



## The Church's Mission in Asia : A Catholic Perspective

Gregory Baum

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# THE CHURCH'S MISSION IN ASIA : A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

**Gregory Baum**

Faculty of Religious Studies  
McGill University, Montreal

*RÉSUMÉ : Au concile Vatican II, l'Église catholique affirme que sa mission se réalise dans trois activités : l'annonce, la solidarité et le dialogue. Ces deux dernières activités, la solidarité et le dialogue, ne sont pas de simples engagements humanistes ; elles sont des activités rédemptrices, des expressions de foi, d'espérance et d'amour. Dans sa pratique, l'Église reconnaît que, dans certains espaces, sa mission divine n'inclut pas l'annonce, mais seulement la solidarité et le dialogue. C'est le cas du ministère pastoral dans les hôpitaux et dans les prisons ; c'est aussi le cas, sur le plan universel, de la Conférence mondiale des religions pour la paix. Le présent article suggère que les grandes religions d'Asie constituent, elles aussi, des espaces où la mission de l'Église s'exprime uniquement dans la solidarité et le dialogue.*

*ABSTRACT : At Vatican Council II the Catholic Church defined its mission in terms of three activities, proclamation, solidarity and dialogue. Solidarity and dialogue are here conceived not simply as humanistic endeavours, but as redemptive activities, expressions of faith, hope and love. At this time, the Church already recognizes certain spaces where her divine mission does not include proclamation to outsiders, but simply consists of solidarity and dialogue, for instance the pastoral ministry in hospitals and prisons and, on the global level, the World Conference on Religion and Peace. The article argues that the great religions in Asia are also spaces where the Church's mission simply consists of solidarity and dialogue.*

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**T**he mission of the Catholic Church in Asia has become a hotly debated topic. Is the task of the Church in Asia to preach the Gospel so that Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists abandon their religion and become Christians ? Or is it the Church's mission to engage in dialogue and co-operation with Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists in order to deepen the spirituality of all participants, each learning from the other, and together engage in the struggle for peace and justice in their societies ?

## VATICAN COUNCIL II

Innovative thinking about the Church's mission was introduced by Vatican Council II (1962-1965). There is a general agreement that the Church has a divine mission and is, in fact, defined by this mission. Besides, a Church turned in upon itself is a dying community. According to the Vatican Council, the Church has been called to extend to the world the coming of God's Son and to proclaim the mission of

God's Spirit. The Church is thus sent into the history of humankind by its very foundation. According to a beautiful expression prominently used at the World Council of Churches, the Church participates in the *missio Dei*,<sup>1</sup> where God is both the One who sends and the One who is sent.

But what is this mission of the Church? Vatican Council II offers three different concepts of the Church's mission without explaining how these three concepts are related to one another. In *Ad gentes*, the document on the Church's missionary activity, the Church's mission is defined in the traditional manner as proclaiming the Gospel so that the world may believe.<sup>2</sup> I shall refer to this simply as Proclamation or Evangelization. *Ad gentes* clearly acknowledges the innovative teaching of *Lumen gentium* (n. 16) that the world religions are bearers of redemptive elements. The motive for Evangelization is therefore not, as it was in previous centuries, to rescue people from eternal punishment, but rather to share with them the fullness of Christ's spiritual gifts received in the Church.

Throughout *Gaudium et spes*, the conciliar document of the Church in the Modern World, the Church's mission is described as a service rendered to humanity in view of its sanctification and humanization. As Christ was the divine Servant of the human family wounded by sin, so is the Church, dependent on him, the servant of humans in their endeavour to create the historical conditions that correspond to their high dignity as God's children. The Church's mission is to enter into solidarity with the peoples of the world, beginning with the poor, to bear with them the burden imposed on them by unjust institutions, and to join them in the effort to create a more just, more peaceful and more generous society. I shall call this mission Active Solidarity.

