

Some Asian questions on the dictatorship of relativism

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Claim of absolute truth

Pope Benedict XVI as Cardinal Ratzinger had often expressed his serious concern over the problem of what he called "relativism" in theological thinking and in interreligious relations. The Declaration "Dominus Iesus on the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church", issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) on August 6th, 2000, signed by him and ratified and confirmed by Pope John Paul II, states:

"The Church's constant missionary proclamation is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism, not only *de facto* but also *de jure* (or in principle) ... The roots of these problems are to be found in certain presuppositions of both a theological and philosophical nature, which hinder the understanding and acceptance of the revealed truth ... On the basis of such presuppositions, which may evince different nuances, certain theological proposals are developed – at times presented as assertions, and at times as hypotheses – in which Christian revelation and the mystery of Jesus Christ and the Church lose their character of absolute truth and salvific universality, or at least shadows of doubt and uncertainty are cast upon them".¹

The Declaration emphasizes the necessity of Christ and of the Church for the salvation of all humanity:

"With the coming of the Saviour Jesus Christ, God has willed that the Church founded by him (sic) to be the instrument for the salvation of all humanity (cf. Acts 17:30-31). This truth of faith does not lessen the sincere respect which the Church has for the religions of the world, but at the same time, it rules out, in a radical way, that mentality of indifferentism characterized by a religious relativism which leads to the belief that 'one religion is as good as another'. If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that objectively speaking they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation".²

In March 1993 Cardinal Ratzinger delivered a speech in Hong Kong warning against "cultural relativism". He warned specifically against a tendency among certain theologians working in interreligious dialogue to em-

¹ Dominus Iesus on the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, p. 4.

² Ibid.

phasize the reign of God rather than of Christ or the Church, mentioning Jesuit Fr. Jacques Dupuis in a footnote. In May 1996, Ratzinger identified the "theology of religious pluralism" as the gravest threat facing the Church and compared it to liberation theology in the 1980's.³

In the sermon to the Cardinals at the Mass for the election of the Pope on April 18th, 2005, Cardinal Ratzinger stressed the danger of relativism for the Church, of believers being infants in the faith:

"... tossed by waves and swept along by every wind of teaching arising from human trickery (Eph 4:14). This description is very relevant today. How many winds of doctrine we have known in recent decades, how many ideological currents, how many ways of thinking ... thrown from one extreme to the other: from Marxism to Liberalism, even to libertinism, from collectivism to radical individualism; from atheism to a vague religious mysticism, from agnosticism to syncretism, and so forth. Every day new sects are created and what St. Paul says about human trickery comes true, with cunning which tries to draw those into error (cf. Eph 4:14).⁴

Cardinal Ratzinger warned the Conclave that:

"we are moving towards a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one's own ego and one's own desires".⁵

Among some of the preoccupations of the Cardinal (and Pope) are the issues presently faced by the Church in the West on secularization and de-Christianization and those faced in Asia due to the existence of other religions and cultures. In the West there is some debate in society and among the Churches on issues of morality, especially sexuality, and the spirituality and internal relationships within the Churches. I am commenting here only on some questions that arise concerning relativism in the Asian context of religious pluralism and of our ancient cultures.

³ J.L. Allen, in: National Catholic Reporter (15.09.2000).

⁴ Sermon to the Cardinals at the Mass for the election of the Pope, on April 18th, 2005.

It would be interesting to read further to see how St. Paul himself interprets this mature faith in Christ. "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives be subject to your husbands as to the Lord; for the man is the head as Christ also is the head of the Church. Christ is, indeed, the Saviour of the body; just as the Church is subject to Christ, so must women be to their husbands in everything. Husbands love your wives ... Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, single-mindedly, as serving Christ. You masters, also, must do the same by them ..." (Eph 4:22-5:9).

⁵ Ibid.

What is truth?

A claim of Cardinal Ratzinger is that the Catholic Church possesses the absolute truth concerning theological issues such as the universal salvific mission of Jesus Christ, the necessity of the Church for the salvation of all humans, and the limitations of other religions in regard to salvation. In this connection we can raise some basic questions, as to the human capacity and manner of knowing the truth concerning the Divine and life after death. We can distinguish several aspects of our relationship to the absolute truth:

- a) the truth in itself, or the objective truth;
- b) the truth as known by us in our mind, in a given context;
- c) the truth as communicated by us in human language, symbols, signs ...;
- d) the truth as understood by the recipient of our message in his/her own language and context.

