, religious and theological exchanges among different Indian philosophical schools, diverse cults (saivaites, vaishnavas, tantrics), and various religions (Buddhism, Jainism, Islam), constantly sustained either an ongoing dialogue or a fierce opposition, whereas there seem to have been relatively few exchanges of views with Christianity. Many of the Christian missionaries who came from the West displayed an attitude of contempt toward the local population, which partially explains the lack of constructive interactions with them. This attitude was nurtured by language barriers, the fact that they were few in number, the lack of an adequate knowledge of other religions, and also by an instinctive belief in the superiority of Western culture and Christianity, which were held as indistinguishable.[49] Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907), one of the first Brahmins to be converted to Catholicism, reflected on the missionary enterprise of more than a century in some illuminating sentences in his journal *Sophia* (January 1885):

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[48] J. D. MANSI, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissime collectio*, vol. 35, Paris 1902, (Actio III, Decretum IV, art. XXXIX), 1186.

[49] After writing against the wickedness and incongruities of Hindu polytheism and idolatry, the Catholic missionary Abbè Dubuis (1765-1848), who worked in India from 1792 to 1823, adds: "Let us pray that the Almighty may be pleased to allow the torch of Truth to illumine the countries watered by the Ganges! Doubtless the time is still far distant when the stubborn Hindu will open his eyes to the light and tear himself away from his dark superstition; but let us not despair, a day will come when the standard of the Cross will be flying over the temples of India as it flies now over her strong places" (J. A. DUBOIS, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, Rupa & Co., New Delhi 2000⁶, 11).

> Sectarian missionaries [...] have been labouring under the delusion that the more it can be shown that the Hindu scriptures are so many lies, the more rapid will be the propagation of Christianity in India. Hence the uncharitable attempt on all sides to trample and crush everything Hindu, to represent Hindu scriptures in the darkest colour possible. What has been the result? Educated India has been thoroughly estranged, and she looks upon Christianity as a destroyer and not a fulfiller and perfecter of what is true and good in the country.[50]

Despite their opposition, some missionaries, because of their desire to convert India, were also interested to know about the country and its composite religious panorama. Moreover, some of them decided to pursue a method of evangelization that appreciated the values present in the religions, cultures, and customs of the people they encountered. This was the case with Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656), who reached India in 1605 and joined the Portuguese mission in South India. After visiting the capital city Madurai, he realized that a crucial obstacle to conversion was the low esteem people had for Christianity and Portuguese and the contempt shown by many missionaries toward most of the Hindu cultural and religious practices. He therefore decided to take an approach closely resembling what is today called inculturation, by studying and adopting the lifestyle and customs of the local people, but without compromising his religious principles. He learned Tamil, Telegu, and Sanskrit, and adopted the lifestyle of a *saṃnyāsa*.[51] In the same vein, Bartholomew Ziegenbalg (1682-1719), a Protestant missionary who came to India in 1706, showed a special sensitivity to the good and holy present within the local religious expressions. He studied

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[50] B. UPADHYAYA, *Sophia*, (January 1895), as quoted by J. KUTTIANIMAT-TATHIL, *Practice and Theology of Interreligious Dialogue*, 21.

[51] Cf. A. AMALADASS – F.X. CLOONEY (trans. & intro), *Preaching Wisdom to the Wise. Three Treaties by Roberto de Nobili, SJ, Missionary, Scholar and Saint in 17th Century India*, Satya Nilayam Publication, Chennai 2005. He eloquently made the point in one of his letters: "The advice given in Exodus, 'Do not speak against the gods' applies even to pagan divinities; not that these divinities are not despicable, but because speaking against them, instead of doing good, prevents the conversion of souls. [...]Reach the pagan heart by winning its esteem and affection, and then bring in the taper of truth, and all the darkness of idolatry will vanish without trouble" (H. HERAS, "Two Missionary Methods in the Nations of Ancient Civilisation," *Studia Missionalia*, vol. 6, 1951, 183 [179-198]).

Tamil and translated the New Testament into Tamil by 1711. While far from today's understanding of dialogue, both missionaries manifested important dialogical qualities, such as the effort to get to know the other through the study of their languages, scriptures, and customs, the ability to appreciate the good and holy found in the religious and cultural traditions they encountered, and a willingness to accept into one's own tradition whatever is not against it.[52]

However, this dichotomy slowly declined by the beginning of the nineteenth century, making room for a more positive attitude toward other religions.[53] A different consciousness in the Christian understanding of the religions began to emerge, thanks to the combination of the following factors: the struggle for freedom, which brought together many Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians who had to live and work together respecting each other's cultural and religious values; the indigenous movements among the Indian Christians, some of which rejected any European influence in favour of a renewed attitude toward Indian culture and religion; a more scientific study of religions and religious literature, which helped to overcome the earlier cursory Christian interpretations of other religious traditions;[54] the example of various Indian (Hindus or Christians) religious reformers, who were decisive in influencing the Christian perspective and attitude toward the Indian culture and tradition (Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshub Chunder Sen, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, Mahatma Gandhi), or even in interpreting

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[52] Cf. F. J. BALASUNDARAM, "Ziegenbalg Bartholomew," in S. W. SUNQUIST (ed.), *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity*, 935-936.

[53] Cf. J. KUTTIANIMATTATHIL, *Practice and Theology of Interreligious Dialogue*, 22-75.

[54] One should single out Max Müller, the eminent orientalist and language scholar, and editor of the famous series *The Sacred Books of the East*. Regarding the cultural and religious traditions of India, he writes: "If I were asked under what sky the human mind has mostly developed some of its choicest gifts, has most deeply pondered on the greatest problems of life, and has found solutions of some of them which will deserve the attention even of those who have studied Plato and Kant – I should point to India. And if I were to ask myself from what literature we, here in Europe, we, who have been nurtured almost exclusively on the thought of Greeks and Romans, and of the Semitic race, the Jewish, may draw that corrective which is almost wanted in order to make our inner life more perfect, more comprehensible, more universal, in fact, more truly human life, not for this life only, but a transfigured and eternal life – again I should point to India." M. MÜLLER, *India: What It can Teach Us?*, Longmans, Green & Co, London 1882, 6.

Christ and elements of Christianity using Indian cultural, religious, and philosophical categories;[55] the dawn of a new 'inter-religious curiosity' as testified by the first international meeting of the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893, where one of the outstanding figures was Swami Vivekananda with his good news of the "gospel" of the harmony of all religions; and finally, the search for new and more effective methods of evangelization, since it became increasingly clear that one of the main reasons the missionary work in India failed was the lack of inculturation, the total ignorance of the Indian religious traditions, and the absence of dialogue with Hindus, Buddhists, and other religious representatives.

A new era characterized by the appreciation of the depth of philosophical meaning present in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions was rising. Later, from the Second Vatican Council onward, this acceptance was extended not only to cultural and philosophical values, but also to religious insights (*Nostra Aetate* 2). As one scholar puts it, "This meant affirming transcendent values in traditions outside the ambit of Christian faith, seeing them as means of salvation, or as carriers of God's own love and commitment to the human community."[56]

Two early exponents of this new attitude were Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, who argued that an Indian can be Hindu by culture and Christian by religion, that Hinduism contains sublime truths and that Christianity could be the fulfilment rather than the destroyer of Hinduism[57], and John Nicol Farquhar (1861-1929), who wrote about the fulfilment of Hinduism in Christ.[58] Within this frame-

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[55] Cf. M.M. THOMAS, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, Student Christian Movement Press, London 1969; R. BOYD, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Indian Society for Christian Propagation of Knowledge, Delhi 1994.

[56] G. GISPERT-SAUCH, "The Hindu-Christian Dialogue. A Historical Perspective," in A. BONGIOVANNI, L. FERNANDO, G. SABETTA, V. EDWIN (eds.), *Windows on Dialogue*, Indian Society for Christian Propagation of Knowledge, Delhi 2012, 72 [66-82].

[57] S. KALARICKAL, *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay. Father of the Christian Theology*, Alpha Publications, Kannur 2015.

[58] J.N. FARQUHAR, *The Crown of Hinduism*, Oxford University Press, London 1913; ID., "The Relation of Christianity to Hinduism," *The International Review of Mission*, vol. 3, n. 3, July 1914, 417-431.

work, both scholars clearly recognized the presence of truth in other religions and offered a positive attitude toward them, in a kind of adaptation that provided a boost to the study of different religions. It is possible to observe the initial acceptance of this new sensibility in the final message of the International Missionary Council held in Jerusalem in 1928:

> We rejoice to think that just because in Jesus Christ the light that lighted every man shone forth in its full splendor, we find rays of that same light where He is unknown or even rejected. We welcome every noble quality in non-Christians persons or systems as further proof that the Father, who sent His Son into the world, has nowhere left Himself without witness.[59]

1.3 Post-Colonial Period

There is also insight to be gained from examining the way Christianity approaches the religious plurality of the Asian context from the cultural, intellectual, and spiritual viewpoint.

On the cultural level, the central question to be asked is whether it is possible to be truly Indian Christians without necessarily being culturally Greek and religiously Semitic. This is the great challenge that interculturation poses to the Christian message in India and Asia today. It is not about adaptation, that is, the need to interpret the unchanging Gospel in a form that is sympathetic to the mind and heart of India, nor is it simply inculturation, which still presupposes a one-way dynamic, allowing for some, though mostly superficial, arrangements. Rather, it is about interculturation, which implies a mutual symbiosis between culture and religion, whereas the Gospel has to be almost recreated and relived through its encounter with the cultural and religious context. More than the paradigm of incarnation, the dialogical encounter between Christianity and the whole of Asian realities is at work here. Asian Christians are well aware that Christianity develops in each context in and through a constant dialogue with the local cultures and religions. S.W. Sunquist characterizes the situation this way:

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[59] *The World Mission of Christianity: Messages and Recommendations of the Enlarged Meeting of the International Missionary Council* (Jerusalem, March 24th – April 8th, 1928), International Missionary Council, London/New York 1939, 14.

> There is a central or core concern (the person and work of Jesus Christ as taught in the Scripture) that, through this dialogical process, becomes expressed locally. Thus, to understand the local Christian piety, church order, worship, or theology, one must know something about the broader culture.[60]

Having realized that because of the foreign outlook of Christianity, Hindus and Buddhist were hardly attracted to it, Catholics and Protestants alike began thinking about adaptation in the 1940s. Their main aim was to create an Indian Church, more so than a Church in India. Consequently, beyond the adaptation of names, the building of churches in Indian style, and the use of indigenous music and singing, already in 1950 the First Plenary Council of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI) took a keen interest in molding the priestly formation to Indian culture and background. Textbooks to guide seminarians in the study of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, a course plus a degree course in Sanskrit and other vernacular languages, and a special upper-level course in Hinduism and Islam, were some of the initiatives which laid the foundation for the formation of a local clergy well versed in Indian cultures and religions.

The Protestant method of adaptation closely followed the Catholic path, though more emphasis was placed on socio-cultural involvement. Political independence called for diverse forms of interfaith cooperation with the aim of building the nation and solving the various problems facing the country. Anthropological and theological reasons justify these forms of interreligious collaboration, as the Catholic theologian Raimond Panikkar and Protestant proponent Paul David Devanandan explain.[61]

According to Panikkar, human nature received from Christ is common to all human beings, and all the activities in the order of creation are common to all human beings; consequently, Christians can

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[60] S.W. SUNQUIST, "Introduction," in ID. (ed.), *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity*, xxiii.

[61] Cf. R. PANIKKAR, "Common Grounds for Christian-Non-Christian Collaboration," in *Religion and Society*, vol. 5, n. 1, 1958, 29-36; P.D. DEVANANDAN, *Preparation for Dialogue*, Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, Bangalore 1964.

and must work together with others to foster a human life worthy to be lived. Moreover, if all humanity is saved, directly or indirectly, by Christ, it is precisely this Christ that calls everyone to collaborate, since all human activities have redemptive value and offer common ground for collaboration. In Devanandan's thought, the different understanding regarding salvation/liberation (*mokṣa*) among religions goes along with a similarity in the areas of *artha*, *dharma*, and *kāma*. It is precisely these last three goals that offer a common anthropological basis for dialogue and cooperation. On the theological level, the author places the new creation in Christ, brought about by his death and resurrection, at the center of the Gospel, which means that the entire transformation of the whole cosmos has already begun. This transformation in Christ through the Spirit also involves other religions and secular movements. As a consequence, Christians are called to collaborate with God, who is already at work in other religions for the realization of the new creation.