In the past, right up to the time of John XXIII, the promotion of the Church's social teaching was regarded as belonging to the "natural order" and hence as inferior to the Church's evangelizing mission that belonged to the "supernatural order." This perception has changed with John XXIII, Vatican Council II and John Paul II. Since then Catholic social teaching no longer simply relies on "natural reason," but also invokes the higher norm of biblical prophecy demanding equity and justice. Active Solidarity or the promotion of social justice and human rights is now seen as belonging to the order of faith, hope and love and hence to what we used to call the "supernatural order." Active Solidarity serves God's approaching Reign.

In *Nostra aetate*, the declaration on the Church's relationship to the non-Christian religions, the Church's mission is defined as engagement in dialogue and co-operation with the members of these religions (n. 2). I shall call this mission Interreligious Dialogue. The theological foundation of this dialogue, briefly expressed in *Nostra*

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1. See Tom STRANSKY, "Missio Dei," in Nicholas LOSSKY, *et al*, ed., *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1991, p. 687-688.

2. Since the documents of Vatican Council II are available in several editions, it is better to refer to them simply by their Latin denomination and indicate in parentheses the number of the relevant paragraph. The conciliar documents can be found on the Internet, at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va), click Archives, click Documents of Vatican II.

*aetate* and other conciliar documents, is the omnipresence of God's redemptive action in history. According to an ancient theological current, God's Word "which enlightens every human born into the world" (Jn 1:9) is present in all wisdom traditions and Christ's redemptive work has reconciled with God the whole of creation (Col 1:20) and hence touches people all over the world. Here is how *Gaudium et spes* (n. 22) presents the ancient teaching of the Cosmic Christ :

Since Christ has died for all human beings, and since the ultimate vocation of humanity is in fact one and divine, we must believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers every human the possibility of being associated with the pascal mystery.

The conciliar document suggests that interreligious dialogue is more than an exchange of information. Interreligious dialogue is a trusting conversation across religious boundaries that purifies the participants of their inherited prejudices, urges them to enter more deeply into their spiritual roots, and leads them to repossess their religion in a more authentic way. Dialogue and co-operation among the followers of the different religions is a redemptive activity, transforming all partners and supporting the efforts to create a more just society.

What Vatican Council II does not tell us is how these three different concepts of the Church's mission are interrelated. Active Solidarity and Interreligious Dialogue fit well together, but it not clear how these two are to be reconciled with Evangelization. In one particular case, the Council did make a clear decision. The Jews, we are told, in *Lumen gentium* (n. 16) and *Nostra aetate* (n. 4) remain God's covenanted people, *populus secundum electionem Deo carissimus propter patres*, in whom God's grace is at work, implicitly conceding that the Church is not sent to convert them to Christianity. Here the Church's mission is simply Solidarity and Dialogue.

In this article I do not pursue the question who were the important theologians prior to Vatican II whose work affected the conciliar teaching on the Church's mission in the world. There existed a Catholic theological literature on Active Solidarity, Interreligious Dialogue, and the need to overcome the anti-Jewish current in Christian teaching. Needless to say, official Catholic teaching depends on the creative work of theologians and religious thinkers in the Church.

## THE SECRETARIAT FOR NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

After the Council, the theological discussion regarding the three concepts of the Church's mission continued. The debate often created divisions among Christians, especially in missionary societies — Catholic as well as Protestant ones. Some missionaries, relying on the inherited teaching, defended the idea that the Church's mission was simply Proclamation and that a movement for social justice and the engagement in dialogue were purely secular activities. By contrast, other missionaries, especially in Asia, argued that in their region of the world, there was room only for Active Solidarity and Interreligious Dialogue, omitting Evangelization altogether.

The Vatican reacted to these debates in several ways. Paul VI decided already in 1964 to create the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions. In 1975, the Pope pub-

lished the encyclical *Evangelii nuntiandi* that tried to define the mission of the Church in a manner that combined Proclamation and Active Solidarity. He rejected the idea that the Church's mission was simply Proclamation without any active political commitment or simply Active Solidarity without confessing the name of Jesus. This double perspective was later confirmed by several statements of John Paul II that the preaching of the Good News remains incomplete and hence suffers distortion if it is not accompanied by the demand for social justice and human rights.