In the affirmation of claims to interpret teachings on the nature and actions of God, we can recall that the divine is beyond the ken of human intelligence. No one has seen God and the divine is unfathomable by humans. All that theologians and teachers of religion can know of God is necessarily expressed only in analogies and metaphorical language. Not only are these culturally conditioned, but also limited by never being capable of being expressed or interpreted in univocal terms.

Hence all human knowledge of the divine is relative – conditioned by factors such as language, culture, philosophy, context, translations, and interpretations. Humans can thus have only relative understandings of the divine. Cardinal Ratzinger would seem to claim that Christians, particularly Catholics, are privileged to have a special revelation of God through Jesus Christ:

"A faith which is deeply rooted in friendship with Christ is adult and mature. It is this friendship which opens up to us all that is good and gives us the knowledge to judge true from false, and deceit from truth ...

The Lord defines friendship in a dual way. There are no secrets among friends: Christ tells us all everything he hears from the Father; he gives us this full trust, and with that also knowledge".⁶

The Cardinal underlines "a clear faith, based on the creed of the Church". This reminds us of the creeds defined by the Councils, such as of Nicene in 325 and of Chalcedon in 451. Who are the recipients of this full truth, divine friendship and knowledge to judge truth from falsehood?

⁶ Ibid.

Which Christ?

In this connection we are prompted to ask who is the Christ in whom we have faith, who speaks to us and reveals the full truth to us? It would not be irrelevant to ask what is the face of this Christ, his personality, relationship to the divinity, and role in human salvation. Jesus Christ is not necessarily the Christ of the Christologies. Whom does the Cardinal refer to as our Lord and teacher?

- i Jesus of Nazareth in Himself, as of the Gospels or of the Early Church?
- ii The uncreated Logos, co-eternal with the Father and the Holy Spirit, in whom all things have their being?
- iii The Incarnate Word on earth united to the humanity of Jesus?
- iv The crucified Jesus?
- v Jesus Christ as defined by the Councils, often under the dominion of the emperors as Constantine, and resorting to repression of dissent with condemnation and by exile?
- vi Christ as in alliance with imperial powers, Christ the King?
- vii Christ as the champion and motivator of the wars against Islam, of the Crusades?
- viii Christ of the Inquisition, and the Index, and religious intolerance?
- ix Christ of the colonial conquerors, of the wars of religions?
- x Christ of the New Christian Right, of the clash of civilizations, against the axis of evil?

When we combine these options with the limitations of human knowledge and the ways of understanding a truth *in se* and as communicated, we can think of the different combinations and permutations that can be proposed as the truth about human life and salvation, and about Jesus Christ, the Church and God (e.g. try: a) The truth in itself, and i: Jesus of Nazareth in itself. Likewise try: c-v, or d-viii from the above categories). There are dozens of Christologies that have evolved in the course of the Church's teaching ministry. We can ask ourselves how Jesus Christ has been presented by the Christian Churches in different periods of history and contexts.

A relativist view of Christianity

Is it not true that during the period from about 500 AD to about 1950 the Catholic Church had a teaching that regarded other faiths as false, enemies of Christianity and, where possible, even to be eliminated? Is it also not a

fact that Christians, particularly of the West, were involved in wars against other peoples for centuries, as in the Crusades, the wars of the religions, the wars of colonization? Did not the Churches generally justify their wars as just wars, with God being on their side? We can think in this connection of the Papal Bulls of the 15th century and following, that motivated Christians to invade the lands of the unbelievers, as in the Americas, and even legitimized the taking over of their lands. One could make a long list of such questions.

How could Christians, including the Popes of the times, claiming to be friends of the humble and peace-loving Jesus Christ, have received such war-inspiring messages from Him? How could they convince their victims that the Church had the absolute truth about God and salvation when they literally eliminated millions of poor defenceless peoples and took over their lands in so many parts of the world? How can peoples from the invaded and conquered countries, including those in Africa and Asia, be persuaded that Christians were the possessors of the absolute truth concerning God and Jesus Christ and bearers of a message of salvation and of freedom? Can we accept even now that the Church over those centuries had a correct understanding and interpretation of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ? Were they not promoting a relativist version of Christianity that benefited Christians especially from the West? Was such an intolerant and aggressive relativism, claiming to possess the absolute truth, not one of the worst and widest forms of religious domination that humanity has ever experienced?

