



THE BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT

the interreligious dialogue

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Introduction

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Bibliographical orientation

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INTRODUCTION

It is said that astronauts, contemplating the earth from space, are solely concerned in the first week about watching their own country; in the second week they identify themselves with the continent their country is in; and only from the third week onwards do they feel they belong to one and the same planet. Perhaps in their behaviour is reflected in a condensed way the process of humanity: from the tribal instinct, whose feeling of belonging to a group tends to exclude all others, towards a progressive broadening of horizons of world-wide brotherhood.

Let this image serve as an introduction to our topic.

It was not so many years ago when it was believed among Catholics that *extra Ecclesiam, nulla salus*¹ (*outside the Church, there is no salvation*), and it did not even occur to these Catholics that the Protestant and Orthodox churches might consider us the real misguided ones. We who in our opinion were simply unquestioned and unquestionable, as opposed to the *others* who were always despicable –or threatening. There was –and still is– much of the tribal instinct in this attitude. A really problematical *Catholicity* (from the Greek “kata holón”, that means according to the whole”, “according to plenitude”), since it remained limited not only to the confines of the Christian religion, but also to only one of its possible interpretations, and regrettably we have had no problem living with this immense exclusion, this contradiction with the same denomination. The questioning attitude that is lived in the interior of Christianity is made even more obvious when we go out to meet other religions since each religion tends to consider in a disparaging way the followers of other religions.

Is it vain to hope that we can progress, like those astronauts, from intra-denominational (countries) divisions to the consciousness of belonging to one big common Tradition (continents), recognising ourselves bonded as brothers by the same aspiration towards the Transcendent who is the source of universal communion? We are living new times which up to now have not featured in the history of humanity. On the threshold of the Third Millennium in which this planetary consciousness is emerging with ever-growing frequency, would religions be the precursors and leaders of the way or would they be the last to arrive? Would they be capable of *re-binding* humanity among themselves or would they be the last resort to get humans to embrace each other?

1. SOME PROBLEMATICAL QUESTIONS

We have sufficient religion for us to hate each other, but we do not have sufficient religion for us to love one another.
Jonathan Swift

1. The tribal instinct

Religions, in as far as they are cultural phenomena, are intrinsically linked to vital references of each human group, and on account of this, are loaded with an instinct for survival that tends to exclude others. In its turn, inasmuch as they are human elaborations, religious beliefs contain sophisticated elements of narcissism, of infantile omnipotence and self-centredness from which they need to be continuously purified. No religion, no belief, no confession whatever is exempt from this temptation of being self-centredly inclined. The affirmation of one's identity tends to imply a negation of others. To put a few examples, in Judaism, those who did not pertain to the Chosen People were contemptuously called *goyim* (*ethne* in Greek, from which the words *gentes* and *gentiles* in Latin and Spanish are derived respectively); Christians in their turn used in a derogatory sense the term *pagan*, which comes from *pagus* "inhabitants of the field", due to the fact that being rooted in the cultivation of fields, they were more reluctant than the urban population to embrace the Christian faith; Muslims term as "infidels" all those who do not profess Islam, etc. Fundamentalisms are the exacerbation of this tribal instinct that religions can –and are wont to– generate.

2. The temptation of the Absolute

On the other hand, religions, in their search of the Absolute, are contaminated with the instinct of appropriation of that Absolute towards whom they aspire. Inasmuch as they are human elaborations, they contain elements of power and mastery to which no religion is immune. In the name of the most sacred principles, aberrations have been and are committed and are justified by this blind greed of the Absolute. The universalistic vocation of religions is permanently threatened with converting itself into totalitarianism: when, instead of offering itself as an opportunity for all, it converts itself into an overwhelming desire of mastery over others. It is not necessary to remember such lamentable episodes of our past as the Crusades, the Inquisition, the expulsion from the Peninsula of Muslims and Jews; more recently, the political and religious fundamentalisms of Islam. The totalitarian regimes of the "Marxist religion" form part of the same phenomenon.

All this is not something that happens by chance but obeys a mechanism that is inherent in beliefs and religious institutions: in the measure in which they understand and present themselves as mediators of the Absolute, they tend to absolutise themselves.

This brings us to deal with a question that is more delicate in nature and from which no religion is exempt: the confusion between *idol* and *icon*.

3. Idol versus icon

Both terms signify “image” in Greek. *Idol* (*eidōs*) is presented as a saturated image that encloses, fixes, or is possessed. On the other hand, *icon* (*eikōn*) is made up of strokes that only insinuate, open, unfold, dispossess. The characteristic feature of an *icon* is to evoke something beyond itself. All religions are susceptible to producing *idols* or create *icons*. And that depends both on those who have the authority to develop the points referring to their religion as on those who receive them. Whether the points are to be considered as *idols* or *icons* depends always on both sides: they can be imposed as *idols* or they can be offered as *icons*, in the same way as one can submit oneself to them as *absolute* or regard them as *ways*.

The same occurs with dogmas: there can exist *idol-dogmas* and *icon-dogmas*. Dogma means “decree”, and comes from the verb *dokeō*, which means “to think”, “to appear”. Dogmas are converted into idols when they are regarded as definitive and closed formulas; When instead of them being considered as fingers indicating the moon, they are taken for the moon indicated by the fingers. The words, as the images, can open or close; they can be springs opened in the rock of thought that carry people to the infinite sea of Divinity or present themselves as recipes saturated with meaning that block the dynamism of personal experience. All images, all doctrinal formulas are cultural and conditioned historically. Taking into account this relativity does not invalidate them, but puts them in place: human babbling about a Reality that is always open to being unveiled, never possessed, and which escapes being possessed.