In 1984, the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions published *Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*<sup>3</sup> that introduced some new ideas. Instead of seeing the Church primarily as proclaimer of God's *truth*, the 1984 document preferred to see it primarily as the living sign of God's *love* — God's redemptive love revealed in Christ, embodied in the Church and embracing the whole of humanity. The Church's mission, we are told, is a mission of love, whose source, model and finality is Jesus Christ.

This idea of the Church's mission allowed this document to adopt a more generous attitude when discussing the interrelation between the three facets of the Church's mission : Evangelization, Solidarity and Dialogue. For the first time, the historical context of a regional Church becomes a topic of theological reflection. While the Church's mission is one, we are told, "it comes to be exercised in different ways according to the conditions in which it unfolds" (n. 11). Or again, "the needs of the situation, the particular [historical] position of God's people, and an individual's personal charism dispose Christians to direct their efforts principally to one or another aspect of the Church's mission" (n. 14).

The attention to the historical context is not totally new. Vatican Council II already explained the unprecedented openness of the Church to the world religions and, in particular, its new teaching regarding God's abiding covenant with the Jewish people with reference to the historical conditions of the present age. *Nostra aetate*, the first words, mean "in our times." The statement on dialogue and mission of 1984 makes a similar reference to the changing circumstances of contemporary society in order to justify its creative re-reading of the Catholic tradition. The issue of contextuality will retain our attention further on.

## THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

In the same year of 1984, the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions was transformed by John Paul II as the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue which became actively involved in promoting interreligious dialogue and published reports on the interreligious events that included Catholic participants. In 1991, the Pontifical Council promulgated a substantial statement called *Dialogue and Proclamation*, signed not only by Cardinal Arinze, the president of the Pontifical Council but also

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3. Secretariat pro non-christianis, *Bulletin*, XIX, 2 (1984), p. 146-161. Quotations from this document indicate in parentheses the number of the paragraph.

by Cardinal Tomko, the prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

*Dialogue and Proclamation*, available on the Internet,<sup>4</sup> shall here be referred to as the 1991 Statement. Again, it is not the intention of this article to examine the writings of Catholic theologians that have influenced the contents of the Statement. Since I was a member of a drafting committee at Vatican Council II, I am keenly aware that the Church's official teaching relies to a large extent on the creative debates going on among Catholic theologians and religious thinkers. Yet to analyse the Catholic theological debate about interreligious dialogue is not the purpose of this article.<sup>5</sup>

### Interreligious Dialogue

The first part of the 1991 Statement deals with the doctrinal foundation of Interreligious Dialogue, not indeed because Dialogue is more fundamental than Proclamation — which it is not —, but because Interreligious Dialogue is something new in the Church, recommended by Vatican Council II and encouraged by Paul VI and John Paul II. A memorable event of symbolic significance was the World Day of Prayer for Peace held in Assisi on October 27, 1986, uniting John Paul II and representatives of the world religions in a common spiritual exercise. John Paul continues to remind his audiences of "the spirit of Assisi."

Since the documents of Vatican Council II only offered a few sentences on the universality of God's redemptive action, the 1991 Statement spelled out this ancient doctrinal tradition in greater detail. Already in Old and New Testament there are passages that reveal God's salvific action in history from its very beginning and, later, beyond the confines of the chosen people. Jesus' proclamation of God's approaching Reign revealed God's judgement on the sinful world and God's salvation graciously and undeservedly coming upon humankind. The Statement then refers the Fathers of the first centuries, especially the Alexandrians, who recognized that God's Wisdom praised in the sapiential literature of the Old Testament became God's Word in the Johannine tradition of the New (n. 24). This led them to understand Christ as light and saviour of the world, operative among all humans in their search for truth and their desire to do good. The Statement discovers in the later works of St. Augustine the teaching that revealed in Jesus Christ is God's salvific action, prior to the Incarnation, from the very beginning of history (n. 25).