A question that arises from the Asian context is why is it that Christians, claiming to have the absolute truth, were so intolerant of the other religions in Asia till recent decades? Is not the history of inter-relations of other religions (and philosophies) in Asia over 2000 years rather one of a more peaceful living together and even inter-communion? We can think of how Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism evolved and lived side by side in these countries, even in spite of political rulers of different faith persuasions.

A still more striking question is: Why was there no religious teaching or large-scale movement from the mainstream of the Christian Churches that developed a teaching and practice of peace and non-violence inspired by the life, teaching and death of Jesus as did Mahatma Gandhi in the first half of the 20th century? There were eminent examples, such as St. Francis of Assisi, but they had no major and lasting impact on Christian life and behaviour. On the contrary, were not "holy wars" more part of the life of the Churches throughout the centuries? If Mahatma Gandhi was better in

interpreting the teaching of Jesus in real life, and influenced other leaders like Martin Luther King and a world-wide peace movement, can we claim that the other religions inspire less good than Christianity? Inspired by Hinduism and the Jesus Sermon on the Mount, was not Mahatma able to discern the spirituality of Jesus on peace better than any of the 264 Popes of the Catholic Church? On the contrary, were not many of the Popes in favour of the wars of powerful nations, and acquiescing in the prevailing unjust world system built up by such wars? How could the CDF Declaration affirm concerning other religions "that objectively speaking they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation"?⁷

Cardinal Ratzinger reminded the Conclave Cardinals, quoting the Gospel of John, that the Church having the absolute truth had to bear abundant fruit. "I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain" (Jn 15:16). It may be asked why the response to the presentation of the Gospel has been so limited in most Asian countries. Without the Philippines, Christians in Asia would be about 2% of the population after 500 years of active presence here. Is it because the other religions of Asia are deeply inculturated and give an adequate meaning to people's lives? Though the Christian educational and charitable services are deeply appreciated, the history and teaching of Christianity in Asia is not so attractive.

Papal apologies

While the leadership of the Catholic Church claims to have the absolute truth concerning God and humanity and enjoys close friendship with Christ, why is it that the official Church has erred so gravely and for so long in its history? Pope John Paul II, coming from Eastern Europe, was conscious of Western European Church history. Despite the advice of his close collaborators, he apologized to various peoples on over 100 occasions for the wrongs by the Church including resorting to violence in the name of the faith. He apologized for:

- ⇒ the errors and methods of intolerance and violence of the Inquisition;
- ⇒ the sins of the Crusader conquest of Constantinople in 1204;
- ⇒ the execution of Jan Hus in 1415;
- ⇒ the Church's role in stake burnings and the religious wars following the Protestant Reformation;
- ⇒ the persecution of Galileo in the Church trial in 1633;

⁷ Dominus Iesus (22).

- ⇒ the involvement in the African slave trade from the 16th century;
- ⇒ violation of "the right of ethnic groups and peoples, and shown contempt for their cultures and religious traditions";
- ⇒ the inactivity and silence of Catholics during the holocaust;
- ⇒ missionary abuses via internet in the past against the indigenous peoples of the South Pacific;
- ⇒ the injustices committed against women in the name of Christ, the violation of women's rights and the historical denigration of women;

He prayed for an end to conflicts and asked for a mutual pardon between Christians and Islam.⁸

This list could be augmented to include the opposition of the Church to movements such as political democracy and religious tolerance, as in the Syllabus of Errors of Pope Pius IX in 1864.

Appreciating the frankness and boldness of the late Pope in initiating and leading in this process of asking pardon for the past errors and sins of the sons and daughters of the Church, it may be remarked that we have not yet gone the full round of what is required for a good confession. The Church has not undertaken an inquiry into the causes which led us to such grave and centennial/millennial wrongs. The causes would be not only due to human weakness. Could there also not be a mistaken perception of the necessity of the Church for human salvation? If Catholics are convinced that we have the absolute truth on such matters, would we not be claiming to know things beyond human knowledge – and that with absolute certitude? Would we not be taking over the functions of God, or making a God to suit our own interests? Would we not be giving absolute objective value to our own relative perceptions?