On the intellectual level, it is meaningful to take into consideration the experience of the so-called Calcutta School, whose chief exponents were William Wallace, Georges Dandoy, Pierre Johannes, and Joseph Bayart. Their effort sought to build a bridge between Christianity, Hinduism, and Indian culture with the aim of making Christianity understandable to Hindus and Indians and vice versa. Their spirit is well summarized by one of the editorials of *The Light of the East*, the journal they started in 1922:

> We are not out to destroy but to build up. We shall go on acknowledging truth, goodness and beauty wherever it is found and, however fragmentary it may be contained anywhere. Persuaded that our own religious convictions are the only ones that are completely and ultimately true, we have yet too much respect for any sincere faith and earnest persuasion to abuse, defame or minimize the real value of any creed. Our purpose is [...] to assist [India] to become fully herself by pointing out to her her true ideas, showing her the way to realise them and thus enabling her to unfold to the full her peculiar [...] unique genius.[62]

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[62] G. DANDOY, "Looking Ahead," *The Light of the East*, vol. 4, October 1925, 1-2, as quoted by J. KUTTIANIMATTATHIL, *Practice and Theology of Interreligious Dialogue*, 47.

A series by Pierre Johannes (1882-1955), probably the most widely known representative of the Calcutta School, has recently been published as a two-volume set under the title *To Christ through the Vedānta*. Johanns' effort intended to build up a mosaic of Indian philosophies integrating the positive view of Rāmānuja, Ninbārka, Śaṅkara, Vallabha, and Caitanya, into a pattern similar to Thomism, the standard philosophy of Catholicism, since everyone is "struck by the fact that there is no important philosophical doctrine of Saint Thomas [...] which is not found in one or the other of Vedānta systems."[63] His work, which remains "the only systematic and serious attempt to study the whole of the Vedānta [...] in the light of the Thomist philosophy,"[64] was based on the somewhat simplistic assumption that,

> If the Vedānta philosophers will only bring their several positive statements into harmony, if they will only adjust and thus partially limit their assertions, they will turn disconnected doctrines into a system, and that system will be Thomism, or something akin to Thomism. [...] The Hindus will find Christ if they find themselves fully. We would like to manifest this to the Hindus. We would like to make it clear to them that we tread common ground with them – that there is a way which leads to Christ in the Vedānta.[65]

Notwithstanding its limitations, this remains one of the first serious attempts to give the Christian missionaries a sufficient knowledge of Hinduism, along with a positive outlook toward its traditions. The same trajectory occurs between Indian Christians and Islam, when father Victor Curtois (1907-1960), a pioneering figure in Christian-Muslim relations, started the periodical *Note on Islam*. The circulation of the bulletin helped both communities to dispel mutual ignorance and overcome old prejudices.[66] The first editorial

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[63] P. JOHANNES, *To Christ through Vedānta*, The United Theological College, Bangalore 1996, 5.

[64] J. MATTAM, *Land of the Trinity: A Study of Modern Christian Approaches to Hinduism*, Theological Publications in India, Bangalore 1975, 34.

[65] P. JOHANNES, *To Christ through Vedānta*, 6.

[66] Cf. CH. TROLL, "A Pioneer in Christian-Muslim Relations," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 44, 1980, 518-527; V. EDWIN, www.jcsaweb.org/first-victor-courtois-memorial-lecture.

eloquently shows Curtois' benevolent approach toward Islam, stating that the bulletin wished to discover the following:

> The unknown riches of those (Muslim) hearts so that in them we may recognize the features of our Heavenly Father and love them as Brothers. Were they better known, they would surely be better loved, and where there is Love, there is also God: 'Ubi Caritas et Amore, ibi Deus est'.[67]

Among the Protestant initiatives, Pandipeddi Chenchiah (1886-1959), Vengal Chakkarai (1880-1958), both converts from Hinduism, and Aiyadurai Jesudasen Appasamy (1891-1980), whose father was a convert from Hinduism, were on the forefront in fostering an open and positive attitude toward other religions, creating a common platform for dialogue and inculturation, while also affirming the importance of proclaiming Jesus Christ.[68] According to Appasamy's view,

> The growing science of religions has made quite clear that there is much truth in all religions of the world. Christians scholars, therefore, are coming to the conclusion that we should classify religions as those containing a general or a special revelation of God. In all the religions of the world there is a general revelation of God. He has been at work inspiring all the great prophets and seers of mankind [...]. India is a deeply religious country. The pursuit of religion has been of absorbing interest to our people. We have a vast and ancient literature dealing with all the problems raised by religion. There are thousands of devotees who even to-day are earnestly engaged in the spiritual quest and who declare that God has spoken to them.[69]

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[67] V. CURTOIS, "Presentation," in *Notes on Islam: A Bulletin of Information about Islam with Special Reference to India*, vol. 1, n. 1, September 1946, as quoted by J. KUTTIANIMATTATHIL, *Practice and Theology of Interreligious Dialogue*, 49.

[68] Cf. P. CHENCHIAH, "Jesus and Non-Christian Faiths," in D. M. DEVASAHAYAM – A.N. SUDARISANAM (eds.), *Rethinking Christianity in India*, A. N. Sudarisanam, Madras 1938, 49-64; V. CHAKKARAI, "Relation of Christianity to Non-Christian Faiths," in Ibid., 65-79; A. J. APPASAMY, *Christianity as Bhakti Marga: A Study of the Johannine Doctrine of Love*, Christian Literature Society, Madras 1928; ID. (ed.)., *Temple Bells. Readings from Hindu Religious Literature*, Associate Press, Calcutta 1930; ID., *The Gospel and India's Heritage*, Indian Society for Christian Propagation of Knowledge, London-Madras 1942.

[69] A. J. APPASAMY, *The Gospel and India's Heritage*, 16.

These individuals were engaged in explaining the truth of the Gospel in "relation to the spiritual heritage of India."[70] Moreover, they firmly believed in the mutual enrichment to be gained from Christianity and Hinduism, as Chenchiah explained in his rebuttal to Hendrik Kraemer's exclusive outlook presented in his famous book *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*.[71] According to Chenchiah, the supreme gain of the co-living of faiths is

> [...] in the light they throw on each other and the new phases they disclose. We start to compare and we find that the things to be compared have changed in the process. The negative plate of Jesus developed in a solution of Hinduism brings out hitherto unknown features of the portrait and these may prove exactly the 'Gospel' for our time. The same thing happens to Hinduism when developed in a Christian environment.[72]

Their desire to strengthen the comparative study between Christianity and Hinduism led to the creation in 1940 of the Christian Society for the Study of Hinduism. Later, this experience, along with other dialogical experiments, was continued by the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS), an institution still very active all over India.[73] In the field of Christian-Muslim encounters, it is important to recall briefly the work done by the Henry Martyn School of Islamic Studies, founded in Lahore in 1930 and then renamed the Henry Martyn Institute. The Institute continues its activities in Hyderabad, fostering a dialogical approach to Islam.[74]

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[70] Ibid., 20.

[71] H. KRAEMER, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, International Missionary Council, London-New York 1938.

[72] P. CHENCHIAH, "The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World," review of Kraemer's Book, in D. M. DEVASAHAYAM – A.N. SUDARISANAM (eds.), *Rethinking Christianity in India*, 162.

[73] Cf. P.D. DEVANANDAN, "The Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society," *Oikoumene International Review of Mission*, vol. 49, n. 195, 1960, 319-325.

[74] Cf. A. D'SOUZA (ed.), *From Converting the Pagan to Dialogue with Our Partners: HMI's Fifty Years Work of Evangelism and Interfaith Relations*, Henry Martyn Institute/Indian Society for Christian Propagation of Knowledge, Delhi 2009.

The spiritual dimension of the encounter between Christianity and religions involved the cultic aspect (i.e., sharing religious experience and common prayer) and the contemplative level (i.e., the *āśram* movement and eremitic life). While the *communicatio in sacris* with members of other religions remained very limited, mostly because the Church did not encourage shared prayers, important Catholic figures in the contemplative field are Jules Monchanin (1895-1957) (*Swami Parama Arubi Ananda*) and Henri Le Saux (1910-1973) (*Swami Abhishiktananda*). Together they launched the *Saccidānanda āśram* (Eremus of the Sanctissimae Trinitatis) in 1950, also known as *Shantivanam āśram,* on the banks of the river Kaveri in Tamil Nadu, with the intention to live their faith close to the heart of India in the style of Indian monks.[75]

Le Saux spent long periods, especially between 1949 and 1956, in Sri Ramana Maharshi and Sri Gnananda's *āśrams*, learning and experiencing the spiritual heritage of India. While at *Arunāchala*, the holy hill at Tiruvannamalai in Tamil Nadu, where Ramana Maharshi lived until his final departure in 1950, Le Saux had a deep spiritual experience which he recounted in the following passage:

> In the Sage of Arunāchala of our time I discerned the unique Sage of the eternal India, the unbroken succession of her sages, her ascetics, her seers; it was as if the very soul of India penetrated to the very depths of my own soul and held mysterious communion with it. It was a call which pierced through everything, rent it in pieces and opened a mighty abyss.[76]

Le Saux's idea was that monasticism could provide the meeting ground between Christianity and India, and moreover that profound communion was necessary if Christians wanted to engage in dialogue with Buddhism and Hinduism, since both were primarily religions of inner experience. Le Saux maintains that before comparing the God in front of us, typical of the Abrahamic faiths, with the God within us of the *upanisadic* experience, and prior to any judgement about the compatibility or incompatibility between the Chris-

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[75] J. STUART, *Swami Abhishiktananda. His Life through His Letters*, Indian Society for Christian Propagation of Knowledge, Delhi 2000, 35-36.
[76] SWAMI ABHISHIKTANANDA, *The Secret of Arunāchala. A Christian Hermit on Shiva's Holy Mountain*, Delhi 1998, 8-9.

tian and the Vedantic experience, Christians had to plumb the depth of the Eastern religious experience and live the depth-dimension of religious dialogue. His recommendation is as follows:

> The self-awareness of advaitic experience is the highest human experience. It must therefore be capable of being taken up, redeemed and transformed by the Holy Spirit, into the very experience of divine sonship which was the foundation of Jesus' personal self-awareness and which he imparted to all those who give their faith to him. No dialogue, therefore, is possible between Christian and Hindus or Buddhists which does not take into account that experience of self-awareness and the advaitic expression given to it by those who have made it.[77]

Of course, this whole movement should have a deep impact on the Church, as well as on the way Indian Christians and other believers perceive Christ. Therefore, Swami Abhishiktananda argues that

> a truly Indian Church would be born out of a movement toward Christ developing within Hinduism, passing through gnostic stages, and very gradually transforming into Christian values the traditional symbols and concepts of India. From Christ, the *Sadguru* (the supreme Teacher) little by little people would come to the divine Christ, the unique incarnation (L. 18.3.52).[78]

A series of meetings hosted by Abhishiktananda at Shantivanam and in other places, between 1957 and 1963, in the presence of Catholic and Protestant figures, dealt with the relation between the Christian and Hindu mystical experiences, the presence of the Spirit beyond the Church's boundaries and, above all, the contacts between Christianity and religions.[79] Abhishiktananda continues:

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[77] Id., "The Depth-Dimension of Religious Dialogue," in *Bullettin of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue*, n. 13, January 1982, 6 [1-8], originally published in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* [reprinted with permission from VJTR, vol. 45, n. 5, 1981, 202-221].

[78] Cf. J. Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktananda. His Life through His Letters*, 54.

[79] Cf. Swami Abhishiktananda, *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point*, Indian Society for Christian Propagation of Knowledge, Delhi 1984⁴ [*La rencontre de l'hindouisme et du christianisme*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1965].

