Catholicism and Other Religions

Explaining Interfaith Dialogue

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Dialogue for the Sake of Truth

> "For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice."
>
> Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" (*Jn* 18:37-8.)

What is truth? That is the question at the centre of inter-faith dialogue. Dialogue is for the sake of ascertaining the true meaning of the world. We talk in order to come to an agreement about the truth. But we also talk knowing that we may not reach agreement, and that simply trying to understand each other is also worthwhile.

The fact is, we live in a pluralistic society. Only a third of the world population is Christian (more than a half of that 2 billion are Catholic). Muslims account for 21%, Hindus 14%, Buddhists 7%, non-religious for 16%.[1] But believers are scattered across the world, and modern communications and transport have brought about a situation where most people grow up with neighbours and friends – or family members – belonging to a variety of faiths. Some parts of England are more Muslim than Christian. The biggest Buddhist monastery and research

[1] Statistics from www.adherents.com.

centre in Europe is located in the west Scottish lowlands, at Eskdalemuir. It is big and pink, with paintwork in red, yellow, blue and gold. Inside are 1000 golden Buddhas, gold-encrusted pillars and silk-screen prints of dragons and birds.

A person trying to make moral and metaphysical sense of a world where the scriptures of every religion are equally accessible on the internet or in any large bookshop may be forgiven for feeling a bit confused. Every one of these religions offers a complete way of life and claims to answer the question of human and/or cosmic meaning. Apart from their obvious social and cultural expressions, every one of them has the following five components: *scriptures, institutions, doctrines, morality* and *rituals*. Most if not all of them claim some kind of revelation from heaven, and their holy men and women seem reputedly to perform the same kinds of miracles. Yet if you look at the actual teachings of each religion, they are so different from each other that they often appear contradictory. There seem to be at least five common views on all this:

Five Common Views on the Existence of Different Religions

1. All religions are false

This is a cop-out, although, given the way religious people often behave, and the apparent contradictions already

mentioned, one can understand why many people come to this conclusion and decide to live without a religious faith of any kind. A more subtle variation on this position is *relativism*, which is the view that religious statements are not the kinds of statements that can be (absolutely) true. A given doctrine may be 'true for me' but not for you, because its value depends on its context – the situation in which it is affirmed and the person who affirms it. In this way the very word 'truth' loses its force. It was partly this phenomenon that Cardinal Ratzinger had in mind when, just before his election as Pope, he said, "We are moving towards a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognise anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one's own ego and one's own desires."

2. One religion is true, the others are completely false

Sometimes called 'exclusivism', this is the second simplest solution to the challenge of religious diversity. It appeals to those who do not want to examine in detail the history and claims of several religions. Since – for good reasons or bad – they have decided that their own religion is true, they feel no need to examine the others. Those must all be false, since they say something different. Often this is accompanied by a belief that since the other religions must be false or unreliable, and have deceived so many, they must be the work of the devil. A milder form of the same position regards other religions as uninteresting rather than

demonic, and assumes their existence is due to the capacity of the human soul for self-deception and wishful thinking, or fear of death and the desire to find consolation and reassurance. In the absence of divine revelation, human beings have to 'make something up'.

3. One religion is true, the others are merely approximations to or distortions of it (or perhaps stages on the way to it)

This is a more nuanced, more subtle version of the previous position. It is often called 'inclusivism' because it seeks to include truths found in the other religions. Inclusivists argue that all the world's other religions are pointing at theirs: only theirs has the fullness of truth. (Inclusivism can be 'closed' or 'open' depending on whether one thinks one can still learn something from others).

In his book *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis takes a few pages at the end to run through the common moral beliefs that he sees around the world in all the religions, including the "primal" or ancient native religions. This idea goes back at least to the second century, when the Christian Justin Martyr wrote of the "seeds of the Logos [*semina Verbi*] implanted in every race of men". Lewis calls this universal moral law the *Tao* – the ancient Chinese word for the Way. It includes some version of the Golden Rule (*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*), plus various important virtues on which an ordered society seems to

depend, such as humility, charity and honesty. Religions give people a reason for cultivating these virtues, even when it might be to their own immediate advantage not to do so. As the Pontifical Council prepared its guidelines for interreligious dialogue in June 2008, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran echoed Lewis and Justin when he said:

> "The Ten Commandments are a sort of universal grammar that all believers can use in their relationship with God and neighbour. … In creating man, God ordered him with wisdom and love to his end, through the law written within his heart (*Rm* 2:15), the natural law. This is nothing other than the light of intelligence infused within us by God. Thanks to this, we know what we must do and what we must avoid. God gave us this light and this law at creation."

As a Christian inclusivist, for example, I would argue that Christianity has the moral teaching of the natural law common to all religions *plus something else* that is found in no other religion: the Incarnation of God, which reveals the Trinity.

4. All religions are true in what they agree about, but false wherever they disagree

For the final two options we move from inclusivism to outright pluralism. Clearly there are many points of agreement between the religions. This version of pluralism

argues that we should take them seriously where they overlap, and ignore the rest of what they say. It would be a bit like an exercise in trigonometry – we can pinpoint a position on a map by projecting a direction first from one place and then from another: the goal lies at the point where the two lines cross. You come from the south, I come from the west, but we both meet in the middle. In that sense all religions are on a level.

5. All religions are true: any contradictions are only on the surface.

This kind of pluralism is more subtle. It adds another dimension in which it tries to reconcile religious differences. A metaphor that is often used is that of paths up a mountain. If the truth is the summit, the religions are the various ways we can climb in order to reach it. The contradictions between these paths are only provisional. If I am climbing the north face, it is true that I must go left at this rock here and right at that ledge there. But if I am climbing from the south, the instructions will be very different, depending on the terrain. It is only when we get to the top that all these different ways can be seen to be equally valid, and the various contradictions to form part of a bigger picture. Another metaphor is that of languages or dialects. Each religion is viewed as a symbolic dialect in which the truth is expressed, and the contradictions are

held to disappear when you are able to translate them from one language to the other.

A variant of this last position holds that there are two levels of 'truth', sometimes called relative and absolute. Absolute truth is completely beyond words and concepts. It cannot be expressed except by denials (the truth *is not* this or that). Religious differences are confined to the "relative" level of truth, which is provisional (i.e. to be discarded when we reach enlightenment) and pragmatic (i.e. the religions offer 'skilful means' by which we progress towards a goal). Relative truth is therefore like a ladder that we can abandon when we reach the top. This view is associated with many forms of Asian spirituality, but also with some Christian 'negative' mysticism that stresses our approach to God through denial of his likeness to anything in the world. At the popular level it translates crudely back into the 'relativism' mentioned in connection with option 1.

The Catholic Balance

Out of the five options just listed, I think 3 (open inclusivism) corresponds best to the position of the Catholic Church as expressed in the Second Vatican Council. Catholics cannot simply dismiss other religions as completely false. We are told in *Nostra Aetate*:

> "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflects a ray of that truth which enlightens all men [*Jn* 1:9]. … The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognise, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among them" (n. 2).

Thus the Church recognises there are "good things", even truths, to be found in other religions. The question is how to "preserve and promote" these good things at the same time as witnessing to Christ – for the sentence I omitted from the quotation I just gave affirms that the Church "proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ 'the way, the truth, and the life' (*Jn* 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself." This also means that we cannot be the kind of pluralists I described in option 4. Catholics are committed to the belief that our faith is true – we cannot drop one part of it simply because another religion disagrees with it. (The pluralism of option 5 is more difficult both to understand and to contradict, but I will touch on this in the next chapter).