4. The one irrenounceable value of each religion

In the same way as belonging to planet Earth does not exclude, but rather requires the particular identity of each country and each culture, the embracing of religions requires the singularity of each religion, the richness of its historical and cultural baggage. It is not a question here of simply accepting the vagueness of a *paella of religions*, from which each person serves himself what he wants. This would do no more than reinforce the egocentric tendency that is fomented by the consumer society. The salvific (soteriological) character of religions resides precisely in its capacity to free us from this self-centredness that devours us. Every religion presents itself as a compact *whole*, that one does not create according to one's liking but is received from Tradition. A Tradition that has been in the sedimentation and maturing process over many generations, and which has been purifying this *whole* from its own interior. Taking loose elements from different religions is a delicate affair because it supposes the disintegration of those elements from their context, with the risk of emptying out their content, since they take their meaning from the way they are set in their own system. This said, a dialogue between religions would suppose a fecund interchange for all, sharing aspects of the unfathomable Mystery that could enrich the different Traditions. This requires, however, that the different parties involved indulge in careful and accurate discernment.

Before passing on to speak of the fruitfulness of this dialogue and of the attitudes that are implied, let us try to situate our own Tradition in relation with this meeting-dialogue.

2. CHRIST AND THE UNIVERSAL VOCATION OF CHRISTIANITY

Christ is Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the foundation and keystone of the cupola; Plenitude and filling. He it is who consumes and gives everything its consistency. Towards Him and through Him, the interior Life and Light of the world, through effort and agony, the universal convergence of all created spirit is given. He is the only precious and consistent Centre, which shines in the future culmination of the World.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin²

1. The tribal antecedents of Christianity

a. The consciousness of Israel as the Chosen People

Christianity traces its roots way back to the religious experience of some nomadic tribes who had undergone slavery in Egypt. Liberation from this slavery and the successive alliances that God formed with them were considered as predilection, with the concurrent danger of giving it an exclusivistic and narcissistic turn. The people of Israel were permanently tempted to interpret their being elected as a privilege, as a power that gave them superiority and mastery over other nations. The message of the prophets was always to remind the people of Israel that the choice was not a right, rather it was a gift that had to be transformed into service, into testimony before other nations (Ex 22,20-23; Is 2,2-5; Jer 7,5-7; Zach 7,9-10; 8,20-23).

When Jesus is baptised in the Jordan, He is made aware of being the Privileged Son of the Father (Mt 3,17). In the Gospel of Luke, following this theophany, the genealogy of Jesus is given which goes back to Adam (Luke 3,23-38). In doing so the intention is to indicate that the choice of Jesus as the Privileged Son does not suppose the exclusion of other human beings, but rather a radical inclusion of all of them in Him. The temptations of Jesus in the desert express this innate tendency of the human being to possess for himself what is really destined for all. The life of Jesus would go from stripping Himself from one thing to another: the more He feels He belongs and proceeds from the Father, the more He feels Himself a Brother of all. His death beyond the walls of Jerusalem manifest the Messianic overflowing, beyond the limits established by Israel, invalidating for all times the claims of any nationalistic religion.

b. The true God and false gods

In the Christian subconscious there is an another element that has been inherited from Judaism that poses a problem for the interreligious dialogue: the God of Israel is always very jealous of other gods (Ex 20,3, 34,14; Dt 6,1-7,6; Jr 25,6; Sal81,10). The Torah considers idolatry as the worst of sins, to the point of being punished with death (Ex 22,19; Dt 13,7-16; 17,3-7). Idolatry is identified with the adoration of foreign gods who are perceived as false. This gives Judaism a toughness towards other religions which has been inherited by Christianity and also Islam.

Nevertheless, we understand that the Biblical message regarding the universal character of Yahweh does not suppose a disqualification of the religious experience of other nations, but is a call to the fidelity of Israel to its own history of the alliance with God. The insistence of the Law and prophets on the exclusive character of Yahweh stems from a very precise pedagogy: to show that the one and transcendent God is not a projection of human desires that can go on manipulating the divinity or keep on changing divinities by virtue of their own cravings (Psalms 81, 12-13), but that God is the ultimate term of human desire which is being transformed from possessiveness into abandonment, confidence and communion. That is to say, what the Bible reveals is not that the gods of other nations are false, but what makes them false is the object-like, possessive, and magical-instrumental relationship that is maintained with them.

2. The oneness and universality of Christ

The choice and the unique character of the God of Israel acquire new traits in Christianity. This happens through a series of unprecedented happenings: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Through the Paschal experience, the disciples began to discover that the choice of a few –the people of Israel– was being converted into a choice for all.

On the other hand, the Paschal experience was of such intensity, such significance, that it made the first Christians say that God had manifested Himself “once and for all” (*ephapax*, Rm 6,10) in Christ Jesus. Since then, the Paschal experience is a never-ending source of revelation: we as followers of Jesus understand that in His concrete and historic person, God has manifested Himself as total donation, unbounded love.

The Early Church needed four centuries to elaborate its comprehension of Jesus Christ starting from a prayerful reflection. And it did this with the terminology of its time, taken from Greek philosophy. Gradually the formulation of the Trinity God was arrived at, which tried to express that the Mystery of God revealed in Jesus manifests itself as a Communion of relations between an original and personal Nucleus that creates unceasingly –what we call *Father*– a receptacle, a bowl, that receives this infinite pouring out –what we call *Son*–, and an incandescence of this relation that flows between the two and is expanded “outside” of themselves –what we call *Spirit*.

At the same time, the following paradoxical formulation was arrived at: the plenitude of God was made flesh in the person of Jesus through the Logos, fully combining in Himself both the human and divine natures. To say it in other words, in Jesus Christ the meeting of two donations is given, two radical strippings (*kénosis*, Phil 2,7): the divine and the human. Both are made One because both empty themselves out to give way to the other. What on the Cross appears an annihilation, is revealed as maximum plenitude: authentic Life, the New Humanity begins on the Cross, where the divine (vertical axis) is united with the human (horizontal axis) in a meeting point which is a Vacuum made of Light. This led Maxim the Confessor (VI-VII century) to say that all things are pierced through by the cross, inasmuch as they are redeemed from being closed in to themselves³. And this is given “once and for all” and for all Humanity, not only for one people or one culture in particular. The risen Christ is the new Man (1 Cor 15,45; Rom 5,14), through whom all things are reconciled with God (Col 1,20). The missionary dynamism is contained in the founding experience of Christianity: the communication to all nations of the Good Tidings of the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Word of God in a human being, so that through Him, humanity can be transformed into God. As the Patristic

saying goes: God was made man so that man could be made God.