> A truly Christian and Catholic view of the religious traditions of the world will regard them in the light of their eschatological fulfilment, their perfection within the very fullness of Christ (Eph. 1:23). [...] The Church thus realizes that her mission is not to lead to Christ their Saviour isolated and poverty-stricken individuals, sunk in deepest error and sin. With reverent wonder, she finds that in the hearts of those to whom the name of the Lord is still unknown his Spirit is already at work, bringing them to fulfilment and resurrection. She sees that this is not in spite of, but precisely through the instrumentality of, their various traditions, their rituals and Scriptures, and the spiritual vigour and thirst for renunciation which these have transmitted from generation to generation. [...] The time is therefore ripe for the Church – indeed, for all Churches together – to enter into official contact with these religions.[80]

In this context, it seems very instructive to take note of the First Plenary Council of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI), summoned in Bangalore by the papal legate Cardinal Norman Gilroy in 1950. The Council, rejecting indifferentism and syncretism, stated:

> We acknowledge indeed that there is truth and goodness outside the Christian religion, for God has not left the nations without a witness to Himself and the human soul is naturally drawn toward the one true God. But with the passage of the centuries serious errors have almost everywhere been mixed with these truths, and this is why the various religions contradict each other on essential points. But the inadequacy of all non-Christian religions is principally derived from this, that, Christ being constituted the one Mediator between God and men, there is not salvation by any other name.[81]

According to Josef Neuner and Jacques Dupuis, this is the first official Church document offering a distinctly positive approach to

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[80] Ibid., 3-4.

[81] J. Neuner – J. Dupuis (eds.), *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, Theological Publications in India, Bangalore 2001[7], 428 [1017].

the spiritual values of other religions. It represents a first step in the Church's new understanding of these religions, which will find its full expression in the Second Vatican Council.[82]

At this point, if we were to evaluate the changes that occurred in the Asian Christian understanding of religions in the twentieth century, before the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, we should say that a predominantly negative outlook was slowly giving way to the affirmation of God's presence and activity in other religions.[83] It was recognized that they possessed "truth and goodness,"[84] that the Spirit was at work beyond the boundaries of Christianity,[85] that everyone encounters God "ultimately in and through Christ, the only Mediator, but directly or immediately by the means provided by the Indian culture and religion."[86] Ultimately, the relationship was perceived less in terms of error to truth, darkness to light, evil to goodness, and more in terms of potency to act, seeds to fruits, symbols to reality.[87] Hence the framework of the fulfilment theory was declined more in terms of continuity and transformation than through a total break and complete separation from the past.

If we project this path on the scenario opened by the Second Vatican Council's teaching on other religions, it is possible to say that the Council recognized and sanctioned, so to speak, the Indian Church's dialogical efforts and, in some ways, pushed it to expand its cooperation with other religions.[88]

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[82] Ibid., 427.

[83] J. Kuttianimattathil, *Practice and Theology of Interreligious Dialogue*, 69-75.

[84] J. Neuner – J. Dupuis (eds.), *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, 428 [1017].

[85] Swami Abhishiktananda, *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point*, 1-7.

[86] R. Panikkar, "The Integration of Indian Philosophical and Religious Thought," *The Clergy Monthly Supplement*, n. 4, May 1958, 67 [64-68].

[87] Id., "Common Grounds for Christian-Non-Christian Collaboration," 35.

[88] It would be useful to remember that the Council recognizes the activity of the Spirit in the world before the glorification of Christ (AG 4), and that the different traditions have a role to play in God's universal plan of salvation (cf. AG 3), even if their exact role is not explained. Likewise, the Council acknowledges that people's efforts to live according to their conscience, are, so to speak, a response to God's revelation (GS 16, 17, 22). Notwithstanding their differences, it recognizes that other religions contain a ray of truth (NA 2, GS 57), that they are no longer rivals, nor totally foreigner to the Church, but somehow related to the divine mys-

1.4 Post-Vatican II

In briefly tracing post-Vatican II developments, it is worth mentioning some crucial moments – theological seminaries, CBCI's meetings, and theological meetings – that really laid the foundation for a sound theology of interreligious dialogue and hospitality. It goes without saying that this dialogical effort by the Indian Churches, both Catholic and Protestant, made a deep impression on the very understanding and collective thinking of the Asian Churches about mission, as we shall see while examining the missiological approach put forth at meetings of the Federations of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC).

Under the auspices of the Thirty-First Eucharistic Congress, an international meeting was held in Bombay in November 1964. The recent council document *Nostra Aetate* provided the theological background for the meeting, whereas the addresses by Hans Küng, Piet Fransen, Joseph Massignon, and Raimon Panikkar, gave the audience the opportunity to reflect on four crucial aspects, as presented in the Conclusions of the seminar: the world religions in God's plan of salvation; the salvation of other believers in their own religions; the Church's mission in a pluralistic world; and relations of the Christians with their religiously pluralistic environment.[89]

According to the Conclusions, Christians should admit that "the whole of mankind is embraced by one salvific plan of God which includes all the world religions" (Conclusions n. I.1). As a consequence, the dualism of natural-supernatural used to frame the relationship between Christianity and world religions, is no longer tenable. Instead, Christians should realize that, though not exempted

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tery at the source of its existence (LG 16, NA 2). Hence, the strong appeal for a new attitude toward religions (NA 1-5), and the invitation to enter into dialogue with members of other religions (AG 11,34, GS 92), both at level of cooperation (AA 27, AG 12), and at the level of spiritual, moral, and socio-cultural enrichment (NA 5, AG 18). Cf. J. NEUNER – J. DUPUIS (eds.), *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, 428-429; CBCI COMMISSION FOR DIALOGUE AND ECUMENISM, *Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue* (2nd rev. ed.), CBCI Centre, New Delhi 1989, n. 7; J. DUPUIS, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Gujarat 2001 [1997], 158-170.

[89] These *Conclusions* have been collected with an introduction by J. NEUNER (ed.), *Christian Revelation and World Religions*, Burns & Oates, London 1967, 21-24.

by weakness and sinfulness, these religions too are "embraced, upheld, and penetrated by God's grace" (Conclusions n. I.2). Therefore, for whosoever "is not confronted in an existential way with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, they can be the channel of Christ's saving grace" (Conclusions n. I.2), which is "the historical way to God for their followers" (Conclusions n. III.4).

Of course, this reality changes the entire missiological vision. No more a mission which presupposes truth in the pocket, but a sharing in the life of Christ, the Redeemer, who came to establish the Reign of God: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20). With Christ, the Church exists to serve humankind in its threefold aspect of *koinonia*, *diakonia* and *kerigma* (Conclusions n. IV.3; II.3), and also to bear "witness to Christ and his Gospel before the world and its religions" (Conclusions n. I.4.). Hence, this mission of service to the world is to be "rendered in a spirit of dialogue" (Conclusions n. III.5), that is, a readiness from both dialogue partners to listen to God first; a willingness to listen to God speaking through the other; and a love for the other whom Christians are going to serve. The personal commitment to a life of charity, experienced "under the influence of the inner attraction of the Holy Spirit in the context of various social, cultural, and religious influences" (Conclusions n. II.2), is the way other believers can be saved. As a consequence, Christians should take religious pluralism seriously, and live in collaboration with the adherents of other religions (cf. Conclusion n. IV.1).

This was the first time that a positive attitude toward other religions was accepted publicly by Indian Christian theologians. Other religions *can have* salvific values, since the Conclusions "do not go to the extent of affirming that people are saved *through* their religions, but [...] they affirm only that God can save the people 'within the frame of their religions.'"[90]

More explicitly, the Indian Theological Association (ITA) advanced the following in 1983:

> In this land of religions, the Church can fulfil its mission only in dialogue with Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and other religions. [...]

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[90] J. Kuttianimattathil, *Practice and Theology of Interreligious Dialogue*, 178.

> Recognizing the religions as integral to the one divine economy of human salvation, the Church has to formulate its faith in openness to the concerns and aspirations of other religions of humanity, rather than in opposition to them. To be truly Catholic the Church should acknowledge the insights of other religions as dimensions of its own faith. The positive encounter with other religions can help the Church modify its own traditional self-understanding.[91]

As interreligious dialogue and human liberation, along with proclamation, slowly gained acceptance as important concerns for the mission of the Indian Church and the Asian Churches, the need for some guidelines to help Christians to enter into relationships with other believers took on a new urgency. In this regard, the CBCI Commission for Dialogue published the *Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue*, the first edition of which dates to 1977[92] and the second revised edition to 1989.[93]

The first edition begins with an invitation to all Catholics in India "to be open to and to foster dialogue [...] according to the measure of their capabilities and of their responsibilities within the Church" (2). The section on theological perspectives (8-24) offers an understanding of the Christian believer as a person, as an Indian, as a Christian. From an anthropological point of view, one becomes a person through a network of relationships, and dialogue is therefore the intrinsic law of our being (8). As an Indian, every Christian is aware of being heir to ancient cultures and traditions that have sought God in prayers, meditation, and silence (9). As a Christian (s)he knows that this relentless search for God is linked to the creation covenant (Gen 1-11) and is guided in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, to the final fulfilment in God (10). As an Indian Christian, finally, (s)he shares with other believers in the search for God that is present in every tradition, being conscious of the beauty of belonging to Christ. In this sense "the Church remains open to purification and

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[91] INDIAN THEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, "Searching for an Indian Ecclesiology," n. 31, in J. PARAPPALLY (ed.), *Theologizing in Context. Statements of the Indian Theological Association*, Dharmaram Publication, Bangalore 2002.

[92] CBCI COMMISSION FOR DIALOGUE, *Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue*, CBCI, Varanasi 1977.

[93] CBCI COMMISSION FOR DIALOGUE, *Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue* (2nd rev. ed.).

reform, to growth and enrichment" (11). This double religious register is able both to disclose a picture where all "religions have a place in God's plan of salvation" (13), and to open a space for interreligious encounter within the larger framework of Jesus Christ as the Word of God to humans, and the Church as a community of dialogue.

In this sense, Revelation is "God's dialogue with man" (14), and dialogue belongs to the very essence of the ecclesial community (cf. 16). Among the diverse ways in which the Christian community lives this dialogical endeavour, there is also interreligious dialogue, described by the document as follows:

> It is both an attitude and an activity of committed followers of various religions who agree to meet and accept one another in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust. They do not meet in superficial manner [...]; indeed, it is from the very core of their respective faiths that they encounter each other for they are confident that not only what they have in common but also those things in which they differ can provide a motive for coming together. They meet in order to communicate to one another their religious views, convictions, fears and doubts, their aspirations and hopes. More important, they meet to receive from each other, for they each want to share in the richness God has poured on the other and his fellow religionists, in their tradition. Dialogue not only means praying together and sharing experiences and ideas, but it also demands that we work together for the good of our fellowman, bringing to our common action the power and inspiration of our religious commitment, so to build up a more just and human society. Thus, in a spirit of gratitude we are helped to overcome our limitations and to travel in our common pilgrimage toward the Ultimate Destiny of man (17).

In the context of the relation between dialogue and evangelization, the affirmation that evangelization can be understood in a broad and restricted sense sounds very useful, especially for Christians. In the first sense, evangelization includes every activity undertaken to bring about the Kingdom of God, and therefore interreligious dialogue belongs to that sphere (21). In the more restricted sense, evangelization means the proclamation of God's word with the intention of inviting others to accept Jesus Christ as their savior and to join the ecclesial community. Both dialogue and proclamation be-

long to the very essence of the missionary activity.[94] Likewise, it is very useful that the document suggests some practical ways to live the interreligious encounter, such as sharing in common studies and reflection, sharing in common prayers, sharing in common enterprises, and cooperation with interreligious associations, etc. (46-67).

The 1989 revised edition of the *Guidelines* follows the general theological framework of the previous edition, but gives a more mature expression to the openness toward other religions. First of all, it acknowledges more positively that religious pluralism is a divine gift:

> The plurality of religions is a consequence of the richness of creation itself and of the manifold grace of God. Though all coming from the same Source, peoples have perceived the universe and articulated their awareness of the Divine Mystery in manifold ways, and God has surely been present in these historical undertakings of his children. Such pluralism therefore is in no way to be deplored but rather *acknowledged as itself a divine Gift*.[95]

Furthermore, in speaking about sharing in prayers, the document does not exclude the possibility of Christians joining other believers in prayers addressed to other divinities, provided that one has the right understanding (88). Finally, one entire section is dedicated to the specific values and contributions that the specific religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, primeval traditions, etc.) can offer to the human family (18-24). This demonstrates the need to deal with others individually rather than collectively. This is perhaps one of the first instances in which

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[94] As the 1991 Document *Dialogue and Proclamation* says, "Interreligious dialogue and proclamation, though not on the same level, are both authentic elements of the Church's evangelizing mission. Both are legitimate and necessary. They are intimately related, but not interchangeable: true interreligious dialogue on the part of the Christian supposes the desire to make Jesus Christ better known, recognized and loved; proclaiming Jesus Christ is to be carried out in the Gospel spirit of dialogue. The two activities remain distinct but, as experience shows, one and the same local Church, one and the same person, can be diversely engaged in both" (n. 77), in PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html.