This booklet is therefore about dialogue, but it is also inevitably about proclamation, because interfaith dialogue cannot be silent about what we believe to be true. One of the important Vatican documents mentioned below is called *Dialogue and Proclamation*. Referring to interfaith dialogue in his talks in the United States in 2008, Benedict XVI suggested that "in our attempt to discover points of commonality, perhaps we have shied away from the responsibility to discuss our differences with calmness and clarity. ... The higher goal of interreligious dialogue requires a clear exposition of our respective religious tenets." This 'higher goal' is the achievement of truth. It means, of course, that we must be prepared to see our beliefs called into question. To listen to other points of view, to try to understand the arguments against our own, and to come up with a convincing answer to those arguments, is all part of what 'dialogue' means.

Types of Dialogue

It is important to state at the outset, however, that the kind of intellectual dialogue I have been discussing so far is only one among several types of dialogue that Catholics are engaged in. The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue talks about four. These are dialogues of life, of works, of theological discourse, and of spiritualities. To this is sometimes added dialogue of cultures.

Dialogue of life

This means living together, sharing our day-to-day struggles, becoming friends with followers of other religions, getting to know each other's way of life, joys and troubles. The success of interfaith dialogue largely depends on this important first step, because a religious tradition can only truly be known through the people who make it live, and understood through the friendship that transcends ideological differences and this means also that Christianity, like every religion, is known best by observing the people who live it best, namely the saints.

Dialogue of works

We may go a step further than simply living together, and collaborate together on some common project, whether it be building a dam or planning an exhibition or running a soup

kitchen, for the well-being of others, especially people who live alone, in poverty or sickness. Such common endeavours both test and deepen friendship and mutual understanding, and demonstrate an important solidarity between religious traditions in neighbourly charity. As Pope Benedict XVI said to the Council for Interreligious Dialogue in June 2008, "Religious collaboration offers the opportunity of expressing the highest ideals of every religious tradition. Helping the sick, giving succour to victims of natural disasters and violence, care of the elderly and the poor: these are some of the sectors in which persons of different religions can work together."

Dialogue of theological discourse

This might be better called 'intellectual dialogue', since it includes philosophical or metaphysical dialogue based on the analysis of language and natural symbolism, as well as the more strictly theological type of dialogue concerned mainly with truth as revealed in scripture. In it, thinkers of the different religions get together to compare and discuss their interpretations, assumptions, ideas, and doctrines. This enables us to understand in greater depth and detail each other's religious heritage and tradition, and helps to prevent misunderstandings that sometimes lie at the root of conflict.

Dialogue of spiritualities

Of course, spirituality or religious experience should never be divorced from theology, but this type of dialogue

is concerned more with sharing the riches of the life of prayer and meditation than with academic study and conceptual analysis. Tibetan and Benedictine monks, for example, often get together to compare experience of their lives of religious dedication that on the outside appear somewhat similar, however different the inner reality may be. Often this kind of dialogue is limited to mutual listening, in which practitioners of the various religions share their experience of prayer with each other, or at least try to express their experiences in a way the other might understand. From this process commonalities and parallels often emerge. However, any attempt to probe the actual meaning of terms in order to discern differences beneath the surface leads into the "dialogue of theological discourse" mentioned above.

Dialogue of cultures

This was stressed particularly by Pope John Paul II. As he wrote in his Message for the World Day of Peace, 1st January 2001, "People are marked by the culture whose very air they breathe through the family and the social groups around them, through education and the most varied influences of their environment, through the very relationship which they have with the place in which they live. There is no determinism here, but rather a constant dialectic between the strength of the individual's conditioning and the workings of human freedom" (n. 5). A dialogue of

cultures is one in which we try to understand the value that lies in the very distinctiveness of cultures "as historical and creative expressions of the underlying unity of the human family", sustained by common values rooted in the nature of the human person (nn. 10, 16). The exploration of artistic expressions of beauty and meaning is also an important part of the dialogue of cultures. A religion is not only a set of ideas, but a way of imagining the world.

In recent years, with the continued persecution of Christians in many Islamic countries, and the growth of international terrorism, the Pope and Pontifical Council have become conscious of the danger that Christian openness to dialogue may, in some quarters, be taken as a sign of weakness, or at least lead to certain unpleasant topics not being addressed for fear of offending the other side. The truths that we put on the table cannot always be truths that the other side already wants to hear. As Cardinal Tauran said at a conference in Kenya on 23rd April 2008: "Partners in dialogue must be open to talk about those issues not often put on the table: religious liberty, freedom of conscience, reciprocity, conversion, religious extremism, etc."

Reciprocity

In Catholic circles, the principle of reciprocity is becoming a particularly important point to insist upon. It is a condition

of dialogue that both (or all) sides be allowed to express their views openly without fear of coercion or reprisal.

This is relatively unproblematic for Christian and post-Christian groups and societies , where the rights to religious freedom affirmed by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s (see next chapter) are widely accepted. These rights were first defined and promulgated in the American Bill of Rights in 1791 and consolidated in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations. They are the fruit of a Christian civilization since they rest on respect for the divine image in man, but they have been framed in a way that does not assume Christian faith, and are now regarded as the bedrock of a secular democratic society. Other civilizations, such as the Islamic, that have not yet developed or accepted the same philosophy of human rights may find it harder to offer such freedoms.

One of the tasks for a 'dialogue of cultures' must therefore be to explore the doctrine of human rights, including the right to religious freedom. The difficulty is that for Western or Christian participants it may appear to be not so much an item for discussion as a presupposition. Nevertheless dialogue actually depends on a more primitive and universal set of principles and attitudes: human respect, empathy, the desire for truth. The formulation of mutual respect in terms of a doctrine of human rights is one way, but not the only way, to foster respect and reciprocity.

Facing Difference: Recent Developments in Dialogue

Interfaith dialogue, which was one of the themes and achievements of the Second Vatican Council (see next chapter), received an enormous boost from Pope John Paul II. In 1986 he organised an inter-religious prayer meeting in Assisi which may have been one of the inspired moments of his pontificate, although it provoked severe criticism from some Catholic conservatives.

In order to take account of these criticisms, the Pope was careful to make a distinction between 'praying with' and 'praying in the presence of' a member of another religion, given the widely different understandings we have of what it is we do when we pray, and of exactly whom we address in our prayer. It is not possible to pray a common prayer, he said, but only to pray our own prayers in the same place. He also took pains to emphasise that "The fact that we have come here does not imply any intention of seeking a religious consensus among ourselves or of negotiating our faith convictions. Neither does it mean that religions can be reconciled at the level of a common commitment in an earthly project which would surpass them all. Nor is it a concession to relativism in religious beliefs, because every human being

must sincerely follow his or her upright conscience with the intention of seeking and obeying the truth." In making these remarks, he may have had in mind several recent attempts to produce a kind of global religious alliance along the lines of a World Parliament of Religions, such as the United Religions Initiative (www.uri.org). Such attempts are full of good intentions, but risk subordinating the search for truth to the search for peace and social collaboration.

Since 1986, interfaith initiatives involving the Catholic Church have become increasingly common. In 1990 the papal encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* set this kind of initiative in the context of a strong reaffirmation of the value of evangelisation and mission – in other words, of the attempt to persuade non-Christians to become members of the Catholic Church. This was reinforced by the document *Dialogue and Proclamation* the following year by Cardinals Arinze and Tomko. And in the previous year, 1989, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under Cardinal Ratzinger had already produced a letter to the world's bishops on *Christian Meditation* which clarified some of the essential differences between Christian and other forms of spirituality and prayer.