Relation to other religions

As far as persons of other religions are concerned it seems that the official Christian Church thinks of them rather as excluded from or secondary in the friendship and grace of God. This would be contrary to the teaching of Jesus concerning God as a loving Father/Mother. All those who are not Catholics would be like some sort of marginalized step-children of God. How can Asian Christians present such a teaching as God's message of salvation revealed especially to them through Christian religious leaders? Since Pope Benedict XVI has stated in his inaugural sermon that his programme of governance is to listen to the will of God, Asians would tend to

⁸ Luigi Accattoli, *Quand le Pape demande pardon*, Paris 1997.

ask how does he listen to God, and whom does he hear in the process? What are the criteria for knowing whether such listening takes him and other similar believers to the truth – the absolute truth? If the true record is that for the most part of the history of the Church the Asian peoples and other religions were thought of as gravely disadvantaged by God as interpreted by the official Church, these people could, in good faith, have doubts as to the sources of such revelations and the claims of friendship with Christ.

Continuing our reflection on the papal apologies, the grave wrongs and crimes of history would require due compensation to the offended peoples, reparation for the damage done to their religions, and even more important to Jesus Christ and God for proposing such theologies that led to an unacceptable presentation of God. How can the Church correct the wrong presentation of Jesus Christ, of playing God, and of being allied with the world's exploiting powers? How far have steps been taken to avoid the occasions of sin, such as alliances with the superpowers, or benefiting from the unjust world system?

An even worse impact of such a claim of the Church being the exclusive path to salvation is that it would tend to make us Christians arrogant of our presumed spiritual superiority. It would make us immune to self-correction, and confirm us in our traditional intolerance of others.

Between "Dictatorships of relativisms and of absolutisms"

Three positions can be referred to in this relationship of relativisms:

- a) Relativism that makes the self or one's wishes the ultimate value. This is a danger in the modern world of individualism or libertinism, as Cardinal Ratzinger stressed.
- b) On the other hand, those who claim to possess the Absolute and full truth and want to impose it on others. These could be a greater danger of an unjust social or collective dictatorship. Nazism and the Marxist dictatorship of the proletariat tried to rule the world on that claim. Did not the Catholic Church in claiming to be the unique and necessary means of salvation for all humankind tend to be a holy dictatorship over peoples' minds, hearts and souls? When this is associated with political, economic and cultural power it can also be an oppressive regime over other peoples.
- c) What is required is a middle way, or an in-between which has norms that are general and binding but with less claims than of a sure conviction of Absolute Truth and privileged friendship with God.

A universal community like the Catholic Church, including in its membership (at least nominally) one sixth of the human race, would need some definite norms to constitute its body of doctrine and accepted ways of life. Hence on the one hand the fear of individualistic and hedonistic relativism. On the other hand an acceptable teaching of the Catholic Church cannot be one that has historically led to the Church claiming to be the possessor and only legitimate interpreter of the absolute truth.

Immense good has been inspired by Christianity throughout its global history. The validity of the Church's theological claims can be evaluated from its historical consequences on the entire human family even according to the central message of the Gospels.

Universally accepted norms required

Humanity, moving towards an increasingly globalized world, and with the despoliation of nature with ecological and environmental degradation, is in need of some universally accepted norms of human conduct. These cannot be the relativisms or absolutisms of some particularistic trends satisfying the interest and 'temporary' advantages of some individualistic and hedonistic persons and groups. Nor can they be the rights of some powerful nations, claiming to be the ones who know what is good for humanity as against the forces of evil. These may exercise military power to acquire others' lands and possessions even by aggression or initiating 'preventive' military action to dethrone rulers who oppose them.

What is needed are some universal norms that are in keeping with human reason, natural law, common sense, the consciousness of what is humane, and the requirements of the human common good.

If any teachings claiming to be of divine revelation go against the common good of humanity, or against the common sense and rational thinking of the greater part of the human race they can hardly claim to be divinely revealed truth. This is all the more so because of Jesus' teachings that the spirit of God will be sent to everyone. Is it not far better and safer to accept the quasi general common sense and rationality of humanity than the arbitrary, violent and exclusive claims of an authoritarian orthodoxy that has had serious disastrous impact on human relationships throughout human history?