[95] CBCI COMMISSION FOR DIALOGUE, *Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue*, (2nd rev. ed.), n. 25.

an official document tries to reach a second level of dialogue, which we may call *dualogue*, where Christianity overcomes the generic "other-religions" level to reach a more profound, personal, and specific encounter with the other. Undoubtedly, both documents show a gradual and constant openness to the acceptance of religious pluralism not only positively but also as willed by God, so to speak. Hence, they manifest a great sensitivity to the religious pluralistic situation in which Christians find themselves and respond to it adequately with relevant pastoral perspectives.[96] In this situation, the Christological approach will avoid negative and exclusivist expressions. Christ is understood as the sacrament, the definite symbol of God's salvation for the whole of humankind. This is precisely the meaning of the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ in the Indian context. This does not exclude the presence of other symbols, which Christianity accepts as related to the definitive symbol of Christ.[97]

Before coming to the end of this section, it is necessary to recall two significant theological meetings of the Indian Theological Association. These highlighted what could be considered an Indian (Asian) theology of inter-religious dialogue, with its effects on the genesis of the Christian communities in Asia, in other words, their understanding of mission as presence among the people (*missio inter gentes*).

In the first meeting, held in December 1998,[98] it was emphasized that a new and renewed Christian participation in the Asian religious experiences could gradually emerge out of an "inter-religious praxis of dialogue, liberative action, and inculturation" (37). These

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[96] Cf. L. Fernando, "CBCI and FABC on Religious Pluralism," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, vol. 64, n. 11, 2000, 858-864, [857-869].

[97] CBCI Commission for Dialogue, *Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue*, (2nd rev. ed.), n. 22. *Dominus Iesus* n. 14 will say that, "Although participated forms of mediation of different kind and degrees are not excluded, they acquire meaning *only* from Christ's own mediation, and they cannot be understood as parallel or complementary to his," in http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html .

[98] Indian Theological Association, "Toward a Theology of Religions: An Indian Christian Perspectives," in K. Pathil (ed.), *Religious Pluralism. An Indian Christian Perspective*, Indian Society for Christian Propagation of Knowledge, Delhi 1991, 324-337.

three dimensions "constitute the new *locus theologicus*" (20), the new starting point, given the plurality of the current Asian context, which is pushed and pulled by various forces responding to this plurality. Communal or even fundamentalist forces claim the universal validity and superiority of their own path. Often by way of political action, cultural homogenization and religious constructions, they try to subordinate or assimilate the other, thus dissolving its otherness and specificity. Other groups are engaged in living their lives in isolation, strengthening a model of parallel monologues, whereas there are communities that are unable to get rid of their ghetto mentality and therefore remain paralyzed in the public arena.

Finally, some people or communities try to bring about harmony and co-existence, which desire to relate positively to the cultural and religious meaning systems of the other and, without bypassing their limits, to work together for a world of greater justice, freedom, and peace. (cf. 5). Needless to say, the last attitude should be accepted and lived by the Christian communities if their presence is to become relevant and meaningful, both for themselves and within the Indian and Asian religious-cultural and political milieu. This really seems to capture an inchoate vision of mission in tune with the complexities of the Asian scenarios.

According to the ITA document, dialogue in general, "understood as mode of being and a way of life" (21), is essentially liberative, not simply in a spiritual way, but also in its socio-political implications. The Reign of God, the Buddha's ideal of a casteless society, and the Hindu yearning for *Ramrajya*, are oriented toward the total and integral liberation of the human being, and these different communities are called to join their minds, hearts, and hands for the transformation of society (25). Dialogue is also strictly linked to inculturation, which is the "total living of Christian faith in a particular cultural setting of the Indian cultural mosaic." This is why inculturation is more of a "creative assimilation" than a mere borrowing. Of course, "if religion is the core of culture, inculturation certainly implies entry into the total religiousness or ethos of the people" (29). And this implies a meaningful interreligious dialogue, which, at this point, has to be understood as "not merely a joint exercise in intellectual reflection, but as a process of liberation, and entrance into the religious experience, faith commitment, and worship, and a rooting of ourselves and our society into the religio-cultural *milieux* of the people" (24).

The second meeting held in 1989[99] developed the conclusions reached by the previous encounter. Starting from the recognition that the creative encounter of the major world religions has *qualitatively* changed the Asian context and raised several important questions (cf. 3), the meeting moves away from the exhausted categories of ecclesiocentrism, christocentrism, and theocentrism. It points, instead, to a theology of religious pluralism which stems from the context of an interreligious praxis of liberation, dialogue, and interculturation (4), a new word used to express the "mutual fecundation" or "natural symbiosis" that takes place when two religions or cultures encounter each other (cf. 21). Their reflection wants to be authentically theological, that is, a reflection emerging for their being committed believers touched by the Absolute Reality in the encounter with other believers that are experiencing the same divine touch, even though expressed differently.

It is not a mere generic or scientific study of other religions. Thus, the meaning of their theology of religious pluralism is eminently *theological*. This means that the long experience of dialogue has driven them "to speak theologically about these faiths with integrity and total respect, and to find a place of honor for them in our theological world" (9). Here we encounter the seed of a different methodological approach to the understanding of other religious worlds in relation to Christianity. No more a clear definition *before* the encounter, as in the case of the theoretical categories of ecclesiocentrism, christocentrism, and theocentrism, but the elaboration of the Christian identity during and because of the encounter; no more only theologies of religions, but above all *interreligious theologies*, since "a religion [...] can no more define itself in splendid isolation from other religions. Rather it has to evolve its own self-understanding in its manifold forms of relatedness of other religions" (16). This is because other believers also reflect on the plurality of religions from their own perspective, using their own language, and the day will come when we are all able to evolve a common language, different from a universal language, in which each tradition will recognize its own identity and its relatedness to others (cf. 10).

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[99] INDIAN THEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, "Toward an Indian Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism," in K. PATHIL (ed.), *Religious Pluralism. An Indian Christian Perspective*, 338-349.

Both editions show a positive attitude toward other religions; their approach is less theoretical and less focused on the possible soteriological meaning of these religions, which is accepted, and more on the place of religions within God's universal plan of salvation, starting from an interreligious praxis of liberation, dialogue, and interculturation. The second edition in particular affirms that the *kenotic* Christ, "present in every human vicissitude as servant and leaven" (27), is extremely close to the faith of the Indian people. Christ is "constitutionally the Way to the Father" (28), and yet they are aware that the uniqueness of Christ (*ephapax*) is not a Christian's exclusive assertion, since claims to uniqueness are present in other religions. Being aware of this complex picture, they can still make the following important statement, with deep missiological implications:

> The religions of the world are expressions of the human openness of God. They are signs of God's presence in the world. Every religion is unique and through its uniqueness, religions enrich each other. In their specificity, they manifest different faces of that supreme Mystery which is never exhausted. In their diversity, they enable us to experience the richness of the One more profoundly. When religions encounter one another in dialogue, they build up a community in which differences become complementarity and divergences are changed into pointers to community. (32)

After analyzing some of the conferences and consultations held since the Second Vatican Council, it is possible to affirm that interreligious dialogue is a major concern of the Indian and Asian Churches. They are struggling to build a full-fledged theology of interreligious dialogue starting from the praxis of dialogue. Asian Christian communities show a growing sensibility toward seeing other religions as positively willed by God, as different faces of the one supreme Mystery that can never be exhausted. For some of them, these ways can facilitate the encounter between God and human, because of the hidden presence of Christ or even, at least implicitly, through participated mediations. Interreligious dialogue seems to have deep anthropological, philosophical, and theological foundations, and its place in the understanding of the mission of the Church grows in accordance with the progressive evolution of the intrinsic relations between dialogue, action for liberation, and inter-

culturation. Moreover, emphasis is increasingly being placed on the interreligious dialogue in diluting communal tensions and facilitating the encounter and the understanding not only between members of different religions, but also among the different strata of a society, often entrapped in cultural stereotypes and communal walls.

2. Buddhists & Christians

2.1 First encounters

Ironically enough, the encounter between Buddhism and Christianity could just as easily respond to Rudyard Kipling's most-quoted affirmation: "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,"[100] or to Aloysius Pieris' invitation, "Deep within each of us there is a Buddhist and Christian engaged in a profound encounter."[101] Historically these 'intimate strangers' have walked this two-way road: their strangeness, as well as their closeness, remains part and parcel of their evolution. Despite the good number of parallels between Buddhist and New Testament sayings, the intensive scholarly research at the beginning of the twentieth century has concluded that Buddha's Dharma and Christianity developed without any substantial reciprocal influence. However, this does not entail a lack of contacts, specifically among Christians in Alexandria, where a certain fragmentary knowledge of Buddhism was present since the second century, as attested in the *Stromata* (1:15) of Clement of Alexandria, written in about 202:

> Philosophy, of things of highest utility flourished in antiquity among the barbarians, shedding its light over the nations. [...] First in its ranks were [...] the Samanaeans among the Bactrians. [...] Some, too of the Indians obey the precepts of the Boutta, whom on account of his extraordinary sanctity they have raised to divine honours.[102]

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[100] R. KIPLING, "The Ballad of East and West,"– in E.D. STEDMAN (ed.), *A Victorian Anthology 1837-1895*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston-New York 1895, 596.

[101] A. PIERIS, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism*, Maryknoll-Orbis, New York 1988, 113.

[102] D. SCOTT, "Christian Responses to Buddhism in Pre-Medieval Time," *Numen*, vol. 32, n. 1, 1985, 89 [88-100].

According to David Scott, Clement's emphasis on philosophy in his remarks on Buddhism is understandable given the Buddhist development which took place within the Mādhyamika school of thought and Nāgārjuna (150-250). Particularly reflective is his indirect reference to a possible analogy between two forms of wisdom, namely, the Greek *sophia* and the Buddhist *prajñā*. Other scattered remarks on the Buddha can be found in Jerome (382-420) who, in the twilight of the Roman Empire, noted in his *Adversus Iovinianum* 1.42 that "Buddha the founder of their religion had his birth through the side of a virgin."[103]

The rise of Islam in the seventh century CE cut across previous links between India and the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, it is still possible to imagine a possible significant indirect Eastern influence on Neo-Platonism, which is one of the roots of Christian and Muslim mysticism.[104] Structural similarities between the metaphysics of Plotinus (205-270 CE) and vedāntic philosophy; the possible Indian origin of Plotinus' teacher Ammonius Sakkas; and, finally, the possibility that Plotinus after Ammonius' death wanted to reach Asia in order to study Indian and Persian philosophy, all seem to ascribe a certain value to this hypothesis, albeit one still heavily based in the field of speculation.[105] Hence, it is possible to conclude that, despite a few missionaries – for instance William of Rubruck (1215-1270) – and adventurers like Marco Polo (1254-1324), who managed to reach Asia, the Christian knowledge of Buddhism remained fragmentary and inaccurate until the beginning of the European colonial expansion in the sixteenth century. This scanty and often distorted information nurtured notions about Buddhism that prevailed in Europe for centuries. They ranged from pantheism, in so far as everything seemed to be viewed as divine, to idolatry, when the practices seemed to focus on the veneration of sacred images of Bodhisattvas, and to the Buddhist founder, seen as a saintly figure who fell short of true sainthood because he was a pagan. Ironically enough, the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat, so popular in the Mid-

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[103] Ibid., 90.

[104] M. VANNINI, *La mistica delle grandi religioni*, Le Lettere, Firenze 2010.