This minor theological tradition is not well known to Catholics since the emphasis on the doctrine *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* has persuaded Catholics that divine grace granted beyond the Church's boundary is something rather exceptional. May I add as a personal note that I became acquainted with this minor tradition as a young student in 1946, listening to a lecture at St. Michael's College, Toronto. Professor

4. At [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va), click Roman Curia, click Pontifical Councils, click Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

5. For an analysis of the entire debate, see Jacques DUPUIS, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 1997.

Pegis lectured on an article by Thomas Aquinas (S.T. I-II, 89, 6) which handed on this minor theological tradition in Thomas's own Aristotelian vocabulary. Because one cannot will the means without first willing the end, Thomas argued that the first act of a child reaching the age of reason is an option for the end, which means saying either Yes or No to the God who, graciously and in a hidden way, summons the child's awakening consciousness. Thomas saw himself as an heir of a theological tradition which held that in their history human beings were either in the state of grace or the state of mortal sin. Since my convictions in 1946 were more "evangelical," I was rather shocked by this Thomistic teaching. It was only much later, after studying theology, that the theoretical elaboration of this universalist thesis by Maurice Blondel and Karl Rahner, persuaded me of its truth. These and other 20th century theologians recovered the old doctrines of the omnipresent Logos and the Cosmic Christ so persuasively that they were in fact integrated by Vatican Council II into the Church's official teaching. The echo of God's saving Word sounds in the Non-Christian religions.

According to the 1991 Statement, "the foundation of the Church's commitment to dialogue is not merely anthropological but primarily theological. God, in an age-long dialogue, has offered and continues to offer salvation to humankind. In faithfulness to the divine initiative, the Church too must enter into a dialogue of salvation with all men and women" (n. 38). The Church is summoned by the Spirit to join the ongoing conversation carried on by God's Word with the religious and sapiential traditions and their followers.

An interesting paragraph (n. 42) of the Statement describes four different forms of interreligious dialogue :

- a) The *dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.
- b) The *dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.
- c) The *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages and appreciate each other's spiritual values.
- d) The *dialogue of religious experience*, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.

### ***Extra ecclesiam nulla salus***

Despite the new openness, neither the Vatican Council nor the 1991 Statement bracketed the traditional teaching that the Church is "the universal sacrament of salvation," apart from which there is no salvation. According to the harsh teaching of the Ecumenical Council of Florence (1442), people outside the Church, not only pagans, but also Jews, heretics and schismatics will go to hell immediately after they die, even if they have lived a holy life, were generous alms givers and shed their

blood in the name of Christ (Denz. 1351). Of course, we do not believe this any more. New reflection on Scripture and tradition in the light of recent cultural developments has persuaded the Church that God is redemptively involved in the lives of all human beings. Still, the harsh teaching of 1442 has its usefulness : it helps theologians to relativize the Church's magisterium.

The relation of the Church to God's universal will to save continues to preoccupy the ecclesiastical magisterium. Vatican Council II still insists that the Church is "the universal sacrament of salvation" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 48). The grace of Christ is communicated to humanity through his earthly body, which is the Church. But what precisely does this mean ? It cannot possibly mean that the great Asian religions, some of which preceded the birth of Christ, were influenced by the Church's preaching. Perhaps the Council clarified the meaning of this claim when it argued that God's grace, mediated in other religious traditions and in human life itself, is always "oriented" towards the Church (*Lumen gentium*, n. 16), meaning that it was derived from Christ and destined to find fulfilment in him and his mystical body.

This teaching could be interpreted as saying that the followers of the world religions are "implicit Christians," Christians without realizing it and that, if they had greater self-knowledge, they would become "explicit Christians" and join the Catholic Church. In my opinion, such an interpretation is prohibited by the respect for other religions demanded by *Nostra aetate*.

The respect for otherness is new in the history of the Church ! The solemn liturgy of repentance celebrated by John Paul II on March 12, 2000, asking forgiveness for the sins of the Church, included among these transgressions "sins committed against respect for cultures and religions." What respect for otherness means in theological terms still has to be clarified.

