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Dialogue and religious plurality – challenges of contemporary society

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Abstract. Starting from the premise that man is a dichotomous being, with a material body and a spiritual, immortal soul, today's society is looking for answers to perhaps the most important question that refers to salvation, namely: how can we know today's religions, Christian and non-Christian, the authentic meaning of the human soul and implicitly its path in eternity? For such answers, in the context of religious pluralism, interreligious dialogue is imperative, through which Christian and non-Christian religions offer their answers, so that the result can be experienced by society.

Keywords. Religious pluralism, ecumenical dialogue, society

Introduction

When we talk about interreligious dialogue, we refer to bilateral and multilateral meetings between religious cults that aim to deal with some theological topics in which there is more or less consensus. In contrast to these, socio-religious dialogues are characterized by the fact that the participants are not only from religious cults, but also representatives of civil society. The Kairos of dialogue as a model of interreligious relations seems to have ended, and the voices criticizing this model are becoming stronger. The objections raised by religious leaders is that the dialogues can bring with it a lessening of loyalty to one's own religion, and the openness to other forms of faith can lead to the relativization of one's faith. However, interreligious dialogue is defined in contemporary society as "a window, which allows the participants to present an ideal image of their religion, reviewing the problematic elements and masking all the problems caused by religions"¹.

The year 1983, through the establishment of the World Parliament of Religions, brings to the fore new challenges for religious cults, in the sense that new schemes of social presence are needed. The reconfiguration of the Christian identity and, implicitly, its localization in an increasingly culturally and religiously pluralist society has become a priority. The evolution of the politico-religious reconfiguration of Christianity provided a solid foundation for the expansion of interreligious dialogue after the event of 1893, referring here to the launch of the

¹ Reinhold Bernhardt, „*Concepts and Practice of Interreligious and Socio-religious Dialogue*”, în *Religious Diversity and Interreligious Dialogue*, Anna Körs, Wolfram Weisse and Jean-Paul Willaime (Eds.), Springer, 2020, p. 314.

Christian Ecumenical Movement in the framework of the World Missionary Conference (14.10-23) June 19 in Edinburgh².

I. Religious plurality analyzed as a theological challenge today

Contemporary missiology highlights two trajectories that shed light on the positive and negative aspects of pluralization. On the one hand, it is desired to emphasize religious vitality as a source of spirituality and morality for other religions, and on the other hand, plurality is highlighted as a possibility for interreligious conflicts. Analyzed from the first perspective, religious pluralism can be seen as an enrichment of different traditions in terms of religious experience. The parallelism between the two perspectives of analysis denotes the importance of interreligious dialogue. In this context, we should think about the expression formulated by the Swiss theologian Hans Küng, that there will be no peace between nations without peace between religions; there will be no peace between religions without a dialogue between religions³.

The religious diversity in today's society raises new challenges for missiological theology such as structural reconfiguration, the development of an open theology through which interreligious dialogue can be constructive. The difficulty arises when it comes to the question of salvation. The question that imperatively requires an answer is this: what is the connection of non-Christian religions with the Christian reality of salvation?⁴

The reality of salvation can be analyzed from two perspectives: the means necessary for salvation and the salvation itself of those who come from non-Christian religions. This is one of the biggest challenges that missiological theology must answer today⁵. It should be noted that, in the missionary and apologetic theological debate, there is, first, the problem of the first means of salvation and, more precisely, the meaning and role of religions in God's plan of salvation. Seeking a connection with the experience of religious diversity as a source of spirituality, morality and harmony in the contemporary world, the emphasis has shifted from the other as a problem to the question of what can be the significance of these religions from the perspective of God's redemptive intentions for the whole world.

Christ, as the creator and savior Logos, synthesizes in His human nature assumed through incarnation, all humanity regardless of ethnicity, time, religion, culture, geography. This change has two sides. First, there is a shift in emphasis from the other as an individual to the collective level of religions. The question is no longer whether it is possible for non-Christians to be saved despite their religion, but rather how followers of different religions can be saved in and by practicing their own faith. Secondly, and related to the previously stated, the real (de facto) plurality of religions is increasingly recognized as a given (by right). This is the reason why the problem of the theological significance of religions in God's plan of salvation is raised⁶.

² **Brian Stanley**, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., Grand Rapids, 2009; **Harry Sawyerr**, „*The First World Missionary Conference: Edinburgh 1910*”, in *International Review of Mission*, Vol. 67, pp. 267.

³ **H. Küng**, „*Dialogability and Steadfastness: On Two Complementary Virtues*”, in W.G. Jeanrond and J.L. Rike (eds). *Radical Pluralism and Truth: David Tracy and the Hermeneutics of Religion*. New York: Crossroad, 1991, p. 238.