But as a result of that, Christian faith finds itself in a tension that is not easy to resolve: on the one hand, it stems from the concrete and historical person of Jesus of Nazareth, circumscribed in time and space, the bearer of a particular message. On the other hand, by affirming that He is the New Adam and that in Him resides the plenitude of the Divinity (Col 1,19; 2,9), this particularity acquires a universal reach. This conflict between the historical particularity of Jesus of Nazareth and the all-time universality of Jesus Christ manifests itself when confronted with the message of other religions: with Islam for example we have the problem of a new revelation, chronologically later than that of Christ. With Hinduism, another problem occurs: the avatars. Avatar literally means “to descend”. In Hindu tradition, God “descends” every time the world needs Him⁴. Traditionally, ten avatars are attributed to *Vishnu*. God is infinite, and for them, to think that with Christ no further possibility of God descending again appears a very poor concept of Divinity. They can accept that Jesus could be one of the “avatars” but not that He be the one and only. We perceive here the difficulties of language and the inadequacy of the equivalence of terms, because the Christian concept of *incarnation* does not correspond exactly to the Hindu term of *avatar*. Avatar has a sort of mythical/symbolical character and approaches more a *manifestation of God*, that could be multiple, as opposed to the concept of Christian *incarnation* that is linked to the historical, one and irrepeatable character of the person of Christ.

Even so, from this perspective *the point could be raised whether the action (oikonomía) of the Word is restricted to the event of Jesus of Nazareth's incarnation; whether this action that was fully fulfilled in Him could also mean that it was not completely exhausted in Him*. That is to say, it is not impertinent to wonder if there is a non-incarnated dimension of the Son, –the *Logos asarkos*– that carries on after its incarnation in Jesus⁵. The symbolical withdrawal of Jesus in the Ascension would seem to signify that in a certain sense, the concrete historical presence of Jesus Christ must be transcended: “It is suitable that I go away, because if I do not leave, the Defender will not come to you” (John 16,7). The Defender is the Holy Spirit, the other arm of the Father, according to the expression of St. Ireneo.

It is important to realise that *Christ* signifies *The Anointed One*, “He who has received the Spirit”. That is to say, in the term *Jesus Christ* the action and presence of the Son and of the Spirit are jointly mentioned. A Spirit that acts in the world before the incarnation of the Word and carries on acting after that. It is the Creator Spirit that flew over the original Chaos (Gen 1,2), giving shape to the shapeless waters. Christ is the completed Form of God, his full Image (John 1,18 14,9), while the Spirit is the dynamism which shapes History towards this Christic Form that is latent in all forms. In mystic tradition, not just one but a successive engendering of the Word is conceived, through the full aperture to the action of the Spirit. So says Master Eckhart: “The Father begets His Son unceasingly. And I say even more: the Father begets me inasmuch as His Son and the same Son (...). All that God achieves is One, on account of which, He begets me inasmuch as His Son, without any difference”⁶. This interpretation of the action of the Spirit leaves the field open for other manifestations of the Word. Not in vain is Master Eckhart one of the reference-bridges with the religions of the East.

Speaking of the interreligious dialogue, the possibility of that type of interpretation has been emphasised.

3. Different theological trends vis-à-vis the pluralism of religions

In recent years, within Christian theology –both Catholic and Protestant– different positions have been taken vis-à-vis the pluralism of religions: ranging from the most closed so-called *eclesiocentric* theology, of an exclusivist nature, to the most open so-called *theocentric* or also *pluralistic* theology. Between the two extremes is located the *Christocentric* position.

Eclesiocentric theology represents the classic stand of the Church up to Vatican II; there is “salvation” only if there is explicit recognition of Christ and the sacramental incorporation in the Christian community. This position, in reality, was given only on the theoretical plane, since in practice the existence of a *baptism of desire* was accepted, and it was also admitted that this desire could even be merely implicit.

On the other extreme, authors of the *theocentric* or *pluralistic* trend sustain that Christ is *the way*, but is not the only way to reach God, and so conceive Christianity as one more among religions.

The *Christocentric* position is more complex: on the one hand, it maintains the affirmation of the unique and universal character of Christ, but not in the sense that one has to explicitly admit it to be able to participate in Him; rather the irrepeatable event of Christ, that took place for all humanity, shapes and illumines the other religions and attitudes from within themselves. We are talking of a conception similar to that held by Karl Rahner with his expression of “anonymous Christians”. This position, of an inclusivist nature is branded by some as absorptionism. *Christocentrism* is not absorptionist if it is combined with what could be called *pneumatocentrism*. That is, the consciousness of the fact that what makes Jesus of Nazareth universal is his Christic character, that is to say, the action of the Spirit on Him, that is extended to every human being.

However, more recent reflections⁷ feel intuitively that these different positions (*exclusivist*, *inclusivist* and *pluralistic*) are all inadequate for the interreligious dialogue, because they start with pre-conceived postures that struggle between absolutism and relativism. And so one talks of a theology *in dialogue* which implies a new method of a theological act that is yet to be discovered and practised. We will return to this question further ahead in the last section.

In any case, an interreligious dialogue will help us to take account of the inadequacy of the formulation of the Christian mystery, which is always made starting from a very concrete terminology and context. And for this reason, in addition to the previous questions, one has to take into account the cultural mediations that have played their part in the Christian message.