Christian Meditation states that "the essential element of authentic Christian prayer is the meeting of two freedoms, the infinite freedom of God with the finite freedom of man" (n. 3). Christian prayer and mysticism, unlike any system of Buddhist meditation or of Yoga, is not aimed at

transcendence of the human condition. It is focused on the Person of Christ – on his love for us rather than our love for him. Any particular 'techniques' of prayer, even if they involve traditional Christian devotions such as the Jesus Prayer, or the Rosary, or certain methods of breathing and interior stillness practised by the Desert Fathers, are placed by the letter in that context. It says that Christian mysticism "has nothing to do with technique: it is always a gift of God; and the one who benefits from it knows himself to be unworthy" (n. 32). It adds that one may take from the other religions whatever is useful in the way of prayer, but only if "the Christian conception of prayer, its logic and requirements, are never obscured" (n. 16). In fact "all the aspirations which the prayer of other religions expresses are fulfilled in the reality of Christianity beyond all measure" (n. 15). But the difference is this, that according to Christianity "the personal self or the nature of a creature" is never dissolved (n. 15).

Pope Benedict XVI

Under Pope Benedict XVI the process has continued: the emphasis has been on dialogue, but perhaps increasingly on the recognition of difference. Inevitably the period after 2001 has been dominated by the growing fear of Islamicist terrorism and the so-called "War on Terror". A speech by the Pope at the University of Regensburg in September 2006 provoked outrage in Muslim circles by its citation of a dialogue written by the medieval emperor of Constantinople

during the siege of the city by Muslims around 1400. The Emperor's harsh words concerning Islam were an occasion for Pope Benedict to condemn the spreading of faith by violence as something 'unreasonable'. The Pope wanted to make the point that "not acting reasonably is contrary to God's nature", and he raised the question of whether this was as true for Muslims as it is for Christians. The Gospel of John tells us "In the beginning was the Word 'Logos', and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." For Christians, therefore, God is 'Logos', which means he is the very archetype of reasonableness. But Muslims do not have John's Gospel. If God is thought to be not Logos but pure Will, is there not a danger we will end up with "a capricious God, who is not even bound to truth and goodness"?

The comments were construed as a criticism of Islam, and Muslims protested that it was an unfair one. There were several incidents of violence against Christians as a result, but some of the outcomes were more positive. A month after the speech was delivered, thirty-eight Islamic authorities and scholars from around the world joined together to deliver an Open Letter to the Pope in the spirit of intellectual exchange and mutual understanding. It was said to be the first time in recent history that Muslim scholars from every branch of Islam had spoken with one voice about the teachings of Islam. A year after that letter, a total of 138 Muslim scholars, clerics and intellectuals from every denomination and school of thought in Islam,

and every major Islamic country or region in the world, issued *A Common Word Between Us and You* addressed to Christians everywhere. In it they affirmed a common ground between the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and the teachings of Jesus Christ (and the Jewish Scriptures) in the commandments to love God and love one's neighbour. This in turn led to other interfaith initiatives and dialogues aimed at addressing mutual concerns, including a permanent Catholic-Muslim Forum that began work in 2008. The text of the *Common Word* can be found on the official web-site, *www.acommonword.com*.

In addition to the fear of terrorism, there are two other new factors contributing to the growth in interest and sense of urgency about interfaith dialogue. One of these is widespread concern about human degradation of the environment. From being the obsession of a fringe minority in the 1960s, the environmental and conservation movement moved fully into the mainstream by the turn of the century, so that concerns about climate change, biodiversity, recycling, sustainability, and ecological balance are now commonly expressed by scientists and citizens alike. The third new factor is the continuing rise of secularism and what has been called 'the new atheism' in the consumerist West, along with a set of ideological tenets commonly referred to as 'political correctness' that seem to pervade the intellectual atmosphere in many European countries. (Of course, environmentalism itself is sometimes

dismissed as one of these tenets). The significance of these factors is that they are capable of transcending the divide between one religion and another. Just as many believers seek to work together in an alliance against terrorism, so others are trying to work together to save the earth, and others again to defend shared traditional notions of decency, morality and piety.

Three Rules for Engaging in Dialogue

The future Benedict XVI suggested three rules for the kind of religious dialogue that might be capable of discovering common moral principles without engaging in unacceptable compromise.[2]

No Renunciation of Truth

The first is "No renunciation of truth" – that is, no truth must be sacrificed for the sake of unity. Scepticism and pragmatism, he rightly points out, do not unite people anyway. We must cling to the truth we already have, but we must become capable of seeking *more* truth than we have already, by looking beyond the alien appearances of another's religion to find "the deeper truth hidden there".

Criticism of one's own religion

The second principle he enunciates is "Criticism of one's own religion". Religion, he says – even my own religion

[2] J. Ratzinger, *Many Religions – One Covenant*, 110-12.

– can fall sick, can keep us from the truth; it must be constantly purified. While it is easy to criticise the religion of the other person, we must be ready to accept criticism of our own where it is justified. Pope Benedict has made many statements that suggest he is keenly aware of the failings of Catholics – and especially of Catholic priests – in this regard.[3]

Proclamation as dialogue

The third principle is "Proclamation of the gospel as a dialogical process", or, more simply, "Proclamation as dialogue". In other words, dialogue does not replace missionary activity or evangelism on behalf of one's religion. Instead, dialogue and proclamation should 'mutually interpenetrate'. The conversation between religious representatives should not be an 'aimless chat', but be directed at finding the truth (together, in charity). Each should be a receiver as well as a giver: "We are not telling the other person something that is entirely unknown to him; rather, we are opening up the hidden depth of something with which, in his own religion, he is already in touch."

From a Christian point of view there will be things that we know to be true and that we wish to share with an interlocutor, things that they are not aware of, or perhaps

[3] He lists some examples of corruption in the various religions – including Christianity – in *Truth and Tolerance*, 204.

have misunderstood. The central truths of our faith such as the two natures of Christ and the three persons of the Trinity fall into that category. We may correspondingly learn things that we ourselves did not know, and be forced to revise our view of the other religion with which we are in dialogue. We may fail to convince our friends of particular truths that have been revealed to us, but none of us can lose from the destruction of ignorance through sympathetic study and conversation, and with it we return to our own faith enriched.

As a private theologian, as Prefect of the CDF and now as Pope, Benedict XVI knows that even if we have memorised a creed or two, truth is not the *exclusive possession* of the Christian. We have a duty to proclaim what has been revealed to us, but we also have the duty to continue listening, obeying, searching. Just as St Thomas Aquinas did in his day (with reference to the pagan Greeks and their Islamic and Jewish commentators, Averroes, Avicenna, and Maimonides), we must look to other traditions for truths that will enable us to understand better what we ourselves have been entrusted to represent. And in this he is being faithful to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, where we read that the Holy Spirit may be at work in other religions: "The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions. Indeed, the Spirit

is at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history."[4]

In a very interesting paragraph of his book *Truth and Tolerance*,[5] the future Pope Benedict asks: "Can or must a man simply make the best of the religion that happens to fall to his share, in the form in which it is actually practiced around him? Or must he not, whatever happens, be one who seeks, who strives to purify his conscience and, thus, move toward – at the very least – the purer forms of his own religion?" After all, he continues,

> "The apostles, and the early Christian congregations as a whole, were only able to see in Jesus their Saviour because they were looking for the 'hope of Israel' – because they did not simply regard the inherited religious forms of their environment as being sufficient in themselves but were waiting and seeking people with open hearts. The Church of the Gentiles could develop only because there were 'God-fearers,' people who went beyond their traditional religion and looked for something greater."