[105] Cf. P. SCHMIDT-LEUKEL, "Intimate Strangers: An Introduction," in ID. (ed.), *Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue*, Student Christian Movement Press, Norwich 2004, 2-3.

dle Ages, is a Christianized version of the Buddha legend, which had reached the West through Persian and Syrian travelers. The Buddha thus had been anonymously venerated as a Christian saint throughout the Middle Ages.[106]

The scenario is entirely different with the Nestorian Christians who spread eastward quite early, settling in South India and China. During their encounters with Buddhism and Daoism, more than simply trying to translate the Christian message into local languages in order to conduct an effective evangelization, they were reconciling East and West insights with the aim of reaching a synthesis of Tao, Christ, and Buddha. It is the case with the Nestorian missionary Alopen, who reached China in 635 CE, during the Tang dynasty. In the *Discourse on Monotheism*, he draws an analogy between the theme of "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*), so decisive in Nāgārjuna and the whole *prajñā-pārāmitā* literature, and the Christian apophatic theology equating "emptiness" with God: "The holy One of great wisdom [*prajñā-pārāmitā*] is equal to pure emptiness [*śūnyatā*] itself and cannot be taken (a view thereof)."[107] In the same vein, an a-dualistic dynamism links God and the world, who, in the form of the Spirit, expresses the transcendent-immanence, permeating everything and yet being beyond everything:

> The One Sacred Spirit simply is, existing in wu wei [inaction], being in beinglessness and beyond touch. Existing in non-existence never extinguished into nonbeing. All that exists does so as the manifestation of the beingness of the One Sacred Spirit.[108]

Another line of thought that was pursued fruitfully links the Bodhisattva figure of Avalokiteśvara, who was considered in Mahāyāna circles as the embodiment of compassion (*karuṇā*) and in China was equated with the female figure of Guanyin (literally the

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[106] Cf. J. Jacobs (ed.), *Barlaam and Josaphat. English Lives of Buddha*, David Nutt, London 1896.

[107] *Discourse on Monotheism*, 58, as quoted by D. Scott, *Christian Responses to Buddhism in Pre-Medieval Time*, 94, from P.Y. Saeki (transl.), *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, The Academy of Oriental Culture, Tokyo 1937.

[108] Ibid., as quoted by P. Schmidt-Leukel, "Intimate Strangers: An Introduction," 4.

One who perceives the Cries of the World), and Jesus-Christ. Both of them functionally overlap in this field of compassion (Mt 9:13; Mk 5:19; Lk 4:18-19), as appears in the famous stele erected at His-an Fu in 781 by Mar Yazedbouzid, presbyter of the Royal City of Kumdan.[109]

It is possible to imagine that the positive way Nestorians presented Christianity in relation to Buddhism and Daoism, helped the newly arrived religion to achieve official recognition. Known as the "luminous religion" (*ching chiao*), the famous Nestorian Stele erected in 781 quotes the imperial proclamation which in 638 had authorized the propagation of Christianity, on the grounds that "we find it mysteriously spiritual and of silent operation. [...] [Therefore]This teaching is helpful to all creatures and beneficial to all men."[110] However, Nestorian influence faded away after their first suppression in 841, and it eventually disappeared completely. The historical presence of the Nestorian Christianity then sank into oblivion until the discovery and examination of the Nestorian Monument at His-an Fu in 1625. Traces of knowledge of Christ and Christianity in the early Buddhist literature are very few. Except for the presence of Jesus in the *Kālacakra Tantra* 1:154, probably a tenth-century Indian text where he appears along with other "powerful, merciless *mlecchas*" (thereby more as one of the prophets of Islam than the central figure of Christianity), there is no evidence of detailed knowledge, much less of any deep interest, until the European colonial domination.[111]

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[109] Cf. D. SCOTT, *Christian Responses to Buddhism in Pre-Medieval Time*, 94-95.

[110] P.Y. SAEKI, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, Maruzen, Tokyo 1951, 450.

[111] "Adam, Noah, Abraham, and five others – Moses, Jesus, the White-Clad One, Muhammad, and Mahdi – with tamas, are in the asura-naga caste. The eighth will be the blinded one. The seventh will manifestly come to the city of Baghdad in the land of Mecca, (the place) in this world where a portion of the asura (caste) will have the form of the powerful, merciless mlecchas" (*Kālacakra Tantra* 1:154), in A. BERZIN, *The Prophets of non-Indic Invaders in Kalachakra*, Study Buddhism, n.d., https://studybuddhism.com/en/advanced-studies/vajrayana/kalachakra-advanced/the-prophets-of-the-non-indic-invaders-in-kalachakra.

2.2 From Strangers to Enemies

The scenario changed drastically when Buddhism encountered Christianity in modern times. In the sixteenth century the Portuguese reached India, Sri Lanka, China, and Japan, along with missionaries. The confrontational approach soon took center stage due to the conviction, shared by the great majority of Christians, that their religion was superior to all others. A testament to that position was the first catechism adopted by the Korean Church from 1790 until 1932, which contained a strong refutation of the whole Buddhist doctrine.[112] In Sri Lanka, many Buddhists were persecuted and deported after the Portuguese arrival, whereas in Japan, the suspicion of an alliance between Christianity and colonial powers triggered one of the bloodiest persecutions against Christians. With the exception of Japan and Korea, the rest of the Buddhist countries became subject to the colonial powers: as for Sri Lanka, the Portuguese dominion, then the Dutch presence and, finally, the British domination; in Myanmar, the British rule (1824-1948) abolished the monarchy, destroyed the traditional Buddhist monastery education and disintegrated the social, cultural, and political systems of the country, fuelling the nationalist sentiment; France established itself in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia (Indochina); and China became the object of desire for France, Britain, Germany, and Russia.[113] In this complex scenario, it was evident to Buddhists that Christianity played a vital role in the European culture that was dominating them. As a consequence, Christianity, often simultaneously rejected and imitated, advanced in a hostile situation, which grew stronger when Buddhists became aware that the reassertion of their own identity would imply a critique of Christianity. It is thus sensible to pay attention to the intermingling within Buddhism of ethnicity

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[112] The specific Korean situation should be highlighted in this context. Korea is the only traditionally Buddhist country in Asia where Christianity has been growing along with Buddhism. One of the main reasons may well be that Korea has not been colonized by Christianity, since Christianity started as a local phenomenon. Cf. R. E. BUSWELL – T.S. LEE (eds.), *Christianity in Korea*, University of Hawai, Honolulu 2005.

[113] P. SCHMIDT-LEUKEL, "Intimate Strangers: An Introduction," 6-8; I. KODITHUWAKKU, "'In Our time'. Dialogue in Asia with Buddhism," in W. LAROUSSE (ed.), *Dialogue with Religions in Asia and Interreligious Marriage*, 19-30.

and nationalism. The country-nation-religion (*rata-jāthiyā-āgama*) narrative is an attempt, in some Buddhist countries, to reaffirm the traditional pre-colonial Buddhist identity, to the exclusion of the newcomers. At the turn of the twentieth century, both religions had transformed from strangers to enemies. The great reformer of *Theravāda* Buddhism, the Sinhalese Anagarika Dharmapāla (1864-1933), writes with his typical anti-Christian rhetoric:

> Semitic religions have neither psychology nor a scientific background. Judaism was an exclusive religion intended only for the Hebrews. It is a materialistic monotheism with Jehowah as the architect of a limited world. Christianity is a political camouflage. Its three aspects are politics, trade, and imperial expansion. Its weapons are the Bible, barrels of whisky, and bullets.[114]

At the same time, Buddhists began to adopt Christian institutional forms and methods of evangelization and study Christian teachings, in order to improve their anti-Christian polemics (the "Buddhist Bible" in Japan, or "Buddhist Cathechism" in Sri Lanka), whereas Christian writers did not miss any opportunity to assert the superiority of their tradition.[115] This attitude is still visible during the twentieth century in the writings of many Buddhist intellectuals from the countries of South and Southeast Asia. In Gunapala Dharmasiri, for instance, an apology of the central truths of Buddhism goes in parallel with an extended intellectual engagement with Christian theism.[116] Since Buddhism rejects the possibility that the

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[114] A. W. P. GURUGE (ed.), *Return to Righteousness: A Collection of Speeches, and Letters of the Anagarika Dharmapala*, Ministry of Cultural Affairs & Information, Ceylon 1991 [1965]², 439.

[115] From the Buddhist side, it is possible to think of the Young Men's Buddhist Association founded in Sri Lanka in 1898, and of its past anti-Christian apologetic pamphlets (For more information http://www.ymba-colombo.org), whereas from the Christian side, Archibald Scott's affirmation seems to be pertinent: "Christianity seems to be superior to it [Buddhism], not in the sense that the infant is superior to the embryo, but as man is superior to animal," in A. SCOTT, *Buddhism and Christianity: A Parallel and a Contrast*, Kennikat Press, Port Washington 41 [1890], as quoted by P. SCHMIDT-LEUKEL, "Intimate Strangers: An Introduction," 9.

[116] Cf. G. DHARMASIRI, *A Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God: A Critique of the Concept of God in Contemporary Christian Theology and Philosophy of Religion from the Point of View of Early Buddhism*, Lake House Investments, Colombo 1974.

soul exists, it also rejects the assertion that the soul can be an image of God. Given that the conceptual interdependency between God and soul is so fundamental in Christianity, the text maintains, a position of nonexistence of the soul implies the nonexistence of God. Paul J. Griffiths frames the discourse this way:

> Dharmasiri represents [...] one important dimension of Buddhist perceptions of and responses to Christianity: the uncompromising rejection of a metaphysics constructed around the idea of enduring substances. Neither God nor human persons can, from a Buddhist viewpoint, be regarded as such, and the development of arguments to show that there are no substances and [...] that an eternal deity cannot exist, has been an important part of the Buddhist apologetical arsenal since long before the encounter with Christianity.[117]

2.3 Toward Dialogue

Knowledge of Buddhism increased amid the era of Western colonialism, and by the first half of the nineteenth century most of the Buddhist scriptures had been translated and published in the West. Beyond the atheistic and nihilistic interpretation of Buddhism, which was prevalent in the West and was even able to influence Buddhist self-understanding, a more open and constructive communication was emerging, especially from the second half of the twentieth century, even in the face of Western forms of Buddhism. In the same vein, the process of nationalization, decolonization, and progressive politicization of many Buddhist countries, contributed, at least indirectly, to an understanding of the Church mission which displayed more sensitivity toward the process of inculturation and the promotion of interreligious dialogue, as attested by the Second Vatican Council.

The Methodist pastor Lynn de Silva (1919-1982), one of the great pioneers of Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Sri Lanka, launched in 1963 the *Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue* and the magazine *Dialogue*, to make the Gospel comprehensible to Buddhists, grounding it first in their own Buddhist categories.[118] He

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[117] P.J. GRIFFITHS (ed.), *Christianity through non-Christian Eyes*, Maryknoll-Orbis, New York 1990, 154.

[118] For more information on *Dialogue*, see www.tulana.org/dialogue/.

had realized the importance of the inter-faith encounter and its crucial relevance in the mission of the Church. As de Silva stated during the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of the Churches in 1975:

> Dialogue is urgent and essential for us in Asia in order to repudiate the arrogance, aggression, and negativity of our evangelistic crusades, which have obscured the Gospel and caricatured Christianity as an aggressive and militant religion. As a result of this, Jesus Christ appears in the eyes of people of other faiths as a religious Julius Caesar. [...] Dialogue therefore is essential in order to dispel the misunderstandings and prejudices of the past created by our negative attitude to other faith, and thereby create a healthy atmosphere where we can receive as well as give, listen as well as proclaim.[119]

Along with this new missiological outlook, which would find an initial systematization in the FABC's understanding of mission from 1974 onward, another major factor spurring Christian-Buddhist inter-faith practices has been the acknowledgement of the high moral standards and contemplative richness of the Buddhist religious heritage. Important instances of the new dialogical climate can be seen in Thomas Merton's spiritual experiences with Buddhism, Nikkyo Niwano's invitation to the Second Vatican Council in 1965 (the first Buddhist leader to be invited as founder of the Rissho Kosei-Kai's), and in the following well-known statement in the *Nostra Aetate*:

> Buddhism, in its various forms, realizes the radical insufficiency of this changeable world; it teaches a way by which men, in a devout and confident spirit, may be able either to acquire a state of perfect liberation, or attain, by their efforts or through higher help, supreme illumination (NA 2).