4. Cultural adaptation

The Church faces today a situation that is similar to the one Paul and the early Christian community were faced with: whereas they, at that point in time, had to plan how to transmit the nucleus of faith without having to go through Judaism, we today are faced with the challenge of how to transmit the nucleus of faith to other cultures without having to make use of the Greek-Latin legacy. It is necessary to insist, however, that the first venture of cultural adaptation was made in Hellenic Judaism when in the III century BC, the Jewish community decided to translate the Bible to Greek for the Jews of the Diaspora. We are referring to the famous translation of the *Seventy*, so called because this difficult task of translating without

betraying –*tradutore, traditore*– was confided to seventy-two scholars. In this translation several questions of capital importance were at stake: What Greek term could convey the Hebrew notion-experience of God? *Yahweh*, the unpronounceable tetragram, was not and could not be translated, but the term *Theos* was taken to say *Elohim* or *El* – of the same Semitic root as *Allah*. *El* literally means “power”. *Theos*, on the other hand, comes from *dev*, the Indo-European root to point to divinity, that signifies “to shine through”. *Theos* has a resonance of *Zeus*, the highest god of the *pagan* pantheon. Using this term implied, in some measure, getting the two conceptions of God closer together: the Semitic, of a more monolithic and transcendent nature, and the Indo-European, more polysemic and immanent. Hence Torres Queiruga spoke of *in-religionation*⁸ when referring to the fact that conversion to another religion should not imply the complete abandoning of one's own, but that the new adopted religion should be enriched by the baggage of the previous one.

Whatever the case, to translate is to adapt culturally, and to adapt culturally implies impregnating oneself with the explicit and implicit values of the cosmivision that a language embodies. The word that denotes God in each language is loaded with connotations of one's own religion and culture⁹. So, for example, it will surprise us, Christians of the West, that Christians of the Arab language call God *Allah*. How else could they call Him?

In their day, early Christianity was capable of adapting itself to the Hellenic culture prevalent at that time. Using Hellenic categories, it transformed them to elaborate the principal dogmas of our faith. Today, when we have to go to meet other cultures and evaluate them as such, we have begun to realise that there are other symbols and formulations that can be as suitable as *our own* to contain the message of the Paschal mystery. This would have a double implication: on the one hand, those symbols will be transformed by the content of the Gospel, as happened with the Greek culture, but on the other hand, we would be able to express and speak in an explicit way of aspects of the faith that have not been formulated before. *Cultural adaptation* is a challenge that the Church has become aware of only recently. Michel de Certeau spoke of an *Abrahamic voyage*: To divest ourselves of perennial references (“abandon your country and the house of our fathers” – Gen 12,1) so as to go in search of formulations that are more suitable to our interlocutors¹⁰.

The formulation and symbolic expression of the Christian faith with other categories that are not western would require great efforts and discussions, tempered by contemplation, marked by tentative moves, excesses, failures and successes, similar to what happened in the first centuries of Christianity. But as then, we are not alone: “the Spirit will keep on guiding us to the full Truth” (John 16,13). Why should we fear this adventure? On the contrary, why should we not love it with all that it implies: promise, in-depth growth, enrichment of the faith, discovery of more sides of one and the same Diamond? Because no human word can fathom the width, length, height and depth of the love of God revealed in Christ Jesus, that love which surpasses all knowledge” (Eph 3, 18-19).

5. Difference between *Christian* and *Christic*

But what most falsifies the Christian message –as any other religious credo –is the attitude with which it is presented: when more than being offered as an opportunity for everybody, it is converted into a watchword to be imposed on others. The true spiritual experience is not held but is received; is not forced on but is offered and is propagated by the testimony of one's life.

That is to say, we do not possess the truth but rather we are possessed by it. The fact alone that we profess ourselves Christians does not bring us farther or nearer Christ and His message than all those who have never heard anybody speak about Him but who are faithful to their own beliefs. The problem arises because we confuse book-knowledge of a message or a concept with personal-knowledge of the same or better still living the message. With “book-knowledge”, we imagine we hold all the possibilities of knowing the message, we settle down in this knowledge and we end up waving it as a trophy. And when transmitting it, we hand it out as though it were something “ours”, something that invades and competes with other creeds. And this could be an idolatrous way of relating oneself to and presenting Christ. Charged with this ambiguity, for centuries the task of “evangelisation” has been carried out, when quite often it has not been more than a religious and cultural colonisation at the service of a western depredating power.

And we must insist on the fact that we do not possess Christ but rather are possessed by Him, and being His possession we are dispossessed of ourselves. Because Christ is the emptying out of God made incarnate, and it is perversion to take possession of Somebody who reveals God as dispossession of Himself. Faith in Christ is not a concept but the experience of a Meeting which opens an inexhaustible dynamism of identification with Him and this leads to a progressive dislodging of all forms of “I-ness” and “my-ness”. In this sense, Christ is not the founder of a new religion that has to be exalted or defended but Christ reveals a way of living, a way of being in the world which is the road of humanisation and divinisation at the same time. One should try to live like Christ, live in Christ, make himself Christ, in stead of talking *about* Him.

Having arrived at this point, we will have to distinguish three different questions¹¹:

— *a.* The Christian experience of faith, arising from a personal Encounter with Christ which each Christian is called to recreate and go deep into. A mystical experience that at no moment in time is attained or reached but contains a never-ending dynamism of transformation and knowledge¹². *All religions contain an original and basic nucleus which is what gives it its unifying strength.* Christianity emerges simultaneously, then, from two sources: in the first place, from the transmission of the Paschal experience of the first disciples, of their personal encounter with the Risen Christ; and at the same time, from the personal experience of each Christian with Christ, which is what recreates Christianity. When this personal encounter with Him is produced, previous co-ordinates become radically altered, as happened paradigmatically with St. Paul (Acts 9; Gal 1,11-24). This mystical experience cannot be imposed. It can only be desired and offered, and in any case, with fear and trembling, it should be aroused and communicated to others by personal testimony.

— *b.* Distinguishable from this experience of a personal and basic Encounter is the Christianity that is presented to us in its form of dogmatic reflection, symbolical expression and the institutional configuration of that basic experience. That is to say, Christianity in its “institutional” aspect in what refers to its set up, its social and cultural interpretation of the life, message and Paschal experience of Christ, that was first forged in the cradle of the Mediterranean and later extended to the whole of the West. The problem area in the interreligious dialogue arises precisely from these other aspects and interests of Christianity that clash with the institutional paraphernalia of other religions.