And he applies this to Christianity itself. "It is not simply a network of institutions and ideas we have to hand

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[4] *Gaudium et Spes* 38. St Thomas Aquinas has a saying he borrowed from Ambrosiaster to the effect that "All truth – no matter who says it – comes from the Holy Spirit."

[5] *Truth and Tolerance*, p. 54

on but a seeking ever in faith for faith's inmost depths, for the real encounter with Christ." We cannot simply assume that we have arrived at our goal. So it is this "dynamic of the conscience and of the silent presence of God in it that is leading religions toward one another and guiding people onto the path to God, not the canonising of what already exists, so that people are excused from any deeper searching."

The Pope has said on many occasions that to privatise religious belief as one more lifestyle option open to the religious consumer is to betray the very nature of religion. It is only by taking religion more seriously than this, in a common search for the truth, goodness, and beauty no human being and no religion can exhaust or monopolise, that the key to peaceful dialogue will be discovered. "God is always infinitely greater than all our concepts and all our images and names."[6] But all of this implies that an ecumenism which is prepared to gloss over substantial differences for the sake of initiating friendly discussion needs to give way to a more profound engagement – the kind of fruitful argument that can take place only between friends.

[6] J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 25.

On Asking the Right Questions

Having laid out the basic rules and principles of interfaith dialogue in general, I want to take a closer look at a particular set of problems that arise when we engage in such dialogue, namely the apparent inability of the participants truly to hear what each other is saying. Why is this?

Normally it is because each regards his own religion as in some way superior. His religious needs are met by the rituals and spiritual practice in which he is engaged. His religion has holy men and women who serve as models and guides for his life. The influence of such exemplary people – and, analogously, the beauty of the artistic heritage of those traditions – is understandably pervasive and long-lasting. And each religion has ways of placing other faiths in a relatively inferior position. So a Muslim, for example, will probably have been told that the Jews and Christians have falsified and corrupted their own Scriptures over time. A Christian evangelist will therefore find it hard to persuade him to read the Gospels except to find truths that he can already see in the Koran.

Another fundamental reason why communication is so difficult and at times frustrating is that each religion is an answer to a slightly different question. It is this that gives

each of us the conviction that *our own* religion is best.[7] We will be speaking at cross purposes as long as we assume that we are all talking about the same thing. Obviously we are all talking about fundamental realities and meaning, but our specific approaches are very different.

- The primary question that the religions of India tend to ask is *Who am I?* The answer that emerges from the Upanisads and from the teachings of the Buddha is that the innermost self is one with the Absolute.
- Buddhism asks, *What is the way beyond suffering?* The answer it gives is the Noble Eightfold Path of detachment from the world.
- Judaism asks, *Who are we?* Or *What is our identity as a People?* Being Jewish is being a member of the people who have been called into a Covenant by the One God, a Covenant defined in the Law, the Torah.
- Islam asks simply, *What must I believe and do, in order to be rightly guided*? The answer is that I must worship the one God only, and follow his Prophet.
- The fundamental question Christianity asks is different again: Who is Christ? The answer is: the Son of God, the second Person of the Holy Trinity.

Christianity is therefore centred not on a doctrine, or on a method, or on a law, or on a book, but on a person (and thus also, the greatest contribution of Christianity

[7] I am not ruling out the possibility that one of us may be right about that, just trying to explain why we all have the same conviction.

to civilization is arguably the importance and dignity of personality, or *personhood*, both divine and human). The message of Christ, you could say, was simply himself; he is the Word of God. He did not come to teach us something, but rather to ask us to *believe in him, in order to be saved*. And from this basic difference flow a multitude of others. For a religious perspective has to be seen as an organic whole, a carefully balanced harmony of ideas and spiritual methods, of symbolic images and ways of speaking.

If we do not recognise that the other religions have different concerns and different questions, we will continue to be puzzled that no real communication is taking place. We will be speaking in different rooms. Furthermore, we should be aware that inter-religious dialogue is as much about coming to understand each other's questions as it is about understanding the answers – in fact, the answers will make no sense without the questions.

Christianity and Buddhism

Take for example the word 'saved'. Both Christians and Buddhists use the word, but the meaning in each case is very different. When it is used in Buddhism it means *salvation from ignorance* through enlightenment, which implies the dissolution of the false self – or rather from a whole chain of false identities that is supposed to continue from life to life until enlightenment is finally attained. The origin of our state of *avidya* or ignorance is nowhere

explained. Nor is the existence of the world attributed to a creator God – the Buddha seems to have been exclusively concerned with the process of liberation itself (this did not, however, prevent the development of elaborate cosmological speculations among his followers after his death, especially in the Mahayana tradition).[8]

Christianity does have an explanation of the beginning of all things – namely a free act of creation by God. It also explains the beginning of sin and ignorance. An original graced harmony between Man and God was destroyed by human action in the garden of Eden. For Christianity, 'salvation' is from the resulting state of alienation from God, the path that leads from sin to suffering and death. Through his incarnation within history, as the culmination of his self-revelation to humanity, God overcame this alienation and invited us to join him in eternal life. Our existence is therefore destined not to be extinguished, but to be made eternal in God. Salvation is the process by which even in this life we become part of Christ.

What Christians mean by *love* also seems to differ radically from what Buddhists mean by *compassion*. For the Buddhist, compassion is the natural result of dissolving the selfish attachments which create the illusion of a self. As a Christian, I am supposed to love my neighbour as

[8] I am speaking about Buddhism at a very general level. For the significant differences between the various branches, see Paul Williams's booklet *Buddhism* from CTS.

myself; the Buddhist is taught there is ultimately no 'self' to love – my own or anyone else's. Paul Williams even argues that strictly speaking there is no 'compassion' in Buddhism, since the word means 'suffering with' and the Buddha is beyond suffering. Instead *karuna* should be translated as 'pity' (whether this makes a difference to the way we behave is another of the questions that might be examined in an inter-religious dialogue).

There is certainly a difference between the two religions in their attitude to suffering. In both, it is regarded as an evil but in Christianity, the evil has a salvific purpose. The aim is not to escape or elude suffering, but to join our suffering to that of Christ – to 'offer it up' with him. The French poet, Paul Claudel, put it another way: "Jesus did not come to explain suffering, nor to take it away; he came to fill it with his presence." In other words, Jesus's purpose was to enter into suffering in order to be with us and in order to draw us to himself: to heal the breach between God and man. For Buddhism, since suffering is regarded as the result of ignorance and craving, an 'enlightened one' does not suffer.

There was a great outcry a few years ago when Pope John Paul II, in his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, described Buddhism as a "negative" religion, in comparison to Christianity for which the world is God's creation, redeemed by Christ, in which we can meet God. According to their teachings, Buddhists claimed,

it is not the world that is evil and the source of evil so much as 'craving' (*tanha*) – that is, our undue *attachment* to the world – that is the source of evil. Even this is not as nihilistic a doctrine as it has usually been painted in the West. Buddhists do speak of the ultimate nature of all things, including the self, as a 'Void', but they do not mean by this the modern Western idea of 'nothingness'. They mean almost the opposite: a state of infinite fullness, of being which cannot be divided into parts or 'things' – '*no-thing-ness*' perhaps.