Similarly, Aloysius Pieris (1934-) highlights a core-to-core dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism which leads directly to

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[119] Cf. D.M. Paton (ed.), *Breaking Barriers: Nairobi 1975. The Official Report of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London 1976, 72, as quoted by P. Schmidt-Leukel, "Intimate Strangers: An Introduction," 12.

the core experience of both traditions, namely Buddhist gnosis, or "liberative knowledge" and Christian agape, or "redemptive love":

> Both gnosis and agape are *necessary* precisely because each in itself is *inadequate* as a medium, not only for experiencing but also for expressing our intimate moments with the Ultimate Source of Liberation. They are, in other words, complementary idioms that need each other to mediate the self-transcending experience called "salvation."[120]

On the Buddhist side, it is possible to identify the philosophical work of the so-called Kyoto School and its interest in Christianity as a decisive factor in the development of the modern culture. These philosophers, coming primarily from an Amida Buddhist and Zen background, acquired an excellent knowledge of a Western history of ideas and the role of Christianity within it, thus greatly contributing to the development of Buddhist-Christian dialogue. While most of them claimed that Buddhism would be better equipped than Christianity to deal with modernity, there are clear indications that both traditions have to work together in the search for adequate answers to secularization. For instance, Masao Abe (1915-2006) states that:

> When we clearly realize the notion of the kenotic God in Christianity and the notion of the dynamic Sunyata in Buddhism – then without eliminating the distinctiveness of each religion but rather by deepening their respective unique characters – we find a significant common basis at a deeper dimension. In this way, I believe, Christianity and Buddhism can enter into a much more profound and creative dialogue and overcome antireligious ideologies prevailing in our contemporary society.[121]

Another area of Buddhist interest in Christianity is the admiration for the person of Jesus, the "Living Christ",[122] whose Sermon

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[120] A. Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism*, 111.
[121] M. Abe, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," in J. Cobb – C. Ives (eds.), *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, Maryknoll-Orbis, New York 1991, 61.
[122] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Rider, London 1996.

on the Mount is "far more than enough and complete to attain eman-cipation."[123]

An additional strong motive to sustain the Christian-Buddhist encounter is their jointly felt responsibility to hear and respond to the 'cries of the world', as demonstrated by their common commitment to global organizations such as the World Conference of Religions for Peace, or by the experience of the so-called Engaged Buddhism.[124] This is precisely Dalai Lama's way of reasoning when he states:

> I am not interested in converting other people to Buddhism but in how we Buddhists can contribute to human society, according to our own ideas. I believe that other religious faiths also think in a similar way, seeking to contribute to the common aim. Because the different religions have at times argued with each other rather than concentrating on how to contribute to a common aim, for the last twenty years in India I have taken every occasion to meet with Christian monks [...] as well as Muslims and Jews and [...] many Hindus. [...] I take great interest in Christian practices, what we can learn [...] from their system. Similarly, in Buddhist theory there may be points such as meditative techniques which can be practiced in the Christian church.[125]

In recent decades, the upsurge of ethno-religious nationalism, es-pecially in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, coupled with the Christian evan-gelical expansion and its aggressive proselytism in many Buddhist countries, has exacerbated the situation and affected the peaceful re-ligious coexistence. The smell of 'unethical conversion' has come back, also affecting interreligious dialogue, seen by many as another method of conversion, whereas most nationalist movements catalyze existential insecurities of the Buddhist majority and tend to identify the religious and ethnic minorities as the culprits of their problems.

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[123] BIKKHU BUDDHADĀSA, *Christianity and Buddhism*, Sublime Life Mission, Bangkok 1967, 30.

[124] B. PURI, *Engaged Buddhism. The Dalai Lama's Worldview*, Oxford India Paperbacks, Delhi 2009; S.B. KING – C.S. QUEEN (eds.), *Engaged Buddhism*, State University of New York (Suny), Albany 1996.

[125] H.H. the XIVth DALAI LAMA, *Religious Harmony and Extract from the Bodhgaya Interviews*, in P.J. GRIFFITHS (ed.), *Christianity through non-Christian Eyes*, 165.

Regarding conversions, the document *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct*, which was signed in 2011 by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), seems to be a very substantial attempt to formulate appropriate guidelines for conduct regarding Christian witness and proclamation in a multi-religious world.[126] This position is illustrated by one of the document's key stipulations:

> Religious freedom including the right to publicly profess, practice, propagate and change one's religion flows from the very dignity of the human person which is grounded in the creation of all human beings in the image and likeness of God (cf. Genesis 1:26). Thus, all human beings have equal rights and responsibilities. Where any religion is instrumentalized for political ends, or where religious persecution occurs, Christians are called to engage in a prophetic witness denouncing such actions (7).

The consequence is that Christians are called to commit themselves to work with all people in mutual respect, jointly promoting justice, peace and the common good, and interreligious cooperation is an essential dimension of such commitment (8). Moreover, Christians recognize that the Gospel both challenges and enriches cultures. Even when the Gospel challenges certain aspects of cultures, Christians are called to respect all people. Christians are also called to discern elements in their own cultures that are challenged by the Gospel (9). Finally, Christians are to speak sincerely and respectfully, they are to listen in order to learn about and understand others' beliefs and practices, and they are encouraged to acknowledge and appreciate what is true and good in them. Any comment or critical approach should be advanced in a spirit of mutual respect, making sure not to bear false witness concerning other religions.

What about the future of interreligious relations between Buddhists and Christians? We have just observed how the many efforts made by both communities in different Asian countries toward mu-

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[126] PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE, *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World. Recommendations for Conduct*, January 28 (2011), www.pcinterreligious.org/pcid-documents.

tual recognition and creative mutual engagement are apparently at stake because of the so-called "unethical conversion." On the other hand, in some *Theravāda* places the building of an exclusive Buddhist identity has put at risk the status of the minorities. In this context, Asian Christians are called to live the interreligious engagement at a grassroots level (dialogue of life); to elaborate a formal and informal educational process capable of preparing its members for the task of dialogue; to be ready to narrate the story of Jesus, with respect and humility, without triumphalist attitude or exclusivist language; and to collaborate with other believers in a socially engaged project in order to respond to the cries of the "little ones" and to the pains of the planet, since we are all involved in one plan of salvation that comes directly from God.[127] As Pope Francis writes in his Encyclical Letter *Lumen Fidei*:

> The light of faith in Jesus also illumines the path of all those who seek God, and makes a specifically Christian contribution to dialogue with the followers of the different religions. The Letter to the Hebrews speaks of the witness of those just ones who, before the covenant with Abraham, already sought God in faith. Of Enoch "it was attested that he had pleased God" (*Heb* 11:5), something impossible apart from faith, for "whoever would approach God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (*Heb* 11:6). We can see from this that the path of religious man passes through the acknowledgment of a God who cares for us and is not impossible to find. What other reward can God give to those who seek him, if not to let himself be found? Even earlier, we encounter Abel, whose faith was praised and whose gifts, his offering of the firstlings of his flock (cf. *Heb* 11:4), were therefore pleasing to God. Religious man strives to see signs of God in the daily experiences of life, in the cycle of the seasons, in the fruitfulness of the earth and in the movement of the cosmos. God is light and he can be found also by those who seek him with a sincere heart.[128]

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[127] Cf. I. KODITHUWAKKU, "'In Our time." Dialogue in Asia with Buddhism, 27-30.

[128] FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Lumen Fidei*, June 29, 2013; 35, w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_ 20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html.

III. ASIAN MISSION

With two-thirds of the world's population, its enormous geographical extension, its ancient, rich and heterogeneous mosaic of cultures, philosophies, religions, and languages, Asia remains beyond any easy categorization. However, this can only partly explain why there are a host of opinions about mission in Asia, which is the continent with the smallest Christian population, despite the fact that the presence of Christianity is attested right from the beginning.[129] For this reason, Asia is seen by many as the new missiological frontier of the third millennium, whereas for others, mission continues to fail there due to the lack of any serious efforts to create dialogue with the Asian cultural and religious realities. However, there are also those who consider any attempt to foster interreligious encounter an undermining, so to speak, of Jesus Christ's proclamation and the Church's propagation.

1. Missio Inter Gentes

What seems clear from the foregoing discussion is that "mission is encountering a special challenge in Asia,"[130] because of the active presence of religions which sometimes intend to affirm their identity through violent means or support a climate of communal tension. Accordingly, William Burrows proposed a shift in understanding from *missio ad gentes* to *missio inter gentes*, as the beginning of a new missiological paradigm in Asia to be carried out primarily by Asian Christians.[131] Its further development would be

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[129] According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life's report 2011, Christians count for 7% of the total population of the Asia-Pacific region, equal to 13.1% of the total world Christian population. Philippines (93.1%), East Timor (99.6%), and South Korea (29.3%), are the first three countries with the most significant Christian population, whereas in China (5%) and India (2.6%), one third of the world population, the percentage is small. PEW RESEARCH CENTER, *Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population*, www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/.

[130] M. AMALADOSS, "Pluralism of Religions and the Proclamation of Jesus Christ in the Context of Asia," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, vol. 56, 2001, 1 [1-14].

[131] Cf. W. BURROWS, "A Response to Michael Amaladoss," Ibid., 15-20. The theme of *missio inter gentes* has been further developed in: J. TAN, "Missio Inter Gentes: Toward a New Paradigm in the Mission Theology of the Federation of

extremely beneficial. In particular, the following five points seem to be apt to underpin a relevant and meaningful Christian presence in Asia in terms of *missio inter gentes*.

First, Asian Catholics are deeply involved in the process of translating the Gospel or incarnating Christ in Asia in the gentle, loving, and persuasive power of the Spirit.[132] Second, most Asian Christians understand the religious tradition of Asia not as demoniac or evil, but as vehicles of God's salvific encounter with the faithful.[133] Third, overcoming the perception that Christianity is a foreign import and not properly Asian, a kind of missionary Trojan horse, is decisive for its future in Asia. Fourth, the task of the Christian "mission-*among*-the-people" model in a pluralistic society is one of proclaiming and making the world ready for God's Kingdom. It considers the ultimate reconciliation of the world's differences "as *eschatological*, one that will bring about not a unity among *religions* but a unity among *believing persons*." In addition, it also reminds us that "the religious unity of humankind will be an *eschatological* accomplishment – one in which the Spirit is active in other religious Ways."[134] Fifth, the *missio inter gentes* paradigm sees other religions not as enemies but as potential allies; they can and should collaborate and work together against any real, mutual enemies, that is, the structural power of evil and attachment to power, wealth and pleasure, any form of exploitation and selfishness, as well as the social, cultural, and political structures that uphold them. This vision of mission surfaces in the following affirmation by a group of missiologists:

> Creation itself is a self-communication of God, who is reaching out to all peoples through the Word and the Spirit in varied ways, at

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Asian Bishop's Conferences," *Mission Studies*, vol. 21, n. 1, 2004, 65-95; ID., "From 'Missio Ad Gentes' to 'Missio Inter Gentes': Shaping a New Paradigm for Doing Christian Mission in Asia": part I, *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, vol. 68, n. 9, 2004, 670-686; part II, *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, vol. 69, n. 1, 2005, 27-41; ID., *Christian Mission Among the People of Asia*, Maryknoll-Orbis, New York 2014.

[132] Cf. M. AMALADOSS, "Pluralism of Religions and the Proclamation of Jesus Christ in the Context of Asia," 5-12; W. BURROWS, "A Response to Micheal Amaladoss," 15.

[133] Cf.M. AMALADOSS, "Pluralism of Religions and the Proclamation of Jesus Christ in the Context of Asia," 1-5.