— *c.* Finally, it is necessary to speak of “the Christic”, that is, the specific contribution of what

was revealed by Christ to the world but divested, in the measure it is possible, of all those historical and cultural trappings. Christ has revealed that receiving and giving to another is the way of being of God and the most human way of being. In Christ, God reveals Himself as an infinite giving away of Himself, as a radical going out of Himself. God's being manifests itself as radically ecstatic: a permanent offering of Himself for love, both in His "interior" (the so-called intra-Trinitarian relations") as well as in His "exterior" (creating). *The Christic message is the revelation that the human being reaches his plenitude when he participates in this Divine ecstatic way of being.*

Understood in this way, the *Christic* perspective does not imply an absorption of other religions in one single formulation and expression of the Mystery, but provides a key to interpreting a religion and an impulse to the authenticity of each of these religions. In this sense, we repeat, it is possible to say that Christ does not propose a new religion but puts dynamism into and brings to its culmination what is already present in each of the religions. It is a question of deepening and extending what the Patristic called the *logoi spermatikoi* (the "seminal reasons") of the Hellenic culture: in all nations, in all cultures there are latent seeds of the Word. Christ, the fully manifested God's Giving away of Himself, does nothing else but permit the recognition and the development of these seeds. From our Christian perspective, each religion is like the Old Testament: Christ does not annul but completes each human path towards God and towards our brothers.

We can say that the *Christic* is the criterion of discernment that Christianity offers to other religions: what saves us and what makes us divine is the capacity to open ourselves out to the Other – God as the source of experience of being itself and to the other –*the sacrament of the brother*. What's more, God reveals Himself *in* and identifies Himself *with* the face of the brother (Mt 25, 31-46). "In the dusk of life, we will be examined in love," says St. John of the Cross¹³. This inclusivist comprehension of what is *Christic* in other religions is not absorptionism but a radical respect for *the other*, and at the same time, viewed from the perspective of faith, supposes too the offer of plenitude. The universality of Christ lies in the fact that it is already latent in everybody and in everything ("through Him and with Him in mind, everything was made" (Col 1,16), and this the historic Christ does nothing else but reveal and give a thrust forward. In this way, we believe that there is no contradiction in believing, on the one hand, that Christ plenifies other religions, and on the other, affirming that this Plenitude is already present in them and that it does not come from the outside.

As Christians, we believe that the Peak has descended to the plains and that a Path has been made, not to annul other paths but to make them easier. In the same way, we must try to maintain two affirmations simultaneously: that Jesus, the Christ, inasmuch as a historical particularity, is a path alongside other paths, and at the same time, that Christ, inasmuch as Transhistoric Reality, is Meta, Omega, Meeting Point of all paths, among which is included, as one more, the historical and cultural path of Christianity.

From this perspective, we are inclined to believe that conversion does not consist in changing one's religion –religion understood as a cultural construction, dogmatic elaboration and institutional enclosure– but in renovating the heart (*conversio cordis*), not concentrating on itself but looking for its authenticity in the depth of its Tradition. Because every religion is a path towards the single Peak, a radius of the circumference that leads to the one single Centre. In that Depth, in that Peak, an infinite Dimension of Love and of Light is opened, the Christian

name of which is the kenotic Face of God, Christ Jesus.

Every culture has elaborated its own symbols and formulations of the Mystery, and perhaps the first conversion should be that of respecting and admiring the wisdom and beauty of those other accesses. It is from this perspective that the interreligious dialogue takes on its full relevance.

3. DIALOGUE AS AN ATTITUDE

With illumination, all is of the same family. Without illumination, all is separated from all. Chinese poem of the XIII century

1. Respect for the other

Meeting and interreligious dialogue imply first of all an integral attitude of respect for the *other*. The following is a description by Gandhi, martyr and confessor of this cause:

“It is not incumbent on me to criticise the Scriptures of other religions or to point out their defects. Rather it is my privilege –and it should be so– to proclaim and practise the truths that there are in them. I should not, then, criticise or condemn questions of the Koran or of the life of Mohammed that I cannot understand but I should take advantage of the opportunities that present themselves to me to express my admiration for those aspects of his life that I am capable of appreciating and understanding. Before questions that offer difficulty, I try to see them through the eyes of my Muslim friends, and try at the same time to understand them with the help of their specialists who comment on Islam. It is only through this reverent approach to other beliefs different from my own that I can practise the principle of equality of all religions. And at the same time, it is simultaneously my right and my duty to point out the defects of Hinduism with the idea of purifying and keeping it pure. However, when a non-Hindu criticises Hinduism indiscriminately, reviewing all its defects, he manifests only too clearly his own ignorance and incapacity to adapt to the Hindu point of view. He distorts his vision and warps his judgement. And so, it is my own experience that the criticism proffered by non-Hindus have helped me discover the limitations of my religion and at the same time have taught me to be prudent before venturing to criticise Islam or Christianity and their founders”¹⁴.

We think that the extension of this quote is justified for the exquisite delicacy of its content. The posture that is manifested here is the radical respect for *the other*, before whom neither exclusion nor absorption is shown, on the contrary a reverential welcome is given. It starts from the conviction that the other is not only not a hindrance but is in reality a blessing for me, since he complements me. At the same time it is evident that in order that there be “otherness”, there must be identity. That is to say, for richness to exist in the dialogue, each party must approach the other from the stance of what one is oneself. The problem lies in that the identity, as we have already pointed out, usually contains many elements of self-affirmation and narcissism. And it is not sufficient that one should be aware of that but one should be permanently working on this, purifying it, through that openness to and welcome of what is “different” from oneself.

But we note that there is more to it. Respect for the other does not consist only in courteously putting up with the difference but in reaching the conviction that the difference is a blessing for

all. And that this difference has even a theological value, in the sense that it permits one to approach even more closely the mystery of God, in as much as it permits access from more angles.