Of course, there are many different philosophical schools of Buddhism, but for example the sage Buddhagosha describes *Nirvana* (or *Nibbana* in Pali) in extremely positive terms, as "Truth transcendental, difficult to be seen, without decay, eternal, indestructible, immortal, happy, peaceful, wonderful, holy, pure and an island of refuge." Similarly, in one of the most respected Tibetan Buddhist traditions, known as *Dzog Ch'en*, the meaning of Voidness is defined simply as the absence of all mental fabrications about it. There are two levels of truth, that of relative reality and that of the Absolute. "Ultimate reality transcends the division into subject and object. It is the underlying stratum, the unborn, pure mode of existence of the appearances of the relative level."[9] So when Buddhists speak of the destruction of the self, they

[9] From *The Four-Themed Precious Garland: An Introduction to Dzog Ch'en* (Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1979), 32.

are not denying the reality of the self as it is experienced by us (much less talking about what we call the 'soul'); they are distinguishing the ultimate reality from the self as a concept in our own minds. A Christian might be wise to interpret them as referring to the destruction of what he might call the 'Old Adam', meaning the false self, the self that is in slavery to sin. Similar considerations apply when we look at the various branches of Hinduism, which are even more diverse than Buddhism (though there are close parallels between Buddhist teaching and the Advaita Vedanta, a school of thought based on the Upanisads).

It is worth noting that the medieval English mystic who wrote *The Cloud of Unknowing* and the *Epistle of Privy Counsel* similarly tells the contemplative Christian reader to set his heart on *losing self-awareness*: "not on ceasing to exist (for that would be lunacy and an insult to God), but on getting rid of the conscious knowledge of your own being; this must always happen if God's love is to be experienced here below." The author is here making a very important distinction that may show a way of entering a dialogue with Buddhism at the deepest level. We must ask ourselves seriously, are we talking about *ceasing to exist* or merely of *ceasing to be aware of our own existence*?

The Encounter with Asia

Given that the various religions ask different questions, which lead to their giving different answers, must we

conclude that dialogue is never going to lead us any further towards an ultimate truth? Everything depends on those questions. It would of course be polite to assume that each question is equally fundamental – so that the various religions can be seen as paths up the different faces of the same mountain, each eventually reaching the same top. Or perhaps they are paths up completely different mountains, from which the intrepid climbers wave to each other as they continue their climb. But we do not need to assume that the questions *are* all equally profound. It is important to recognise that they are different, but that is only the first step in conducting a serious dialogue concerning the relative merits of the questions, and the possible reach of the answers. This, to my mind, is where interfaith dialogue really starts to get interesting.

Towards the end of his life in 1988, the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (who was, by the way, no admirer of Buddhism) wrote about the encounter between Christian and Asian forms of spirituality. He believed that the encounter might turn out to be more important for Christianity even than the earlier encounter with Greek civilization, which created the culture of the Middle Ages. "The question is," he wrote in a letter to an enquirer: "does selflessness mean emptiness or Trinitarian love? The dialogue is possible."[10] Now by this he did not

[10] Cited in Raymond Gawronski SJ, *Word and Silence*, p. 221. See Further Reading.

mean that the Asian religions possess the doctrine of the Trinity. In fact they sometimes do speak of divine triads or trinities (the Trimurti consisting of Brahma, Shiva and Visnu, for example, or the other main Hindu triad of Being, Consciousness and Bliss, *Sat-Chit-Ananda*), but these are not the same as the Christian Trinity which was revealed through the Incarnation. Trinity and the Incarnation go together, as two aspects of a mystery that Christians believe is not revealed to the eyes of meditation, nor in the scriptures of the other religions, but exclusively through God's initiative in sharing with us his own interior life. Once again, an apparent similarity may be masking a fundamental divide. But Balthasar is reaching for the top of the mountain – he is wondering if the questions really do converge on an experience that can be expressed in different ways.

I think that what Balthasar meant was probably something like this. Is the 'self' that is denied – and the 'God' that is denied – by Buddhist spirituality something that Christianity also would deny? Asian religions do not (cannot) have the positive doctrine that is revealed in Christianity. But if they lack the *doctrine*, are they nevertheless open in some way to the *reality*? Given that Buddhism concentrates on the denial of the false self, is it also potentially open to the revelation of a self (and likewise of a God) that would not be false? Can we therefore speak about our Christian experience of this self, without having

our statements dismissed as if they concerned only the false self? And this is a rather delicate question, which perhaps cannot even be answered for the religion as a whole, but only for a particular believer. For if the formal doctrine of the religion denies the existence of a self or of a God, then in a very important way it is by definition closed to Christianity. But a person who adheres to that religion in good conscience, as a genuine seeker of truth who as yet has found nothing truer, may well be open to dialogue in a way that the religion as such cannot be.

Explaning the Incarnation and the Trinity

For a Christian involved in dialogue, it will always be a challenge to explain what is meant by the Incarnation and the Trinity. The world religions all know that duality is transcended by unity. It is only the Christian who claims that *even unity is transcended* (by the Trinity). The other religions know that God is unknowable by us, and cannot even be described in human concepts or grasped by our consciousness. But Christians believe that God knows himself, and has chosen to reveal his self-knowledge to us in Christ. The Asian religions tend to teach that everything that has a beginning must also come to an end, must be reabsorbed by the Absolute. But the Christian Trinity makes it possible for something that has a beginning *not to have an end*. For our uniqueness as persons, our difference from God and from each other, is founded on the very

thing that alone transcends time, namely love, and "Love never ends" (1 *Co* 13:8). For Christianity, our relationships with others around us are more important than any state of consciousness or enlightenment, because it is through these relationships that we enter eternal life, which is the life of the Blessed Trinity.

This Christian claim needs to be put as strongly as possible to avoid misunderstanding. It may be that Christ offers offers salvation not only from Hell, but even from *Nirvana*.[11] There is a hope that Christian faith awakens in us that is something new in the history of world religions – the hope that comes from knowing that the God who made the whole world loves us personally, and that we are in his hands. What we long for, and cannot attain in this world, is a sign of the fulfilment that is possible in the next. This Christian hope gives rise to love, for the one who is loved is able to love others in turn. Benedict XVI writes about this in his encyclical on hope, *Spe Salvi*.

That is not to say, however, that Christians must believe that Buddhists whose sights are set on *Nirvana* will not be saved. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Buddhism appears to be a path for the pure in heart, the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful. The Buddha, purifying himself of all selfish desire, was surely purifying

[11] It could be argued that the equivalent to *Nirvana* in Christian teaching is "Limbo", a state of perfect natural happiness, without pain or glory. The existence of such a state is disputed by theologians.

his heart, and it is hard to believe that good Christians will not meet the Buddha in heaven. What Christians believe is that the followers of other religions will be saved by Christ, whether they know it or not.[12] Furthermore they may be saved more easily if they know the source and meaning of their salvation. This may appear patronising, but it is a claim that needs to be acknowledged if the dialogue is to be an honest one on both sides. It is precisely this kind of honesty that may lead to a deeper understanding of the points at issue.

The Children of Abraham

Last but not least, what of our dialogue with religions in the same Abrahamic family as Christianity – the two other main branches of Middle-Eastern monotheism, Judaism and Islam? The two are, of course, very different, and indeed often at loggerheads, especially in the Middle East where political events have complicated the relationships between the followers of each religion (to put it mildly). Those political events are beyond the scope of this booklet.

[12] "Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation" (*Lumen Gentium* n. 16; see also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paras 846-8).

Judaism

By treating Judaism and Jewish religious leaders with great respect, as well as in their official teachings about the value of Judaism as such, the Second Vatican Council and the post-conciliar popes have succeeded in overturning a great deal of the anti-semitism that at various times has marred Christian attitudes and history. The attitude that "it was the Jews who killed Jesus" has given way before the realisation that it was a small clique of Jewish leaders and the Romans who actually had him killed. Jesus himself *was* Jewish, along with all his closest disciples, and Christianity is inextricably and eternally bound up with the religion of Moses (see Roy Schoeman's books listed in Further Reading).