In the search for universally acceptable norms the shared wisdom of the great spiritual leaders of humanity could be a more reliable guide. It is possible to agree on the core teachings of the religions and the spiritual leaders beginning with such axioms as 'do unto others as you would like them to do

onto you'. All the major world religions, many of which are of Asian origin, propose such a value as universally meaningful and valid. They express the same concept in different ways and languages.

The five precepts of the Buddha are a further elaboration of the core values of religions. These are similar to the basic teachings of Jesus and the ten commandments of the Old Testament.⁹ An approach of seeking the core values of the main Asian world religions can give us at least some generic norms for the problems of moral living. Tolerance for the sincere seeking of the truth with peace and goodwill towards all would also be more in line with the teaching of Jesus Christ.

The modern world, alongside its secularization, is also seeking universally valid norms for human behaviour within and among peoples and nations. Despite the drawbacks of the present unjust world system, the nations of the world set up the UNO after World War II. After much deliberation, the UNO came to an agreement on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) proclaimed on December 10th, 1948. Though it is within the limitations of the present world system, it has been a valuable contribution towards a more general acknowledgement of human rights universally. The UNO, operating through a process of dialogue and trial and error, is moving forward towards agreements, treaties and protocols on global relationships and governance, e.g. the protocol on the environment, the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, action for women's rights and against racism. Though not fully accepted these indicate a way in which the international community is attempting to come to some agreement on universally acknowledged norms and even to set up mechanisms for their global observance. There are many inadequacies and failures such as the composition and functioning of the UN Security Council or the WTO. They are all the same an effort of organized humanity to grope towards a better way of living and the rule of law.

The religions are also involved in this historic search. Christianity and especially the Catholic Church can learn much from this endeavour and participate in its formulation and effective implementation. On disputed issues, such as regarding sexual morality, the Catholic Church would have much to learn from the global search by the nations, the religions, and the relevant people's movements. In this connection we may reflect that the Catholic Church has learnt many lessons over the centuries from the wider and wiser experience of humanity in matters such as science, the herme-

⁹ Cf. my paper on: Religions for another possible world, at the World Forum for Theology and Liberation, Porto Alegre, Brazil, January 2005.

neutics of interpretation of sacred scriptures, the claims of divine revelation, freedom and democracy, women's emancipation, the divine right of kings, the right to war for the propagation of religious teachings and the promotion of interest of religion.

The consideration of the requirement of generally normative norms that are not absolutely absolute seems to be the way out between what the Cardinal calls the dictatorship of relativisms and the dictatorship of the claims of absolute truth and righteousness that the Catholic Church seems to have sought in its more extreme persuasions and positions. It would seem that the real world of plural faiths, philosophies and cultures requires a more subtle, gentle and flexible understanding of life and its values than a mere selfish rugged individualism or a dominance of a self-righteous absolutism. Would peaceful co-existence in the real world require a perspective of limited relative absolutes or of limitedly absolute relatives? Could such an approach be a contribution of the general Asian philosophical mould or approach?

The mission of the Church in Asia

The Christian mission in Asia does not take place in a vacuum. It is in the background of a continent with a millennial history of sages and seers, of religions, sacred scriptures, systems of logic, philosophies, moral teachings, views on life and after life, of agnosticism, syncretism and religious mysticism. The Asian approach to the analysis of problems, with its advantages and drawbacks, does not generally limit itself to a view of truth and righteousness as either black or white, right or wrong. The approach is one of "both – and" rather than of "either – or". There is a general acceptance that opposites may be parts of the whole, that there can be various shades of colour, different routes to the mountain top, many streams making up the rivers, and rivers leading to the oceans, light and darkness making up the day (cf. yin yang in Chinese thought).

Life is not merely linear, but is also cyclical, with an evolving dynamic continuity from one stage of life to another or even one life to another. Asian religions would not appreciate a punishing Transcendent God who damns anyone for eternity.