Saying that the redemptive elements in the world religions are "oriented" toward the Church could mean, I suggest, that they are destined to become fully alive, *faithful to their otherness*, in the ultimate reconciliation of humanity — which is the redemptive mystery revealed in Christ and proclaimed by the Church. More of this later. The doctrinal development that has already taken place would have allowed the Vatican Council to say *extra ecclesiam abundantia salutis*.

## Proclamation

After dealing with interreligious dialogue, the 1991 Statement discusses the mission of the Church's evangelizing mission to proclaim the name of Jesus so that the world may believe. The Scriptures and the early Christian writers provide ample evidence that the Church understood itself from the beginning as divinely sent to communicate the Good News to humanity and to found communities of believers which together would constitute the visible body of Christ. The Statement offers an account of this evangelizing mission in theological terms that acknowledge God's salvific gifts in other religions and imply that these gifts are destined to find their completion in Christ. In other words, the Statement while praising Dialogue, does not offer a clear answer of how Dialogue and Proclamation can be theologically recon-



ciled. Discussing Dialogue, the Statement does insist that interreligious conversation and co-operation do not aim at the conversion of the non-Christian partners to Christianity ; yet discussing Proclamation, the Statement does suggest that religious experiences in non-Christian religions are oriented toward their fullness in the Christian Church. This constitutes a dilemma.

Important to me are the references of the 1991 Statement to the impact of the historical context on the exercise of the Church's mission. Under the rubric of internal and external obstacles to proclamation (n. 73, 74) are listed "the lack of appreciation and respect for other believers and their religious traditions," "an attitude of superiority giving rise to the supposition that a particular culture is linked with the Christian message and is to be imposed on converts," "the weight of history [created by] the Church's evangelizing method in the past that aroused fear and suspicion," and "the fear [of people] that the Church's mission will result in the destruction of their religion and culture." While the Statement does not say so explicitly, there may indeed be historical situations where the Church's mission does not include Proclamation, but consists exclusively of Dialogue and Solidarity. This is the theme I wish to develop below.

### AN ONGOING THEOLOGICAL DEBATE

Since the relation between Dialogue and Proclamation has not been clarified, a lively theological debate continues in the Church, including arguments exchanged among cardinals — which has not been a common practice. On August 6, 2000, Cardinal Ratzinger, the president of the Congregation *de doctrina fidei* published the severe document, *Dominus Iesus*, in which he emphasized the universality of Christ and his Church, argued that interreligious dialogue is oriented toward evangelization, and denounced what he called "the ideology of dialogue." The document was not well received. While not contesting the document, John Paul II in his message of Sept. 26, 2000, addressed to an interreligious conference held at Lisbon, expressed the hope that interreligious dialogue would become more frequent and more intense in the new millennium. Nor did Cardinal Ratzinger have to wait a long time before he was challenged by Cardinal Arinze, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and Cardinals Cassidy and Kaspar, former and present president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.<sup>6</sup> Both of them defend the ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and argue that engaging in it demands of the Church humility. What these cardinals fear — a fear shared by many — is that, thanks to Cardinal Ratzinger's message, the Church's openness to dialogue will be interpreted as a subtle strategy for carrying on its mission to convert the followers of other religions to Roman Catholicism. Conservative theologians sometimes look upon the Church's call to interfaith dialogue and co-operation simply as public relations gestures with no theological significance and hence no demand for rethinking inherited attitudes.

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6. Several statements in *Origins*, Nov. 2, 2000, 30 (2000), p. 331-338.

The same debate is carried on among Christian theologians, Catholic and Protestant. Is the Church sent to convert the entire human family to faith in Jesus Christ. If the answer to this question is Yes, then Dialogue and Solidarity are simply Christian engagements in the service of Proclamation. If the answer to this question is Yes, then the Church's desire must be that Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists discover that their respective religious tradition is simply a stepping stone toward the fullness of truth in Christ and that they are destined to convert to Christianity. If the answer to this question is Yes, then religious pluralism is a historical condition that contradicts God's intention for the world, a spiritual deficiency of humanity from which the Church promises rescue.