[134] W. BURROWS, "A Response to Micheal Amaladoss," 16.

various times, and through the different religions. This ongoing divine-human encounter is salvific. However, God's plan is not merely to save individual souls, but to gather together all things in heaven and on earth. God is working out this plan in history through various sages and prophets. Jesus, the Word incarnate, has a specific role in this history of salvation. But Jesus' mission is at service of God's mission. It does not replace it. Taking a kenotic form, it collaborates with other divine self-manifestations in other religions as God's mission is moving toward its eschatological fulfillment. As disciples of Jesus we must witness to the Abba and his Kingdom of freedom and fellowship, love and justice. The 'preparation-fulfillment' framework that links Judaism and Christianity cannot be projected on to other religions.[135]

Under the aegis of this new paradigm, it has become urgent to explore its full significance and profound implications for Asian Christianities. In this context, it makes a lot of sense that the threefold missiological approach of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) – dialogue with religions, cultures, and the poor of Asia – is best exemplified as *missio inter gentes* rather than *missio ad gentes*. Further, it seems extremely relevant to build on this model a new theology of mission able to respond in a creative and effective way to the challenges of contemporary post-colonial and multireligious Asia, in order to favour the genesis of Christian communities that are genuinely Asian in their way of praying, living and communicating their experience of Jesus Christ to others.

2. FABC's Threefold Dialogue as *Missio inter gentes*[136]

The birth of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) dates back to the Second Vatican Council, when, for the first time,

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[135] T. MALIPURATHU – L. STANISLAUS (eds.), *A Vision of Mission in the New Millennium*, St. Paul, Mumbai 2001, 203.

[136] Cf. M. AMALADOSS, "The FABC's Theology of Religions," in V. TIRIMANNA (ed.), *Reaping a Harvest from the Asian Soil: Toward an Asian Theology*, ATC Publishers, Bangalore 2001, 53-66; G. SABETTA, "FABC," in K. ACHARYA, M. ITURBE, B. KANAKAPPALLY, G. SABETTA (eds.), *Hindu-Christian Dictionary. Essential Terms for Inter-religious Dialogue*, 72-73; ID., "FABC's Triple Dialogue," in Ibid., 73-74; J. TAN, *Christian Mission Among the People of Asia*, 95-128.

many Asian bishops had the opportunity to meet each other. In realizing they had much more contact with churches in Europe than among themselves, they decided to better facilitate their own interaction. Since their first meeting in 1970, the FABC, with more than forty years of activity, counts nineteen members and eight associate members across south, south-east, and central Asia, and can be considered the voice of the Church in Asia. Many authors underscore its significant contribution to the development and growth of the spiritual and theological life of Asian Catholics, especially due to the immense number of documents produced by the Plenary Assembly, the highest body, and the many offices, such as the Office of Theological Concern (OTC), Bishops' Institute for Religious Affairs (BIRA), and the Faith Encounters in Social Action (FEISA), which sponsored a series of workshops in order to promote interreligious dialogue through social action.[137]

The essence of its theological approach can be grouped according to the following missiological framework: a) to embrace the immense diversity and pluralism of Asia, and to acknowledge religions as a partner in dialogue; b) to recognize that mission is rooted in a commitment and service to life in pluralistic Asia; c) to develop the spirituality, theology, and practice of harmony, in recognition that many parts of contemporary Asia are being torn apart by hatred and violence; d) rethinking the presence, action, and ecclesial genesis as a threefold dialogue with cultures, religions, and the poor of Asia; and e) as Church, to place oneself at the service of the Kingdom, since the mission seeks to bring about the Reign of God in Asia, making it visible, promoting it, and recognizing that there is no full identification between the Church and the Kingdom.

2.1 Pluralism in the Asian Context

The Asian Bishops at their very first general assembly in Taipei in 1974, starting from their experience of Asian religions and with the aim of realizing a local, indigenous, and inculturated Church, accepted these religions as "significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation," and asked: "How can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our people to Himself through

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[137] For further information about the FABC, see www.fabc.org/.

them?"[138] In the second general assembly, on the subject of prayers, they affirmed that dialogue with believers of other religions "will reveal to us what the Holy Spirit has taught others to express in a marvelous variety of ways. These are different perhaps from our own, but through them we too may hear His voice, calling us to lift our hearts to the Father."[139] Religious pluralism, as far as the FABC is concerned, is to be "rejoiced over and promoted";[140] moreover, the Church in Asia, in the course of the last two thousand years of dialogue with various people, cultures, and religions, has reached the following turning point:

> We do not ask any longer about the relationship of the Church to other cultures and religions. We are rather searching for the place and role of the Church in a religiously and culturally pluralistic world.[141]

In other words, building upon *Gaudium et spes* 22 and *Ad Gentes* 4, the Asian Bishops understand the religious tradition of Asia as "expressions of God's Word and of the universal action of his Spirit in them."[142]

To embrace this immense Asian diversity and pluralism implies the rejection of any exclusivism, and does not open the gate to any form of unbridgeable indifferentism or relativism. This philosophy is affirmed in the 1995 FABC Hindu-Christian Dialogue meeting:

> Beyond the extremes of inclusivism and exclusivism, pluralism is accepted in resonance with the constitutive plurality of reality. Religions, as they are manifested in history, are complementary perceptions of the ineffable divine mystery, the God-beyond-God. All

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[138] G. ROSALES – C.G. AREVALO (eds.), *For All the People of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*, Maryknoll-Orbis, New York 1992, 14 (FABC I, art. 14).

[139] Ibid., 35 (FABC II, art. 35).

[140] Ibid., 321 (BIRA IV/11, art. 15)

[141] THEOLOGICAL ADVISORY COMMISSION, *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, FABC Papers, n. 48, 1987, 3 (art. 08), www.fabc.org/fabc%20papers/fabc_paper_48.pdf/.

[142] G. ROSALES – C.G. AREVALO (eds.), *For All the People of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*, 344.

religions are visions of the divine mystery. No particular religion can raise the claim of being the norm for all others. We religious believers are co-pilgrims, who share intimate spiritual experiences and reflections with one another with concern and compassion, with genuine openness to truth and the freedom of spiritual seekers (*sadhakas*). In this process, we become increasingly sensitive to human suffering and collaborate in promoting justice, peace, and ecological wholeness.[143]

From another perspective, the important document of the *Office of Theological Concerns* (OTC) on theological methodology states:

> Pluralism need not always entails a radical subjectivism or relativism, in the sense of claiming that all points of view are equally valid. However, it is also true that the dawn of pluralistic, democratic, modern societies has paved the way to excessive individualism and subjectivism, and a consequent relativizing of all reality. Thus, today there are persons and groups who hold all reality to be relative. For such persons or groups, pluralism means relativism, in the sense that they claim all points of view are equally valid. Such philosophical or theological positions are to be rejected; and, in fact, all major Asian religions condemn such relativizing of reality, especially the relativizing of basic human values. However, just because certain persons and groups are misled in their search for truth, and just because they tend to perceived pluralism as relativism, or just because they tend to relativize all reality, we cannot conclude that all pluralism leads to relativism. [144]

Following Amaladoss, it is possible to say that, "Here we see the Asian Bishops acknowledging a positive role in God's design of salvation for the religions themselves, not merely finding them some true and holy elements."[145]

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[143] F.-J. EILERS, *For All the People of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996*, Vol. 2, Claretian Publications, Quezon City 1997, 157-158 (BIRA V/3, art. 6).

[144] OFFICE OF THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS, "Methodology: Asian Christian Theology, Doing Theology in Asia Today," in Ibid., 334 (art. 1.1).

[145] M. AMALADOSS, "Pluralism of Religions and the Proclamation of Jesus Christ in the Context of Asia," 2.

2.2 The God of Life

If ours is the "God of life"[146] in all its aspects, the Christian path becomes a service to life. Therefore, it is essential, as affirmed by the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly,

> to immerse ourselves in Asia's cultures of poverty and deprivation, from whose depths the aspiration for love and life are most poignant and compelling [...]; [to be in] communion with every woman and man seeking and struggling for life, in the way of Jesus' solidarity with humanity [...]; [to] join Jesus in serving life by washing the feet of our neighbors.[147]

Furthermore, the entire work of theology in Asia must be understood as a *service to life*. It has to reflect on themes relevant to the common journey of life with other peoples in Asia and to the life of Christians. Theology, then, has to start from below, from the perspective of those who struggle for life, love, justice, and freedom. Its starting point becomes the life-long faith experience of the Christian communities in the Asian contexts. Consider the following:

> Theologizing thus becomes more than faith seeking understanding, but faith fostering life, love, justice, and freedom. It is in this way that theology becomes a dynamic process giving meaning to and facilitating the Asian journey to life. It becomes part of the process of becoming and being Church in Asia.[148]

If being a Church in Asia is a call to commitment and service to life, a theology of mission that seeks to be relevant ought to be rooted in the daily life experiences of the people of Asia, and it has to be perceived and articulated not only for the benefit of the Asian people but together with them, in solidarity with their experiences. Deep immersion, being partners with all Asians as they pray, work,

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[146] G. GUTIÉRREZ, *The God of Life*, Orbis Books, New York 1991; F. WILFRED, *Asian Public Theology, Critical Concerns in Challenging Times*, Indian Society for Christian Propagation of Knowledge, Delhi 2010.

[147] F.-J. EILERS, *For All the People of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996*, 8-9 (FABC VI, art. 14.2, 14.3).

[148] Ibid., 226.

struggle, and suffer for a better human life, and as they search for the meaning of human life and progress combine to become the fertile ground to think and shape a meaningful Christian presence among the people of Asia. We might look to Tan's words:

> In emphasizing the need for commitment and service to life, the FABC perceives the myriad of rich and deeply profound experiences of life not merely as starting points for mission or pre-evangelization, but also the underlying foundation, framework, and continuous referent for doing Christian mission in the Asian milieu.[149]

The FABC vision of life is a communion of life in diversity realized through dialogue. It is a holistic life of integral development for every human person involving compassion and solidarity, care for the earth, concern for the human, and respect for the divine.

2.3 Harmony in Conflict

The underlying foundation in the FABC's theology of mission is the vision of *harmony*, a symbol authentically Christian (Trinity) yet quintessentially Asian. This vision is crucial both to communicate among such diversity and pluralism in a way that builds a project of interreligious collaboration, and to offer an answer to the widening fragmentation and division which affect most of the Asian communities. On par with "the intellectual and affective, religious and artistic, personal and societal soul of both persons and institutions in Asia,"[150] harmony is perceived as:

> The spiritual pursuit of the totality of reality in its infinite diversity and radical unity [*Samanvaya*]. Since the ultimate ground of being is unity-in-plurality, the divergent forms of reality are perceived in the convergent rhythm that harmonizes them. Harmony evolves by respecting the otherness of the other and by acknowledging its significance in relation to the totality. Consequently, the unique sig-

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[149] J. TAN, *Christian Mission Among the People of Asia*, 108.
[150] G. ROSALES – C.G. AREVALO (eds.), *For All the People of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991,* 249 (BIRA IV/1, art. 13).

nificance of every religion is gratefully and critically perceived within the context of the universal spiritual evolution of humanity.[151]

Beyond any simplistic and naïve understanding of harmony as a mere absence of strife – since "the test of true harmony lies in the acceptance of the diversity as richness"[152] –, and beyond any attempt to level off differences – "to say that all religions are the same is simplistic and does not promote honest dialogue, but to argue that religions do not meet at all would block any creative interaction"[153] –, FABC's theology of harmony envisions a venture that involves both Christians and other religious adherents. It is a life lived "with integrity and dignity, a life of compassion for the multitudes, especially for the poor and needy. It is a life of solidarity with every form of life and of sensitive care for the earth."[154] It suggests a spirituality of harmony that is perceptible at various levels:

> Harmony in oneself as personal integration of body and mind; harmony with the Cosmos, not only living in harmony with nature, but sharing nature's gift equitably to promote harmony among peoples; harmony with others, accepting, respecting, and appreciating each one's cultural, ethic, religious identity, building community in freedom and fellowship; harmony in our collaborations as a means of promoting harmony for all the world; and finally harmony with God or the Absolute or whatever we perceive as the ultimate goal of life.[155]

Naturally this task presupposes an interreligious theology, in the sense that:

> A theology of harmony cannot be formed solely within the categories of a traditional Christian theology, by reading Christian rev-

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[151] F.-J. EILERS, *For All the People of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996*, 157 (BIRA V/3, art. 6).

[152] G. ROSALES – C.G. AREVALO (eds.), *For All the People of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991,* 321 (BIRA IV/11, art. 15).

[153] F.-J. EILERS, *For All the People of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996*, 158 (BIRA V/3, art. 7).