Almost equally important is the realisation that, while Christians continue to hope for Jewish recognition of Jesus as the foretold Suffering Servant and Messiah of their own tradition, the rejection by most Jews of his implied claim to divinity even during Jesus's lifetime was a form of fidelity to the Covenant as conventionally understood – and hence presumably in most cases 'non-culpable'. God's promises remain valid. In the words of *Nostra Aetate* (echoing St Paul in *Romans* 11:25-32), God "does not repent of the gifts he makes or of the calls he issues". In this sense Christians can concede some kind of continuing validity to the Jewish Covenant, as long as Jews are unable in good conscience to see the way in which it is fulfilled and renewed in Christianity

(that is, until Jesus returns in glory, when we believe he will be recognised by all). That does not mean Christians should not work, as well as hope, for Jewish recognition of Jesus as the Son of God who opened the covenant to all, but it helps to understand why the task is so difficult.

Islam

The mystery of Islam, which is a reversion against Christian Trinitarian belief back to the monotheism of the desert (Muslims see this as a purification), can be seen as linked to that of Israel – the two peoples being traditionally identified as the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael, both sons of Abraham. Of Ishmael, the ancestor of the Arabs through Hagar the Egyptian, the Bible tells us God said, "I will bless him and make him fruitful and multiply him exceedingly, and I will make him a great nation" (*Gn* 17:20). Thus the Bible says the Arabs are blessed, yet the Covenant was made with Isaac. And we may even speculate that in some mysterious way the continued existence of the Jewish Covenant in the period after the first coming of Christ and before the second makes the existence of Islam possible – as a religious movement that borrows from Judaism the notion of a nation under the one God and from Christianity the notion that all men are to be included within it.

Thus at one level we can make a kind of sense of the existence of these two religions, both of which accepted

as much of God's revelation as they could, short of Christ himself. After all, the Rabbi from Galilee must be interpreted as a blasphemer by anyone who rejects his claim to divinity. And that claim is necessarily a 'stumbling block' (1 *Co* 1:23), because it is revealed to the eyes of faith, not reason. It becomes marginally less unintelligible only in the light of the doctrine of the Trinity, which was revealed to the early Christians as they were led into 'all truth' by the Holy Spirit (*Jn* 16:13).[13]

On another level, of course, we have to grapple with the very real doctrinal differences that flow from this fundamental rejection of Christ as the Son of God.[14] The differences from Islam are well known. The Koran rejects the Trinity and the idea that Jesus is more than a prophet, being divine as well as human. It seems even to reject the idea that Jesus died on the cross, on the grounds that this looks like a defeat and would have been detrimental to his dignity. Instead, he was taken up to heaven, from where he will return at the end of time. These differences from the Christian account are undeniably radical. However, a closer look reveals ambiguities that most Muslims themselves are unwilling to investigate or discuss. Most importantly, the

[13] Later on we find the mystics of both Judaism and Islam coming close to the idea of an "incarnate Logos" in their notions of Adam Kadmon, and the Universal and Perfect Man.

[14] For detailed comparisons see the book by Jacques Jomier OP listed in Further Reading.

'Trinity' rejected in the Koran is actually not the Christian Trinity at all, but a divine triad of God, Jesus and Mary (Christians are as deeply committed to a belief in the oneness of God as Muslims or Jews. The Trinity is never to be understood in a way that compromises that Unity).[15] The Koran does, nonetheless, accept the virgin birth, and has a very similar version of the annunciation story.

The implications of all this for dialogue are two-fold. First, we must respect the consciences of other believers, acknowledging that to them our own beliefs may seem impossible and self-contradictory (and if we truly respect reason, we would never want another person to accept our beliefs as long as they appeared this way to them). And we must accept that both Judaism and Islam have great spiritual richness in their own right, which gives their followers many reasons to remain faithful to them. But, second, since we ourselves understand our beliefs to be both well-founded and logically coherent, we are obliged do our best to communicate this understanding to others. In some places and times, this obligation carries the risk of persecution – for "the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God" (*John* 16:2).

[15] Father, Son and Spirit, each identical with the One Undivided God, are not three individuals. We are sometimes confused about this because the only persons we can see around us – human persons – also happen to be individuals. There is no space to go into the theology of that here, but it is an important topic for dialogue.

Conclusion

We can pull the threads together using a very helpful theological account of inter-religious dialogue written by a Cistercian, Fr Roch Kereszty, in an article for the journal *Communio*.[16] Kereszty begins by explaining the rationale for dialogue. All religions claim a certain knowledge of truth. Dialogue founded on mutual respect and openness requires that this knowledge be associated not with the 'possession' but with the 'contemplation' of truth. "If this is so, in no dialogue may the truth be used as a weapon to assert one's superiority over the other, but truth is always (potentially, at least) a common treasure we both acknowledge as transcending, enriching, and even governing us. In the moment we abuse the truth as a means of domination, we have already distorted it."

Most importantly, Fr Kereszty continues: "This understanding of truth, however, excludes any relativist approach. If my dialogue partner's affirmation of a truth can be valid only for him/her but not for myself, and vice versa, the dialogue cannot enrich either of us; it will degenerate

[16] Autumn 2002. See also his article on the Word of God in dialogue with Judaism and Islam in the Autumn 2001 issue of the same journal, and the fifth chapter of his Jesus Christ: *Fundamentals of Christology* (NY: Alba House, 2002).

into a double monologue that may call for mutual sympathy but renders and exchange of views ultimately meaningless." Dialogue is built into our nature, as creatures made in the image of the Trinity. God's mode of self-revelation takes this into account, since God (the ultimate truth) approaches us through an Incarnation that only fully reveals its riches "through the whole of history and through all redeemed humankind". This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

On the basis of these principles, Fr Kereszty discusses the discernment that a Christian will need to make in any encounter with another religion. Original sin, personal sins and accumulated ignorance have had a distorting effect on all cultures and religions (if not on the essential structures of the Catholic Church or her teachings). On the other hand, grace has also been active in those cultures and religions. Individual non-Christians may collaborate with that grace, and the particular teachings of other religions may contain truths that even Christians can accept or recognise as belonging to the fuller understanding of a truth revealed in Christ. (He refers to *ahimsa* or non-violence, certain forms of *yoga*, the necessity of dying to the 'false self' in Buddhism, the value of vicarious suffering for others, the natural law of the *Tao*, celibacy as the integration of yin and yang, and so on). In fact he argues that the divinely intended fuller understanding of the Christian mysteries and way of life has been and will always be achieved *only in dialogue* with other religious cultures.

Critical Discernment

The attempt to integrate truths from other religions is, nevertheless, fraught with peril if not undertaken with 'critical discernment'. The Christian possesses a principle of discernment in the deposit of faith under the guidance of the magisterium of the Church. The Church, through its essential structures, extends the teachings, actions and person of Christ to all times and places. Equipped with this criterion, the Christian can engage in dialogue in relative safety, learning from others, sorting truth from falsehood, and assisting all who are "obedient to the operation of the Holy Spirit" in their own religions to come to a fuller knowledge of the truth. All Christians, however, must cling to the fundamental points that make Christianity distinctively itself: Incarnation (hypostatic union) and Trinity, together with the whole Christian mystery whose understanding is constantly unfolding in dialogue. Authentic dialogue is not dependent upon downplaying or discarding the characteristic beliefs of any given religion, let alone one's own. This need not blind us to the truths found in other religious texts.