2. Theological value of difference

The oriental parable is well known of an elephant surrounded by five blind men¹⁵. One of them, touching one of the elephant's legs, thought he was before the pillar of a temple; another, holding his tail, thought he had a broom in his hands; another, feeling his stomach, felt that he was under a huge rock; another, putting his hand on the trunk, was frightened, thinking he was touching a snake; and the last blind man, feeling his tusk, thought of a branch of a tree. And all of them began to discuss among themselves about the accuracy of their perception and the infallibility of their interpretation.

This parable, in its apparent simplicity, sheds light in three ways on our theme:

- 1. In the first place, it refers to the analogical character of religious knowledge: identifications (leg-pillar; tail-broom; stomach-rock, etc.), without being totally wrong are clearly insufficient. An insufficiency that causes in us tenderness and compassion, which is what God must feel when He hears our dogmatic approximations. In classical theology it was already affirmed that in the analogy about the knowledge of God, dissimilitude far outdoes similitude.
- 2. Secondly, it shows the conditioned character of all interpretation: we recognise reality from the knowledge we have of other things, making all perception to be conditioned by previous experiences and by the interpretative canons that give us our own references.
- 3. Finally, it shows that total Reality is more, much more, than the prolongation or expansion of its parts. It is not a question of relativising the truth of all religions, but of believing that there is one higher Truth that can never be attained by our partial truths.

However, the temptation of every religion is to believe that it alone, in virtue of a supernatural Revelation, has the global vision of the *Elephant*, and that all the others, in case they are granted to have some truth, only perceive some one of its parts. If all religions are prone to think in this way, it means in reality, that we have not overcome the position of the blind men. From an anthropological perspective, no religion can self-appoint itself as a meta-religion that can look at other religions as from above downwards. Religions are points of view. Only God is the Point from which everything is viewed. Even so, one detects the phenomenon of a sort of *elevation* being produced in the interior of every religion, with a concomitant theological elaboration, that tries to position itself in a *meta-place*. This change of perspective is only legitimate if it is accompanied by a change of attitude: it is a *meta-place* if it does not compete with other meta-places, but which allows itself to be mutually observed without competing, without devouring or disqualifying others; on the contrary, being thankful, having mutual respect, trying to perceive and receive others as complementary.

With this attitude we can enrich each other by the specific way each religion approaches the

Absolute or the Transcendental Reality: among monotheistic religions, Judaism contributes the experience of a Being who, though unnameable is personal, who is faithful and who agglutinates a certain People, re-establishing continuously His alliance with them; Islam offers a God who transcends all image and who orders life around certain prescriptions accessible to everybody, making a person's work-day revolve around five daily prayer services; Christianity, the conception of a God who is communion of ecstatic relations and who has so gone out of Himself that He has become one of us, revealing the sacred character of the brother. Among oriental religions, Hinduism contributes multiple manifestations of the Divinity, and at the same time provides concrete methods to attain divine essence which is in all human beings (*atman*); Buddhism contributes, through Silence, a purification of all mental conceptions of God and at the same time helps people to free themselves from the different forms of pain through the dissolution of the ego; Taoism contributes the notion of the Vacuum, as a path of plenitude, through spontaneous action; Confucianism, the veneration of social order and respect for the memory of one's ancestors, at a time when we have impoverished our relation with the world on account of our utilitarian compulsiveness; the so-called *animist religions* contribute their capacity to perceive the "soul" of things; and at a time when the Planet is threatened with ecological devastation, the American-Indian religions make their contribution with their veneration of Mother Earth (*Pacha Mama*) and the sacred value of nature.

Among other contributions and mutual enrichment, one could include too what the non-believer's posture has contributed to religions: their acceptance of finitude, the option for what could be called the "contingent-concrete" –or *the god of small things*– which help religious beliefs to purify themselves from aspirations and dreams that distract their attention from the concrete. Agnosticism teaches a path of humility and apophatic modesty, as suggested by Wittgenstein: "What is truly important is precisely that which we cannot speak about". At times, our excess of words about God is what draws us away from our contemporaries who live from day to day, trying to be honest in their *re-binding* with everyday things.

4. FOUR SPHERES OF DIALOGUE

Now my heart has been converted into a receptacle of all religious forms: it is a meadow of gazelles and a cloister of Christian monks, temple of idols and Kaaba of pilgrims, tablets of the Law and Sheets of the Koran.

Ibn Arabi¹⁶

Never before up to the present day was there given such opportunity for the holiness of religions to get in touch with people, enabling religions each in their own way to fertilise the Earth. People have recently begun to reflect on this and four spheres of this mutual fertilisation have come to be distinguished: that of daily living together, that of a common cause in favour of peace and justice, that of theological reflection, and the sphere of prayer and silence in common¹⁷.

1. Daily living together in a plurality of beliefs

In a tense world such as ours, where differences are regarded with distrust and all that is “other” is looked upon with suspicion, the first testimony that religions can give would be to manifest themselves as channels of respect and mutual welcome. They should show that the authentic religious experience generates the capacity to open oneself up to the sacrament of the brother as different from me. *Religion*, then, as an impulse of “*religation*” (re-binding) between human beings, as capability of tightening bonds of union between neighbours, with newly arrived immigrants of other creeds, sharing the same staircase, taking the children to the same schools, enjoying the same leisure, the same parks... Religions are called upon to testify to the fact that an authentic spiritual experience is a purifying and transforming fire that makes one get out of oneself, relativises one's “I-ness” and “my-ness”; that the experience of God is a fountain of tenderness and humanity that fertilises from within human living together, giving it an unsuspected quality.

2. Common cause in favour of peace and justice

On a more elaborate plane, religions are called upon to jointly promote peace and justice in the world. Religions should be prophets in this field, instead of feeling themselves alien as though the cause of the children of Heaven were not the same as the cause of the children of the Earth. A great part of their credibility lies in showing how the bond (*religio*) with the Absolute is the source of involvement with everything human. What's more, it is incumbent on them to show that from the very bowels of religious experience springs a torrent of tenderness for the smallest and unprotected, and a concomitant passion for peace and justice. In this sense, Paul Ricoeur spoke that the Church should give testimony of the Law of superabundance¹⁸, that is to say, show a preferential choice for the most disadvantaged people.