[154] Ibid., 5 (FABC VI, art.10).

[155] Ibid., 151 (BIRA V/2, art. 3.2).

elation and applying its principles to the conflictual situation in Asia. It has to be a reading and reflection of the realities themselves, along with other religious and cultural revelations, as well as of the messages continually emerging from the conflicts themselves.[156]

2.4 Proclamation as a Threefold Dialogue

FABC's threefold dialogue is the *dialogical way* in which the Asian Churches live their missionary presence, with the aim of creating an authentic local Church that is embodied in an indigenous and inculturated people. In other words, if the Church's evangelizing mission is the building of God's Reign with Jesus Christ as its bedrock, and the construction of a Church at the service of this Kingdom, this can be brought about through *inculturation* (dialogue with cultures), *interreligious dialogue* (dialogue with religions), and *emancipation* (dialogue with poverty). The heart of mission for the Asian local Church therefore lies in the dialogical encounter between the local Church and the Asian milieu. To put it another way:

> A Church in continuous, humble, and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the great traditions – in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply, and whose history and life gladly makes its own seeks to share in whatever truly belongs to that people: its meanings and its values, its aspirations, its thoughts and its language, its songs and its artistry. Even its frailties and failings it assumes, so that they too may be healed.[157]

Further experience and reflection have led the FABC to see the correlation between these three dimensions of evangelization, such that it is thought impossible to do any one of them without also doing the rest. They are not to be thought of or lived as independent and individual activities, since in practice they integrate and support one another in a single thrust. Jesus inaugurated and promoted God's Kingdom as a community of freedom, justice, and fellowship,

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[156] Ibid., 291-292.
[157] G. Rosales – C.G. Arevalo (eds.), *For All the People of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991,* 12 (FABC I, art. 12).

against the forces of Mammon, and the promotion of this community is the goal of mission. This cannot be done without transforming cultures and collaborating with religions. The discussion is therefore not about three different dialogues, but rather about a threefold dialogue that forms a single project of *integral evangelization*.[158] The dialogical approach is thus the way of the mission in Asia. It is not simply an external methodology, since the Church itself is intimately called to become a 'community of dialogue', within and with other religions, facilitating dialogue among them. This dialogical model is a *new way to be a Church*, shaping the Christian self-identity in such a way that it would be possible to speak of an Asian Church rather than a Church in Asia. In the words of the Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly, this integral mission consists of

> being with the people, responding to their needs, with sensitiveness to the presence of God in cultures and other religious traditions, and witnessing to the values of God's Kingdom through presence, solidarity, sharing, and word. Mission will mean a dialogue with Asia's poor, with its local cultures, and with other religious traditions.[159]

In this integral understanding of mission, there is no more separation or opposition between dialogue and proclamation, nor can the threefold dialogue be regarded as a preparation for proclamation:

> Dialogue and proclamation are integral but dialectical and complementary dimensions of the Church's mission of evangelization. Authentic dialogue includes a witness to one's total Christian faith, which is open to a similar witness of the other religious believers. Proclamation is a call to Christian discipleship and mission. As a service to the mystery of the Spirit who freely calls to conversion, and of the person who freely responds to the call, proclamation is dialogical.[160]

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[158] M. AMALADOSS, "Integral Evangelization. Presynodal Reflections," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, Vol. 61, n. 4, 1997, 223-232.

[159] G. ROSALES – C.G. AREVALO (eds.), *For All the People of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991,* 280 (FABC V, art. 3.1.2.).

[160] THEOLOGICAL ADVISORY COMMISSION, *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, 15 (art. 6).

And as a consequence:

> the relation between dialogue and proclamation is a complex one. [...] We must avoid from the beginning any attempt to reduce one to the other. Some would tend to say that dialogue itself is the only authentic form of proclamation since the Church is only one among the many ways to salvation; others would tend to say that dialogue is only a step, though with and identity of its own, in the total process that culminates in proclamation. While the former approach robs proclamation of any specific meaning, the latter instrumentalizes dialogue.[161]

Proclamation is therefore understood within the context of the threefold dialogue, because if inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and liberation are the three dimensions of evangelization, then "proclamation is not a fourth dimension added to these three, but is the aspect of witness that is an integral element of all the three dimensions of evangelization."[162] Of course, Asian Christians are "not timid when God opens the door to *proclaim* explicitly Lord Jesus Christ as the Savior and the answer to the fundamental questions of human existence,"[163] as is expressed in this communique:

> But the proclamation of Jesus Christ in Asia means, first of all, the witness of Christians and of Christian communities to the values of the Kingdom of God, a *proclamation through Christ-like deeds*. For Christians in Asia, to proclaim Christ means above all to live like him, in the midst of our neighbors of other faiths and persuasions, and to do his deeds by the power of his grace. Proclamation through dialogue and deeds – this is the first call to the Churches of Asia.[164]

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[161] Ibid., 15 (art. 6.2).
[162] Ibid., 16 (art. 6.4).
[163] G. ROSALES – C.G. AREVALO (eds.), *For All the People of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991,* 282 (FABC V, art. 4.3)
[164] Ibid., 281-282 (FABC V, art. 4.1).

2.5 Servant of the Kingdom

To say that the focus of the Church's mission is *regnocentric*, with the Church as its sacrament and servant, means to recognize that the reality of the Kingdom through which God seeks to reconcile all things with himself in Jesus Christ coincides with God's plan of salvation for humanity, which reaches everyone.[165] The ushering in and establishment of God's rule in the hearts and minds of our people, thus remains the ultimate goal of evangelization. Therefore, God's Reign, having already begun and continually being realized and made present through the Spirit, is God's gift and initiative, and the Church exists for it. It is far wider than the Church's boundaries, since where God is accepted, where the values of the Gospel are lived, where man is respected, there is the Kingdom.[166]

Being both beyond and within every religion, God's Reign becomes the meeting point of all of them, because,

> The Reign of God is a universal reality, extending far beyond the boundaries of the Church. It is the reality of salvation in Jesus Christ, in which Christians and others share together. It is a fundamental "mystery of unity" which unites us more deeply than differences in religious allegiance are able to keep us apart. Seen in this manner, a "regnocentric" approach to mission theology does not in any way threaten the Christo-centric perspective of our faith. On the contrary, "regno-centrism" calls for "christo-centrism," and vice-versa, for it is in Jesus Christ and through the Christ-event that God has established his Kingdom upon the earth and in human history (cf. *Redemptoris Missio* 17-18).[167]

According to the FABC, the Asian Churches are constantly moving forward in mission as they accompany all humankind in its pilgrimage to the Kingdom. Moreover, they are challenged to work together with sisters and brothers of different faiths, and with all peo-

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[165] THEOLOGICAL ADVISORY COMMISSION, *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, 7 (art. 2.3).

[166] Cf. G. ROSALES – C.G. AREVALO (eds.), *For All the People of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991,* 252 (BIRA IV/2, art. 8.1)

[167] Ibid., 342 (OE, art. 30).

ple of good will, to make the presence of God's Kingdom more visible in Asia.[168] This inclusive nature of a Kingdom that is able to involve all people of different traditions inspired by Jesus Christ and his Good News, is firmly rooted in the following reality:

> The one divine plan of salvation for all people embraces the whole universe. The mission of the Church has to be understood within the context of this plan. The Church does not monopolize God's action in the universe. While it is aware of a special mission from God in the world, it has to be attentive to God's action in the world, as manifested also in the other religions. This twofold awareness constitutes the two poles of the Church's evangelizing action in relation to other religions. While proclamation is the expression of its awareness of being in mission, dialogue is the expression of its awareness of God's presence and action outside its boundaries. [...] Proclamation is the affirmation of and witness to God's action in oneself. Dialogue is the openness and attention to the mystery of God's action in the other believer. *It is a perspective of faith that we cannot speak of the one without the other*.[169]

3. In God, still Searchers

The aforementioned scenario makes clear that the FABC's mission theology begins from the daily experiences and challenges encountered in the Asian contexts, all the while acknowledging and also rejoicing in the religious pluralism that lies at the heart of what it means to be Asian Christians. It also encourages a multi-religious collaboration with the goal of bringing about the Reign of God, and recognizes that dialogue has the potential to facilitate a de-escalation of religious tensions, in a context often torn apart by violence in the name of religious fanaticism and communal conflict. Moreover, it has chosen to focus on healing the many social, economic, cultural, and religious fractures present in the Asian reality, by prophetically challenging and purifying the existing oppressive elements in the name of Christ and his Gospel. To describe this distinctive Asian

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[168] Ibid., 279 (FABC V, art. 2.3.9).
[169] THEOLOGICAL ADVISORY COMMISSION, *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, 16 (art. 6.5, emphasis added).

approach to mission, the FABC's Seventh Plenary Assembly introduced the new term "active integral evangelization."[170] Following Burrows, we have employed the concept of *missio inter gentes* to describe this reality. This paradigm, summarized in four propositions by Jonathan Tan, seems to be capable of guiding Asian Christians' ongoing search for God in Jesus and making qualitatively meaningful their presence in the years to come, well beyond the superficiality of quantitative growth. This seems to be an appropriate open-ended conclusion to our journey that has sought to carve a meaningful Christian presence and action within the complex, changing, and often ambiguous Asian context.

> The model of mission among the peoples moves away from a sending-receiving Church model toward a World Christianity model where there is a mutual engagement and collaborative global partnership for Christian mission beyond the North-South or Majority-Minority divide.
>
> The *orthodoxy* of the model of mission among the peoples is rooted in the *missio Dei* that seeks to usher in the universality of God's reign in pluralistic Asia, and Christians are called to imitate Jesus, the missional exemplar par excellence of the *missio Dei*.
>
> Mission among the peoples is inspired by an *orthopathos* that illumines divine empathy and solidarity with the pathos of the suffering and brokenness in the daily life experiences of the Asian peoples.
>
> Mission among the peoples is empowered by an *orthopraxis* that enables the Christian Gospel to engage with the religious pluralism of Asia in a spirit of interreligious hospitality.[171]

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[170] "For thirty years, as we have tried to reformulate our Christian identity in Asia, we have addressed different issues, one after the other: evangelization, inculturation, dialogue, the Asian-ness of the Church, justice, the option for the poor, etc. Today, [...] we no longer speak of such distinct issues. [...] These issues are not separate topics to be discussed, but aspect of an integrated approach to our Mission of Love and Service. We need to feel and act 'integrally'. As we face the needs of the 21st century, we do so with Asian hearts, in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, in union with all men and women in Asia of many different faiths. Inculturation, dialogue, justice, and the option for the poor are aspects of whatever we do." F.-J. EILERS, *For All the People of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996*, 3.

[171] J. TAN, *Christian Mission Among the Peoples of Asia*, 131.

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General index

For an Interreligious Discernment of Our Time

The religious discernment referred to in this book is not part of the theological debate, which is often confined to the "Theology of Religions or with Religions." Rather, it reflects current trends in the field, while also maintaining a distinctively Christian-Catholic perspective that does not prioritize an intrinsic natural reason. Being exhaustive on this subject is practically impossible, and a preliminary biblical approach may be unnecessary. However, one aspect requires further elaboration, namely, discernment within the interreligious sphere.

In itself, opening up discernment to the secular culture does not necessarily spill out into other thematic areas, as each religion, Christianity included, engages in different ways with the secular culture of the global West. Moreover, it should be recognized that the latter exerts deep hermeneutical pressure on religions. The secular Western culture presumes to interpret religion as if it had the key to it, seeking to confine its expressions to ancestral or traditional cultural forms, which are today considered inadequate to understand reality. Secular culture, as a global and holistic interpretation of reality, seeks to replace religion itself with a "non-religious religion," one that seeks to be free of preconceived notions. At the same time, it also strives to map out both how and in which context ancient or traditional religions can continue to operate.

The divide between this demand and an awareness of it inevitably leads to unpredictable scenarios, to resistance and perhaps even to a withdrawal, which is to this day still unthinkable.

Fr. Giovanni Rizzi, a member of the Clerics Regular of St. Paul (Barnabites), has taught since February 1997 at the Pontifical Urban University in Rome, where he is currently a Full Professor of Sacred Scripture for the Old Testament in the Theology and Missiology departments.