The Centrality of the Trinity

Again and again we come back to the Trinity, which is the most difficult Christian belief to reconcile with any kind of religious pluralism, and therefore the most urgent

for us to explain and defend to others. At the same time, Gavin D'Costa argues,[17] it may be the most secure basis for genuine tolerance and openness in dialogue, since as Christians from the Church Fathers to the bishops of the Second Vatican Council have acknowledged, there are "seeds of the Word" scattered all through the world by the presence of the Holy Spirit working in all human societies, cultures and religions. The Trinity is our supreme model for dialogue.

By engaging in dialogue for the sake of truth we share in the life of Christ, who is the Word of the Father, carried on the breath of the Holy Spirit. We speak because we love. Our God is a self-communicating God, a God who is love and therefore self-gift.

> "The Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son is together with the Father and the Son one God who is communion in the depth of his mystery. This Trinitarian mystery of love and communion is the eminent model for human relations and the foundation of dialogue."[18]

[17] *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity,* 99-142.

[18] The Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Letter to Presidents of Bishops' Conferences on the Spirituality of Dialogue* (Vatican, 1999).

Key Texts from the Second Vatican Council

The teachings of the Church relevant to interfaith dialogue have been summed up by the Second Vatican Council, in which the world's Catholic bishops came together in the 1960s to chart a course for Catholic thinking in the future. The most relevant documents of the Council are *Lumen Gentium* (Light of the Peoples), *Dignitatis Humane* (Declaration on Religious Freedom) and *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions). Pope John Paul II in his encyclical letters *Redemptoris Missio* and *Fides et Ratio* developed this teaching further, and it was consolidated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

The Conciliar teachings were often very different in tone and attitude from previous magisterial teachings on the subject – so much so that some Catholics (such as the schismatic Archbishop Lefebvre) concluded that the tradition of the Church had been broken. Nevertheless, a closer look shows that what had taken place was not a change in the official teaching but what John Henry Newman termed a 'development of doctrine', in which the essential point of the earlier teaching was preserved

and adapted for the changed (pluralistic) conditions of the modern world.[19]

What follows are the key passages from the documents of the Council – the foundations of the modern Catholic approach to interfaith dialogue – brought together for ease of reference.

Lumen Gentium (1964)

The Council teaches in this document (a) that the Church is necessary for salvation, but (b) that Catholics are not necessarily saved unless they 'persevere in charity', and that (c) non-Catholics may attain salvation by seeking God in their own ways, provided they do not 'serve the creature rather than the Creator' or fall into 'final despair'.

> 2. The eternal Father, by a free and hidden plan of His own wisdom and goodness, created the whole world. His plan was to raise men to a participation of the divine life. Fallen in Adam, God the Father did not leave men to themselves, but ceaselessly offered helps to salvation, in view of Christ, the Redeemer "who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature". All the elect, before time began, the Father "foreknew and pre- destined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that he should be the firstborn among many

[19] See Ian Ker, "Is *Dignitatis Humanae* a Case of Authentic Doctrinal Development?" in *Logos* (11:2 (Spring 2008), 149-57.

> brethren". He planned to assemble in the holy Church all those who would believe in Christ. Already from the beginning of the world the foreshadowing of the Church took place. It was prepared in a remarkable way throughout the history of the people of Israel and by means of the Old Covenant. In the present era of time the Church was constituted and, by the outpouring of the Spirit, was made manifest. At the end of time it will gloriously achieve completion, when, as is read in the Fathers, all the just, from Adam and "from Abel, the just one, to the last of the elect," will be gathered together with the Father in the universal Church.
>
> 13. ... All men are called to be part of this catholic unity of the people of God which in promoting universal peace presages it. And there belong to or are related to it in various ways, the Catholic faithful, all who believe in Christ, and indeed the whole of mankind, for all men are called by the grace of God to salvation.
>
> 14. This Sacred Council wishes to turn its attention firstly to the Catholic faithful. Basing itself upon Sacred Scripture and Tradition, it teaches that the Church, now sojourning on earth as an exile, is necessary for salvation. Christ, present to us in His Body, which is the Church, is the one Mediator and the unique way of salvation. In explicit terms He Himself affirmed the

necessity of faith and baptism and thereby affirmed also the necessity of the Church, for through baptism as through a door men enter the Church. Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse to enter or to remain in it, could not be saved.

They are fully incorporated in the society of the Church who, possessing the Spirit of Christ accept her entire system and all the means of salvation given to her, and are united with her as part of her visible bodily structure and through her with Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops. The bonds which bind men to the Church in a visible way are profession of faith, the sacraments, and ecclesiastical government and communion. He is not saved, however, who, though part of the body of the Church, does not persevere in charity. He remains indeed in the bosom of the Church, but, as it were, only in a "bodily" manner and not "in his heart." All the Church's children should remember that their exalted status is to be attributed not to their own merits but to the special grace of Christ. If they fail moreover to respond to that grace in thought, word and deed, not only shall they not be saved but they will be the more severely judged.

… 16. Finally, those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of

God. In the first place we must recall the people to whom the testament and the promises were given and from whom Christ was born according to the flesh. On account of their fathers this people remains most dear to God, for God does not repent of the gifts He makes nor of the calls He issues. But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Mohammedans, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind. Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and all things, and as Saviour wills that all men be saved. Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel. She knows that it is given by Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life. But often men, deceived by the Evil One, have

become vain in their reasonings and have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, serving the creature rather than the Creator. Or some there are who, living and dying in this world without God, are exposed to final despair. Wherefore to promote the glory of God and procure the salvation of all of these, and mindful of the command of the Lord, "Preach the Gospel to every creature", the Church fosters the missions with care and attention.

Dignitatis Humanae (1965)

Notice in these passages from the Declaration on Religious Freedom that the Council affirms (a) that the "one true religion subsists in the Catholic and Apostolic Church", (b) that Catholics are obliged to evangelise without the use of force, and (c) that all human beings have the right and obligation to seek the truth in freedom, and adhere to it when known.

1. ... First, the council professes its belief that God Himself has made known to mankind the way in which men are to serve Him, and thus be saved in Christ and come to blessedness. We believe that this one true religion subsists in the Catholic and Apostolic Church, to which the Lord Jesus committed the duty of spreading it abroad among all men. Thus He spoke to the Apostles: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of

all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have enjoined upon you" (*Mt* 28:19-20). On their part, all men are bound to seek the truth, especially in what concerns God and His Church, and to embrace the truth they come to know, and to hold fast to it.

This Vatican Council likewise professes its belief that it is upon the human conscience that these obligations fall and exert their binding force. The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it makes its entrance into the mind at once quietly and with power.

Religious freedom, in turn, which men demand as necessary to fulfill their duty to worship God, has to do with immunity from coercion in civil society. Therefore it leaves untouched traditional Catholic doctrine on the moral duty of men and societies toward the true religion and toward the one Church of Christ.

Over and above all this, the council intends to develop the doctrine of recent popes on the inviolable rights of the human person and the constitutional order of society.

2. This Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part

of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.

The council further declares that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself. This right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognised in the constitutional law whereby society is governed and thus it is to become a civil right.

It is in accordance with their dignity as persons – that is, beings endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear personal responsibility – that all men should be at once impelled by nature and also bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. They are also bound to adhere to the truth, once it is known, and to order their whole lives in accord with the demands of truth However, men cannot discharge these obligations in a manner in keeping with their own nature unless they enjoy immunity from external coercion as well as psychological freedom. Therefore the right to religious freedom has its foundation not in the subjective disposition of the person, but in his very nature. In consequence, the right to this immunity

continues to exist even in those who do not live up to their obligation of seeking the truth and adhering to it and the exercise of this right is not to be impeded, provided that just public order be observed.