A great number of contemporary theologians do not wish to say Yes to the above question. They think that it is wrong to look upon the redemption wrought by Jesus Christ as some sort of imperialist project aiming at the disappearance of the world religions. To create theological space for these religions and to be able to rejoice in religious pluralism, these theologians have made many different proposals. They are outlined in Jacques Dupuis's major study, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*.<sup>7</sup> This book, I might add, has become well-known and widely read in the Catholic Church because Cardinal Ratzinger, suspicious of its orientation, demanded that his Congregation examine its orthodoxy. At this time in the Catholic Church, publishers pray to God that their books will be censured by the Vatican because this advertises them and increases their sales.

Some theologians argue that we learn to appreciate other religions if we move from a Christ-centred to a God-centred theology. Others recommend that in our understanding of the world we replace the theological approach focusing upon the Church by one that assigns priority to God's promised Reign touching all of human history. Others again advocate a theology of God's Word who enlightens every human being — an approach adopted, as we saw above, by Vatican Council II. Others again prefer to develop a theology of the Holy Spirit who utters wisdom in all religious and sapiential traditions. Because all of these approaches recognize the Church as the visible community of believers, the bearer of the fullness of truth, they do not — in my opinion — succeed in overcoming the suspicion that Dialogue and Solidarity are subordinated to Evangelization and hence serve the Church's project to embrace the whole of humanity.

There are Christian theologians who are so unhappy with the Church's absolute claim to truth that they are willing to abandon the ancient doctrine that Jesus is God's definitive self-revelation, the Incarnation of God's Word, the Alpha and Omega of human history and the cosmos. They look for an alternative christology which leaves room for the founders of other religions. In Mark's gospel, for instance, Jesus appears as the great prophet, the servant of God, the helper of humans, the teacher of mercy, the miraculous healer, and the man who exercises power over spirits and natural forces — as yet without reference to Incarnation and Trinity. Can we go back to this

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7. See the reference in note 5.

early understanding of Jesus, bracket the classical creeds, and see ourselves as one religious tradition among others ? There are theologians who opt for this proposal or others similar to it. There are currents in the Protestant Churches that, in name of humility, move in this direction.

This trend does not appear persuasive to me. Disregarding the world-historical drama of redemption revealed in the story of the man Jesus robs so many biblical passages of their meaning that the New Testament would be falling apart. It seems to me impossible to remove from the biblical message the idea that disclosed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is God's merciful action that rescues humanity from all alienating powers and reconciles the world with its Creator. I see the doctrines of Redemption and Eschatology, not as foreign paradigms imposed upon the Scriptures, but as sacred symbols that clarify and unify their message of universal salvation.

What I wish to do in this article is to propose a theological argument — a new one, as far as I know — to show that the Church's mission in Asia is defined, not by Evangelization, but exclusively by Dialogue and Solidarity.

### MISSION IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

That there are historical contexts where the Church refuses to exercise an evangelizing mission has become almost universally acknowledged. In hospitals, prisons, schools and the military, we find priests, ministers, rabbis and representatives of other religions who offer a spiritual service to people in need on the basis of trust and co-operation. If a Muslim or a Hindu wants to see a spiritual guide, the Catholic priest or the Protestant minister will invite a religious teacher belonging to his (or her) tradition. To preach the Gospel to people who make such a request would not only be an insult to them but also undermine the democratic, pluralistic character of modern society. When countries like Canada and the United States admit immigrants from Asia and other continents, they implicitly promise to respect the religion of the new arrivals. To make immigrant communities the object of the Church's evangelizing mission would be an unethical undertaking violating the honour due them in their new society.

A few years ago the Southern Baptist Church in Texas announced that in the coming summer it would send a thousand missionaries to Chicago to convert to Jesus the Non-Christians living in that city. In reply the Interreligious Council of Chicago, which included the Catholic Archbishop, wrote a letter to the Southern Baptist Church asking them to desist from their missionary project : lack of respect for the religion of these citizens would be seen as an insult, disturb the social peace of the community and possibly even provoke violence.<sup>8</sup> The Texan missionaries never came.