In this testimony and common cause, each religion is called to contribute the specificity of its own holiness, the richness of its way of proceeding. So, western religions will contribute with

audacious and prophetic words, with efficient media proper to its culture, while oriental religions will contribute its serenity and its wisdom. As testimony of the latter, hear the words of a Cambodian Buddhist monk:

*“The suffering of our country has been profound.
From this suffering springs forth great tenderness.
Tenderness puts peace in one's heart.
A pacific heart gives peace to the human being.
A pacific human being brings peace to the family.
A pacific family establishes peace in the community.
A pacific community brings peace to the nation.
A pacific nation establishes peace in the world”¹⁹.*

This text is a wonderful exponent not only of the East, but of what religious experience is able to contribute to the cause of peace and of justice: to facilitate inner reflection, reconciliation and pacification of the heart as strength and dynamism for social reconciliation. The meeting of Assisi (1986) convened by the Pope to pray for world peace with representatives of the great religions of the planet was an inspired gesture of the path we should take to advance ahead. In this sense religions are called to boldly promote joint causes. For example, how great it would be for Muslims and Christians to join together with more courage in Spain and in Europe to defend the rights of immigrants; and that we should do this from common welcome and prayer centres. In reality, these centres already exist, anonymous underground places of presence, where shoes are taken off before entering, and where the Bible and the Koran both occupy a venerable place in the hall.

Because what is proper of religious experience is to reveal that all of us are one in the One. In the final analysis, the specific contribution of religions in the field of peace and of justice is to show that an unjust or violent action not only destroys the victim but also the aggressor; that all of us are hurt when we live mutually devouring each other up, because when we snatch away material goods from others or exploit others, we lose our soul since we atrophy our capacity of being human, that is, of being brothers.

3. Theological dialogue

Theological dialogue is, perhaps, the most difficult of the four spheres. It is also the slowest; for this reason it should not be regarded as decisive, however necessary it may seem. The difficulty stems from the incomparability of religious systems: each Tradition has elaborated a constellation of terms and meanings that form a whole and cannot be interchanged in an isolated way, because if taken out of their context, they lose their original meaning. We have already mentioned the problematical example of avatars. Let us put a few more: in Christianity, the notion of a Personal God and of personal consciousness at the unitive moment is considered the highest and the most irrenounceable of Revelation. In oriental religions, on the other hand, this personal aspect of the Divinity is associated to still imperfect states of mystic experience. This mutual incomprehension is due to the underlying of two different anthropological conceptions: The East does not know the notion of *person*, but only that of the *ego* (*aham*), and this *ego* is associated with the whole world of desires, avidities, jealousies, envies, mutual dominations and devouring of each other... the cause of all disorders that exist among human beings. Oriental religions try to overcome the sphere of this base ego that makes us self-centred, to attain a Depth

where the human and the divine are made one, causing the I-You relation to disappear. The Christian notion *person*, on the other hand, does not correspond to this peripheral ego to be overcome by oriental soteriologies, but it refers to an irreducible Nucleus, that is endowed with conscience and liberty, that we conceive as present both in the Trinitarian God –communion of *Persons*–, as well as in the maximum degree of mystic union of man with God. From here arise equivocations in themes such as reincarnation: our notion of *person* is identified with a precise body and psyche; from this concept, reincarnation appears to us a trivialisation of the historic, concrete and irrepeatable existence of each one. In the East, on the other hand, what is sought is the liberation of what is deepest in the human being (the *atman*) which keeps on getting purified through different “existences”, advancing through different psychosomatic *egos* (*aham*), that are only accidental.

What, undoubtedly, is a cause of equivocations and difficulties for theological dialogue in the initial stage, can very well be converted into mutual enrichment. And this in two ways: the first, on being confronted with other anthropological and theological conceptions, we are stimulated to determine better our formulations; and the second way, inasmuch as we are invited to relativise our formulations and are helped at the same time to realise that the formulations we have made do not cover completely the totality of the divine and human Mystery.

What should be attained here is what Raimon Panikkar has called the “*dialogical dialogue*”²⁰: a dialogue that goes further than the *dialectical dialogue*, because it goes beyond logic based on confrontation. He himself terms it as “optimism of the heart”²¹. A dialogue of this nature would make possible mutual enrichment. From this meeting all of us will be benefited: restricting ourselves to this framework, western religions will contribute notions of *repentance* and *pardon*, while oriental religions will contribute the notions of *ignorance* and *illumination*; western religions will underline the personal dimension of God, whereas religions of the east will stress His oceanic dimension; the West will contribute the value of the Word, while the East will contribute the Silence which underlies and encloses all talk on God.

We are called then not only to make a theology “for” dialogue and “of” dialogue, but “in” dialogue. It is not so much a question of proposing a new theology as proposing a new method of making theology, based on the open *iconic* dimension of words and concepts, and the kaleidoscopic wealth of the multiplicity of perspectives.

4. Shared adoration and silence

Never before as today have the mystic texts of different Traditions been within our reach. We are living very privileged times in which we can sit together at the feet of the great Masters, and listen through them to the sound of the Peaks²². Certainly there is confusion, but perhaps there have never been so many opportunities for so much thirst and desire to find paths that would lead to that Other Shore. Each Tradition is called to contribute the best of its wisdom and to help illumine and make serene the hearts of so many. For this, believers are called to be transfigured beings, inhabitants of Silence, and at the same time, brothers full of passion for their other brothers. Going beyond confessional particularities, we can help each other mutually to attain and testify to a *theophoric* existence, that is to say, “God-bearing” that propagates His Presence by our mere presence.

Because beyond all talk on God, is dialogue from and in God. This dialogue in Silence, because

when there is experience of God, all parties will perceive the insufficiency of all words about Him Who being in all things, is beyond all things.