3. ... Truth, however, is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue, in the course of which men explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for truth.

The term 'subsists in' (see the second sentence in the extracts above) has been the subject of some scrutiny and discussion, especially as it is found also in the Council's dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*. It seems to mean here not that the visible Catholic Church is simply identical with the one true religion or Church, but that, like the exposed tip of an iceberg, it is certainly part of and inseparable from it.

Nostra Aetate (1965)

The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions is the main Catholic Charter for interfaith dialogue in the modern period.

1. ... Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good, what sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgment and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?

2. From ancient times down to the present, there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history; at times some indeed have come to the recognition of a Supreme Being, or even of a Father. This perception and recognition penetrates their lives with a profound religious sense.

Religions, however, that are bound up with an advanced culture have struggled to answer the same questions by means of more refined concepts and a more developed language. Thus in Hinduism, men contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an inexhaustible abundance of myths and through searching philosophical inquiry. They seek freedom from the anguish of our human condition either through ascetical practices or

profound meditation or a flight to God with love and trust. Again, Buddhism, in its various forms, realises the radical insufficiency of this changeable world; it teaches a way by which men, in a devout and confident spirit, may be able either to acquire the state of perfect liberation, or attain, by their own efforts or through higher help, supreme illumination. Likewise, other religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing "ways," comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.

The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognise, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and

moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.

3. The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all- powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.

4. As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock.

Thus the Church of Christ acknowledges that, according to God's saving design, the beginnings of her faith and her election are found already among the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. She professes that all who believe in Christ – Abraham's sons according to faith – are included in the same Patriarch's call, and likewise that the salvation of the Church is mysteriously foreshadowed by the chosen people's exodus from the land of bondage. The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles. Indeed, the Church believes that by His cross Christ, Our Peace, reconciled Jews and Gentiles, making both one in Himself.

The Church keeps ever in mind the words of the Apostle about his kinsmen: "theirs is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises; theirs are the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:4-5), the Son of the Virgin Mary. She also recalls that the Apostles, the

Church's main-stay and pillars, as well as most of the early disciples who proclaimed Christ's Gospel to the world, sprang from the Jewish people.

As Holy Scripture testifies, Jerusalem did not recognise the time of her visitation, nor did the Jews in large number, accept the Gospel; indeed not a few opposed its spreading. Nevertheless, God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues – such is the witness of the Apostle. In company with the Prophets and the same Apostle, the Church awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and "serve him shoulder to shoulder" (Soph. 3:9).

Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues.

True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected

or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ.

Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.

Besides, as the Church has always held and holds now, Christ underwent His passion and death freely, because of the sins of men and out of infinite love, in order that all may reach salvation. It is, therefore, the burden of the Church's preaching to proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God's all-embracing love and as the fountain from which every grace flows.

Gaudium et Spes (1965)

Finally, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World also made dialogue a major theme, though in a wider context than the encounter of religions. In section 28 of that Constitution we are given some basic principles to bear in mind:

Respect and love ought to be extended also to those who think or act differently than we do in social, political and even religious matters. In fact, the more deeply we come to understand their ways of thinking through such courtesy and love, the more easily will we be able to enter into dialogue with them.

This love and good will, to be sure, must in no way render us indifferent to truth and goodness. Indeed love itself impels the disciples of Christ to speak the saving truth to all men. But it is necessary to distinguish between error, which always merits repudiation, and the person in error, who never loses the dignity of being a person even when he is flawed by false or inadequate religious notions. God alone is the judge and searcher of hearts, for that reason He forbids us to make judgments about the internal guilt of anyone.

Other important texts

Redemptoris Mission

"Dialogue does not originate from tactical concerns or self-interest, but is an activity with its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity. It is demanded by

deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills. Through dialogue, the Church seeks to uncover the 'seeds of the Word,' a 'ray of that truth which enlightens all men'; these are found in individuals and in the religious traditions of mankind. Dialogue is based on hope and love, and will bear fruit in the Spirit. Other religions constitute a positive challenge for the Church: they stimulate her both to discover and acknowledge the signs of Christ's presence and of the working of the Spirit, as well as to examine more deeply her own identity and to bear witness to the fullness of Revelation which she has received for the good of all.

"This gives rise to the spirit which must enliven dialogue in the context of mission. Those engaged in this dialogue must be consistent with their own religious traditions and convictions, and be open to understanding those of the other party without pretense or closed-mindedness, but with truth, humility and frankness, knowing that dialogue can enrich each side. There must be no abandonment of principles nor false irenicism, but instead a witness given and received for mutual advancement on the road of religious inquiry and experience, and at the same time for the elimination of prejudice, intolerance and misunderstandings. Dialogue leads to inner purification

and conversion which, if pursued with docility to the Holy Spirit, will be spiritually fruitful."

Pope John Paul II,
Redemptoris Missio (Vatican, 1990), section 56

Pope Benedict XVI to representatives of other religions

"I assure you that the Church wants to continue building bridges of friendship with the followers of all religions, in order to seek the true good of every person and of society as a whole. The world in which we live is often marked by conflicts, violence and war, but it earnestly longs for peace, peace which is above all a gift from God, peace for which we must pray without ceasing. Yet peace is also a duty to which all peoples must be committed, especially those who profess to belong to religious traditions. Our efforts to come together and foster dialogue are a valuable contribution to building peace on solid foundations. Pope John Paul II, my venerable predecessor, wrote at the start of the new millennium that 'The name of the one God must become increasingly what it is: a name of peace and a summons to peace' (Novo Millennio Ineunte, No. 55). It is therefore imperative to engage in authentic and sincere dialogue, built on respect for the dignity of every human

person, created, as we Christians firmly believe, in the image and likeness of God *(*cf. *Gn* 1:26-27)."

Pope Benedict XVI to representatives of
other religions, Monday 25th April 2005

See also the Further Reading section below.

Further Reading

Church documents

Apart from the forthcoming guidelines or directory on inter-religious dialogue to be published by the Pontifical Council, there are three documents in particular that should be studied in detail by Catholics involved in interfaith dialogue. They are available from CTS and on the official Vatican web-site (www.vatican.va).

John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio: On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate* (Vatican, 1990)

Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Vatican, 1991)

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* (Vatican, 2000)

See also the full texts of the documents listed in the previous section.

Other reading

Pratima Bowes, *The Hindu Religious Tradition: A Philosophical Approach* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978)

Francis Clark, *Godfaring: On Reason, Faith, and Sacred Being* (London: St Pauls, 2000)

Frederick Copleston, *Religion and the One: Philosophies East and West* (London: Search Press, 1982)

Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000)

Raymond Gawronski SJ, *Word and Silence: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Spiritual Encounter between East and West* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995)

Paul J. Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001)

Jacques Jomier OP, *The Bible and the Qur'an* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002)

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2004)

Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004)

Joseph Ratzinger, *Many Religions – One Covenant* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998)

Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004)

Michel Remaud, *Israel, Servant of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2003)

James V. Schall, *The Regensburg Lecture* (South Bend, IN: St Augustine's Press, 2007)

Roy H. Schoeman, *Salvation is From the Jews: The Role of Judaism in Salvation History from Abraham to the Second Coming* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003)

Massimo Serretti (ed.), *The Uniqueness and Universality of Jesus Christ: In Dialogue with the Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004)

Other relevant CTS booklets

Catholic–Jewish Relations: Documents from the Holy See

J.M. Gaskell, *Islam from a Catholic Perspective*

Roy Schoeman, *Judaism from a Catholic Perspective*

Paul M. Williams, *Buddhism from a Catholic Perspective*