Incidences of this kind demand new reflection on the meaning of religious liberty. We have tended to interpret religious liberty, following the model of the free

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8. *National Catholic Reporter*, Dec. 10, 1999, p. 9.

market, as the freedom to advertize our own religion, compete with other religious organizations, and to do our best to enlarge our clientele. But religion is not a commodity. I think it is possible to argue persuasively that the human right of religious freedom assures respect for people's religion, the freedom to practice it, and protection against conversion efforts mounted by missionary groups...

The Church's evangelizing mission addresses people who live in confusion, people who search for a religious answer, and people who are trapped in destructive ideologies. This is a vast field. But if my understanding of religious liberty is correct, the Church in today's world is not called to evangelize people who are deeply rooted in a religious tradition. Here the Church's mission is simply Dialogue and Solidarity.

This has been clearly acknowledged by the magisterium for certain historical contexts. Since, according to *Nostra aetate*, God's covenant with the Jewish people has never been revoked and remains for them a source of grace, the Church is not sent to evangelize the Jews. The Church's mission is defined simply in terms of Dialogue and Solidarity, both of which have a transformative impact on Christians and Jews.

After the appreciative words on Islam in *Nostra aetate*, Pope John Paul II made a bolder statements on the relationship between Christian and Muslim communities. Meeting with Muslim leaders in the Great Omayyad Mosque in Damascus on May 6, 2001, the Pope's allocution contained this paragraph :

Christians and Muslims agree that the encounter with God in prayer is the necessary nourishment of our souls, without which our hearts withers and our will no longer strives for good but succumbs to evil. Both Muslim and Christians prize their places of prayer, as oases where they meet the All Merciful God on the journey to eternal life, and where they meet their brothers and sisters in the bond of religion. When on the occasion of weddings or funerals or other celebrations, Christians and Muslims remain in silent respect at the other's prayer, they bear witness to what unites them, without disguising or denying the things that separate. It is in mosques and churches that the Muslim and Christian communities shape their religious identity, and its is there that the young receive a significant part of their religious education [...]. It is my ardent hope that Muslim and Christians religious leaders will present our two great religious communities *as communities in respectful dialogue, never more as communities in conflict*.

It is difficult not to conclude from John Paul II's speech that the Church's mission toward Islam is exercised through Dialogue and Active Solidarity and does not include the Evangelization of Muslims.

What about the other Asian religions ? They do not venerate Abraham as the father of their faith — as do Jews, Christians and Muslims. Yet *Nostra aetate* honours the symbolic heritage and mystical traditions of the Asian religions. Since the Vatican Council, the dialogue of Christians with members of these religions has been promoted by the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions and, later, by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. In 1999, on a visit in India, John Paul II made the following statement :

The Catholic Church wants to enter ever more deeply into dialogue with the religions of the world. She sees dialogue as an act of love which has roots in God himself. "God is

love,” proclaims the New Testament, “and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him [her]... Let us love, then, because God has loved us first... No one who fails to love the brother [sister] whom he [she] sees can love God whom he [she] has not seen” (1 John 4:16, 19-20).

Yet there are also official pronouncement of the Vatican suggesting that the Church in Asia must proclaim the Gospel so that the Asian people discover in Christ the fullness of their religious aspirations and become members of the Christian Church. Here is a sentence uttered more than once by John Paul II : “Just as in the first millennium the Cross was planted on the soil of Europe, and in the second on that of the Americas and Africa, we pray that in the third Christian millennium a great harvest of faith will be reaped on this vast and vital continent.”<sup>9</sup> Such pronouncements provoke outbreaks of hostility against the Church by people who fear that this western institution, bearer of foreign concepts, will undermine their own culture and their own religious traditions, threatened as they already are by the globalization of the unregulated market and the consumer culture of the West.