⁴ **T. Merrigan**, „*For Us and for our Salvation: The Notion of Salvation History in the Contemporary Theology of Religions*”, in *Irish Theological Quarterly* 64, 1999, p. 339.

⁵ **T. Merrigan**, „*Exploring the Frontiers: Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*”, in *Louvain Studies* 23 (1998), pp. 338-359.

⁶ **J. Dupuis**, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, New York: Orbis, 1997, p. 83.

The question of salvation arises from two traditional Christian axioms: (1) God's will for universal salvation and (2) the teaching that salvation comes only through Jesus Christ. These two axioms symbolize the tension between universality and particularity—a tension that is implicit in the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. Different answers are formulated to the question of salvation and these answers are usually classified in the widespread typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, as Christian attitudes towards other religions⁷.

What unites all three approaches is the recognition of the fact that God wants the salvation of all humanity: "Who wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2: 4) and, consequently, acted to effect salvation in history. What sets them apart, however, is their determination to approach salvation history from different perspectives⁸.

II. Exclusivist, inclusive and pluralist interpretation of non-Christian religions

Exclusivist theology does not play a pioneering role in the practice of interreligious dialogue. Both inclusivists and pluralists view exclusivism as unacceptable and intolerable given the contemporary experience of religious pluralism⁹. Like the paradigms of inclusivism and pluralism, the exclusivist direction begins with the testimony that God wants all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4), but this does not imply that all men will ultimately be saved. According to exclusivism, salvation is possible only for Christians, and those outside Christianity are excluded from salvation¹⁰. The rejection of universal salvation is the most central view of exclusivism. Exclusivist theologians reject the dogma of universal salvation primarily because, in their opinion, it has no biblical basis. In contrast, exclusivism regarding salvation is confirmed by certain passages of the Bible, such as the Gospel of John, where Christ the Savior says that He is the way, the truth and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through [Him] (John 14:6). Another text that seems to confirm exclusivism is Acts of the Apostles 4:12, where it is said that salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. Christ is thus the only mediator of salvation.

The idea that only Christians can be saved is difficult to reconcile with God's will for universal salvation and love for human nature. Moreover, it is difficult to reconcile the pessimistic analysis of culture and the pessimistic anthropology of exclusivism with the contemporary belief in human capacity, on the one hand, and the concrete experience of religious diversity, on the other. Followers of other religions do not seem to be lost or excluded from God's love. On the contrary, the spiritual and moral richness of their traditions is worth noting. Inclusivism tries to deal with exactly these considerations. First, it gives more weight to God's will for universal salvation. Second, it tries to take seriously the contemporary experience of religious vitality.

Inclusivism begins precisely with the experience of the spiritual and moral value of other religions. There is no unilateral rejection of religious pluralism here, but a nuanced position that can be summed up as both acceptance and rejection. The current and original position of the Roman Catholic theologian Jacques Dupuis, expressed in his study *Toward a Christian*

⁷ C. Geffré, „Le pluralisme religieux et l'indifférentisme ou le vrai défi de la théologie chrétienne”, in *Revue théologique de Louvain* 31 (2000), pp. 3-32.

⁸ T. Merrigan, „For Us and for our Salvation: The Notion of Salvation History in the Contemporary...”, p. 341.

⁹ Petrov, G. D. (2021). The importance of the dialogue between theology and science from an anthropological analysis perspective. *Technium Social Sciences Journal*, 24(1), 785–790. Retrieved from <https://techniumscience.com/index.php/socialsciences/article/view/4872>

¹⁰ Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality*, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2011, p. 15.

Theology of Religious Pluralism (1997) shows that inclusivism is a position in motion, trying to take seriously the experience of religious diversity as a spiritual enrichment.

While exclusivism denies a priori the salvific (saving) value of non-Christian religions, inclusivism tries to formulate a more moderate answer to the question of the relationship between Christianity and other religions. It is more moderate in the sense that inclusivists accept and reject other religions. Fully aware of the fact that only a minority of the population is Christian, inclusivists propose that an all-loving God could not have condemned most of the mankind to perdition¹¹.