This interreligious dialogue is an occasion and an invitation to the mystic experience, where all parties will find ourselves in one common adoration before the Being from whom all of us have received existence. As Ramakrishna, a Hindu mystic of the last century says: “What does it matter to us to discuss about the infinite Ocean of the Divinity, if by just drinking one of its drops we get intoxicated?”. Let us try to meet to remain in silence before Him and intoxicated in this way lose ourselves together in Him. Let us pass on His Presence from one to another and impregnate ourselves together with the holiness of God which each of us should manifest in the world with the specific characteristics of one's own Tradition.

Let us help each other to find the Fountains, the Fountain and let us drink together from her, each one filling his cup with his own Tradition, so that all cups filled, we can pour them out on the Earth, cracked and parched in its thirst for God.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In these few pages we have only been able to point out a few aspects of a very complicated topic in which many spheres are integrated: anthropological, sociological, epistemological, theological... We have not attempted to be exhaustive, but only to elucidate a few questions that arise with the awareness of the attitude that this meeting and dialogue require: respect and welcome of others as a reflection of the opening out and donation to the Other. In this way, the interreligious dialogue will help us to discover our deepest attitudes, since God and others are “the other” of our own selves. And it is with the same disposition that we approach God, that we will approach others with, and with the same disposition that we approach others, that we will approach God with. To become aware of them does not fall outside our knowledge of God –nor that of others– but conditions and shapes it from its very root. The religious experience helps to keep on transforming the impulse of possession and depredation into a disposition of welcome and donation, because such is the being of God.

In this sense, we can still say more: the interreligious dialogue –as any other dialogue– is fundamental because it is a “theological” attitude, that is to say, it is a path of participation in the mode of being of God: Opening out without limit, continuous Ecstasy, a permanent “losing oneself” in the other, an emptying oneself out to make the existence of others possible. So, the interreligious dialogue reveals itself as a theophanic space, that is to say, a sphere of the revelation of God and a sphere through which we testify to God, because by the simple fact of coming together and dialoguing, we are already showing the world the mode of being of God: infinite Donation and Forgetfulness of Himself that liberates all things from been closed in on themselves.

NOTES

1. This expression is formulated for the first time by St. Ciprian of Carthage (258); it was re-taken and hardened in the XIV century by Boniface VIII in his Bull *Unam Sanctam* (1302), in: Denzinger, *El magisterio de la Iglesia*, Herder Barcelona, 1963, n.468.
2. *Ciencia y Cristo*, Taurus, Madrid, 1968, 57.
3. Cf. *Centurias sobre la Teología y la Economía*, I,66. St. Ireneus had insinuated something similar, four centuries earlier, when speaking of the “universal crucifixion” of the Logos.
4. Cf. *Bhagavad-Gita*, 4,7.
5. Cf. Jacques Dupuis, *Jesucristo al encuentro de las religiones*, Paulinas, Madrid, 1991, 125-210 and 247-287 and “El pluralismo religioso en el plan divino de salvación”, in: *Selecciones de Teología* 151 (1999), 247-249.
6. *El fruto de la nada: Sermones, Tratados y otros escritos*, Transl. Amador Vega Esquerra, Siruela, Madrid, 1998, 54. In the French edition: *Traitées et Sermons*, transl. Alain de Libera, GF-Flammarion, Paris, 1993, *Sermon n°6*, 262.
7. Cf. Jacques Dupuis, “El pluralismo religioso en el plan divino de salvación”, op. cit. , 241-253.
8. Cf. *El diálogo de las religiones*, Cuadernos Fe y Secularidad n. 18, Sal Terrae, Santander 1992, 34-38.
9. Hence the difficulty encountered by Christian missionaries each time they were confronted with a new race of people. To translate the words of the Credo in their language required a delicate task of discernment.
10. Michel de Certeau thought then of the culture of secularisation, where Christianity is still to be culturally adapted. Cf. *La faiblesse de croire*, Seuil, Paris, 1987. Deserving of mention are the reflections of Marià Corbí on the necessity of adapting Christianity culturally and the other great religious Traditions in the postindustrial culture. Cf. *Religión sin religión*, PPC, Madrid, 1996.
11. Raimon Panikkar establishes another triple distinction: between *Cristiandad* (civilisation), *Cristianismo* (religion) and *Cristianía* (personal religiosity). Cf. *Invitació a la Saviesa*, Proa, Barcelona, 1997, 139. We, when speaking of the *Christic*, are referring to another aspect that is different from the previous three.
12. It is about the *epectatic movement* that appears in St. Paul (Phil 3,13) and which was

developed later in the mystic theology of St. Gregory of Niza.

13. The exact quotation is: “In the evening they will examine you in love; learn to love as God wishes to be loved and put aside your condition”, *Dichos de luz y amor*, 59, in: St. John of the Cross, *Obras Completas*, Ed. De Espiritualidad, Madrid, 1993, 101.

14. Published in the newspaper *Harijan*, on 13-3-37, collected in: *Truth is God*, Navajivan Trust, Ahmedabad, 1997 (1955), pgs. 59-60.

15. Attributed to Rumi, Persian suffi of the XIII century. Cf. Emilio Galindo, *La experiencia del fuego. Itinerarios de los sufíes hacia Dios por los textos*, Verbo Divino, Estella, Navarra, 1994, 243-244.

16. *Ibid*, 236.

17. *Diálogo y Anuncio*, Pontifical Council for the Interreligious dialogue and Congregation for the Evangelisation of Nations (42), *Bulletin of the Pontifical Council for the Dialogue among Religions* 26 (1991), 210-250. See also: *Decree 5 of the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus*, Mensajero-Sal Terrae, Bilbao-Santander, 1995, 139-155.

18. Quoted by Claude Geffré, “Pour un Christianisme mondial” in: *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 86 (1998), 74. Article condensed in: *Selecciones de Teología*, 151 (1999), 203-213.

19. This text reached me, thanks to a Jesuit companion who works in Cambodia, in towns with war-mutilated victims.

20. Cf. *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics*, New York, The Paulist Press, 1979, 9.

21. *Ibid*, 242-244.

22. In our latitudes, a solitary, bold and persistent voice, has insisted on this new religious path, beyond religious institutions. Cf. Mariano Corbí, *Religión sin religión*, op. cit.

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