Many Christian theologians in Asia strongly defend the Church’s open attitude towards the Asian religions. Living as they do in a profoundly religious culture, the theologians have great respect for the spiritual life communicated by the Asian religions and hence thank God for the religious pluralism on their continent. They feel that Western Christians living as they do in a largely secularized society do not understand the wonderment Asian Christians experience surrounded as they are by a spiritual culture of prayer and meditation.

The following is a statement produced in 1987 by the Theological Advisory Committee of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) :

Its experience of the other religions has led the Church in Asia to a positive appreciation of their role in the divine economy of salvation. This appreciation is based on the fruits of the Spirit perceived in the lives of the other religions’ believers : a sense of the sacred, a commitment to the pursuit of fullness, a thirst for self-realization, a taste for prayer and commitment, a desire for renunciation, a struggle for justice, an urge to basic human goodness, an involvement in service, a total surrender of the self to God, and an attachment to the transcendent in their symbols, rituals and life itself, though human weakness and sin are not absent.

The positive appreciation is further rooted in the conviction of faith that God’s plan of salvation is one and reaches out to all peoples : it is God’s Reign through which he seeks to reconcile all things with himself in Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup>

In the historical context defined by the Asian religions, the Church’s mission, I wish to argue, is exercised exclusively by Dialogue and Solidarity, similar to its mission among Jews and Muslims.

Since this proposal does not question the universal redemptive order revealed in Jesus Christ, the reader may object that this proposal still makes a monopolistic or

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9. See the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* (n. 1), Nov. 6, 1999 : at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va), click Archives, click John Paul II, click Apostolic Exhortations.

10. Quoted in Jacques DUPUIS, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, p. 220.

even imperialistic claim for Christianity. My answer to this is that every religion offers a spiritual world interpretation, and that the test whether this world interpretation is monopolistic or not is i) whether it respects otherness and difference, ii) whether it is able to praise God for the gift of religious pluralism, and iii) whether it envisages the reconciliation of religions through Dialogue and Solidarity as a process where each religion becomes more faithful to the spiritual core of its own tradition. Judged by these three criteria, my theological proposal is not monopolistic, even if it regards Jesus as the Alpha and Omega of the cosmos. Christians have learnt i) to respect and honour the world religions, ii) to look upon religious pluralism (Christianity, Judaism, Islam and the Asian religions) as a manifestation of God's inexhaustible richness, incomprehensible to the human mind, and iii) to engage in dialogue and co-operate in solidarity with these religions in the hope that, through this engagement, all of them, including the Church, will be transformed, each one becoming more faithful the spiritual substance of its own inheritance.<sup>11</sup>

Looking at the Church and the world religions not only from a faith perspective but also from a sociological point of view, one is keenly aware that in actual fact no religion is as its wants to be, no religion embodies its deepest convictions, no religion is satisfied with its historical existence. Believers in every religion, especially in the Church, dream of what their religion could and should be under the given historical circumstances. Many of them look upon Interreligious Dialogue and Active Solidarity as engagements in the Spirit destined to renew and reform the religious traditions of all participants.

In my opinion, Interreligious Dialogue must include attention to the secular Enlightenment tradition. The political imagination generated by the idea that society, having been created by humans, can be changed by them is to a large extent a discovery of modernity. That we are political subjects co-responsible for the society to which we belong was not taught by the Christian tradition until the historical conditions created by modernity made the exercise of this responsibility possible. In the past the Catholic Church rejected the human rights and civil liberties proposed by modernity as contrary to its religious tradition. It was Vatican Council II, reflecting on the positive contributions of the Enlightenment, that decided to endorse these rights and liberties on theological grounds. We are aware that, at this time, believers in all religions wrestle with the ethical issues raised by modernity and try to find in their own tradition religious sanctions for the political ideals of freedom, equality and universal solidarity.

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11. A theme I do not develop in this article is that by respecting and rejoicing in religious pluralism, the Church discovers her *kenotic* vocation, through which she participates in the *kenosis* of Christ.