According to inclusivism, salvation is possible outside of Christianity, but only because of what Christ has done through His saving work. Unlike the exclusivists, the inclusivists do not emphasize the need for personal confession in Christ as Savior, but rather the way in which the saving power of Christ is made available to people in certain times and places¹². The emphasis shifts from a personal relationship with the one Mediator of God's will for universal salvation to the mediation of that will. Thus, for the inclusivist, salvation is still Christological, but in an ontological sense, rather than an epistemological one. For the exclusivist, we must not only receive the divine and saving grace of Christ through the Holy Spirit but know and explicitly recognize that grace in the church space. For the inclusivist, the epistemological statement is not necessary; one can be saved without knowing at all about the work of Christ¹³. But the belief in God's will for universal salvation and the conviction that flows from that belief, namely that non-Christians can be saved, does not imply that inclusivists claim that all religions have equal value. Soteriologically, there is an asymmetry between Christianity and other religions. Inclusivism clings to the definitive reality of salvation in the divine incarnation. The idea that other religions are independent paths to salvation cannot be reconciled with the act of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Since the Second Vatican Council, inclusivism has been primarily associated with the Roman Catholic perspective. Sometimes it is even called the Catholic model. Regarding the attitude of the church towards other religions, the intention of the Council was primarily to promote new relations of mutual understanding and respect, as well as dialogue and collaboration¹⁴. Our Statement is of prime importance here. The Catholic Church does not reject anything true and holy in these religions. It regards with respect those modes of conduct and life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many respects from those which it holds and expounds, yet often reflect a ray of that Truth which illumines all men. Indeed, it proclaims and must proclaim Christ the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14: 6), in which people can find the fullness of the religious life, in which God has reconciled all things to Himself.

Vatican II marked an important change in the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church towards other religions. Although the Church before the Synod already recognized that non-Christians can be saved, only in the documents of the Synod did the Church express a positive attitude towards the other religions¹⁵. After the Second Vatican Council, various Catholic

¹¹ G. D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions. Signposts in Theology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986, p. 83.

¹² T. Merrigan, „*For Us and for our Salvation: The Notion of Salvation History in the Contemporary*...p. 339.

¹³ Mc. Carthy, „*Reckoning with Religious Difference: Models of Interreligious Moral Dialogue*”, in S.B. Twiss and B. Grelle (eds). *Explorations in Global Ethics: Comparative Religions Ethics and Interreligious Dialogue*. Boulder: Westview, 1998, p. 85.

¹⁴ J. Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue*, New York: Orbis, 2001, p. 59.

¹⁵ J. Dupuis, „*A Theological Commentary: Dialogue and Proclamation*”, in W.R. Burrows (ed.). *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading Redemptoris Missio and Dialogue and Proclamation*, New York: Orbis, 1993, pp. 119-58.

theologians took up the theological development and refinement of inclusivism, especially regarding two questions that the Council left open: the problem of a more comprehensive understanding of the history of revelation and the problem of the significance and role of other religions in God's plan of salvation¹⁶. One of the main theologians to be mentioned here is Jacques Dupuis, who made a major contribution to the sense of the possibilities and limits of inclusivism. Following the optimism of the Second Vatican Council regarding salvation, he tried to formulate a Christian theology of religions in which the spiritual and moral truth of other religions was truly appreciated¹⁷.

According to pluralism, the inclusivist model is problematic for two reasons. First, it assumes a confessional perspective: other religions are judged based on the criteria that belong to the Christian tradition. In the pluralistic view, this is an expression of parochialism. Furthermore, inclusivism cannot do sufficient justice to the value that belongs to each religion. Considering the contemporary experience of the spiritual and moral vitality of religious diversity, it is best to look for non-confessional criteria that allow religions to be judged equally. A second point of criticism is that inclusivism presupposes an asymmetry between religions. Inclusivism establishes the possibility that other religions are ways by which God invites men to be saved, but this does not imply soteriological parity. The other religions cannot be equated with Christ: there is no symmetrical relationship between them. Different religions are different, incomplete answers to the mystery of ultimate reality that can be experienced in different ways¹⁸. For pluralism theorists, inclusivism is a kind of unstable and incomprehensible middle position¹⁹. It might be seen as desirable, but ultimately it is incapable. It is half open and therefore half closed.

Pluralism takes as its starting point the contemporary experience of plurality, as a touchstone and norm for its reflection, and this brings this theological position to a far-reaching reinterpretation of the Christian tradition (and of other religions).

Conclusions

From the highlights it follows that the ecumenical dialogue is necessary so that all the participating religions can have access to the revealed truth. The reference of Christian and non-Christian religions to Christ God denotes the degree of knowledge of the truth that each religion shows. Through dialogue, religions that do not know God could taste the revealed truth, and the state of salvation that Christianity speaks of can be experienced by man by observing Christian moral norms, the divine commandments that are the source of virtues. For both Christian and non-Christian religions, man's aspiration for the transcendence of God cannot be suppressed, which is why the entire planet, in one form or another, is constantly searching for the truth that Christianity proves to have received through the act of revelation.

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¹⁶ Z. Slacka, *Offenbarung und Heil in den nichtchristlichen Religionen? Eine Untersuchung zu W. Pannenberg*, H.R. Schlette und G. Gäde, Lang, 2001, p. 49.

¹⁷ J. Dupuis, „The Truth Will Make You Free: The Theology of Religious Pluralism Revisited”, in *Louvain Studies* 24 (1999), pp. 211-63.

¹⁸ J. Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism...*, p. 113.

¹⁹ J. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, London: Macmillan, 1988, p. xii.

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