In relation to the Absolute all human realities and perspectives are relative. The Truth is one, but the expressions of the truth are many. To claim to know the absolute is not to know the Absolute, as Taoism says. Tao cannot be named and the Tao which is named is not Tao. Asian thought does not deny a Transcendent or Divine. But it would question

whether the Transcendent can be fully known by us, and whether our limited view of an Absolute excludes all others? The Transcendent is not definable in our categories, cannot be confined in our socio-political systems or frameworks or even philosophical limits of monism or dualism. The Divine is not a system, but a principle or an intuition. No one has a monopoly over the friendship of the Divine. To claim such a privilege or monopoly of divine friendship would be not to know the Divine, or create a God for our own wishes and needs.

All these can be appreciated in relation to the core teaching of Jesus that God is love, and we must love one another as ourselves. But they may not be reconcilable with our many defined Christologies, expressed in Greek philosophical categories or realized in Roman legal structures and frameworks. Love of God and love of neighbour taught by Jesus as his essential message cannot be reduced to a syllogism, an equation or a dogmatic definition. Asian approaches would be more consonant with the Jesus teachings in parables and his real life witness of humble service.

In this historical context the Christian mission can be re-thought in a manner that would be better appreciated in the Asian context. The conviction that we Catholics, as friends of Christ, are the possessors of the absolute truth concerning salvation would give us, as the Cardinal preached to the Conclave, a sense of mission in which we are

"inspired by a holy restlessness: restlessness to bring to everyone the gift of faith, of friendship with Christ, in truth and love and friendship of God was given to us so that it would also be shared with others ... Our ministry is a gift of Christ to humankind, to build up his body – the new world".

Asians would tend to question why they should be converted to the God of a Christ that regards them as second class members of the family of God. Is their spiritual heritage so gravely deficient? Or is it this present interpretation of the official Catholic Church that is gravely deficient in thus presenting the God of the Asian Jesus to Asians. Then Asians would have to suffer not only from the unjust world order set up by the Christian West, but also to accept that they are marginalized even by the God of the Christians. Would such a Christian faith not be adding insult to the injury of the centennial past?

The late Pope John Paul II, while approving such theoretical statements as "Dominus Iesus", was a gracious pilgrim visiting persons and sacred places of other faiths during his hundreds of pilgrimages throughout the world. He diluted or softened the harshness of his official teachings with personal relations and media reported gestures of good will to groups such

as Jews, Moslems and the African peoples. The present Pope has given the impression through his writings and actions that the pluralism of religions and of theology in Asia is a serious obstacle to the absolute truth he claims for his view of Christianity. His position would seem to be somewhat less open or more rigid than that of Vatican II. It is to be hoped that Pope Benedict XVI and the central leadership of the Catholic Church would realize why Asians have much difficulty in accepting the claims of orthodoxy for a teaching that claims to exclude the vast majority of humanity from the benefits of divine revelation and the rightful possibility of salvation.

This will also be a challenge for the peoples of Western countries were they to reflect on the position of their ancestors who lived prior to Jesus. The present trends of secularization and de-Christianization are an implicit non acceptance of the claims of the Church to be the unique guardian and announcer of the saving message of Jesus. We hope that in the coming decade the Church may receive the grace to realize the limitations of its claims of possessing the absolute truth. It will then be humble and wise to learn from the groping and searches of others as of different religions and of secular humanity.

The mission of the Church in Asia would have to be marked by humility in thought and action in the perspective of our mistakes of the past. The other Asian religions graciously dialogue with Christians in a friendly manner, though there is increasing resistance in some countries to the hot-gospeling of certain well financed groups. Our mission can include the acceptance of the core values of all our religions. The world religions would not agree on their presentations of their views on human life before birth and after death. They would have different notions concerning the unknowable divinity. But they have very similar teachings on the basic issues of human moral life of individuals and of societies. It is on that basis that society is organized generally at local, national and international levels. Religions can thus work together for the common good of all.

In so doing we need not dilute anything that Jesus has taught and borne witness to. On the contrary we would be challenged to practice the beatitudes and the call to sharing especially with the needy and exploited as proposed by Jesus in Matthew 25:31 "I was hungry and you gave me to eat ...". We would become better disciples of Jesus and better Christian communities, obeying what he has commanded us. Likewise persons of other faiths can also be invited to live the core message of their faith. We would all be called to self purification, love and sharing with our neighbour, that is the core value of all world religions. In saying so we

would be really serving the best interests of the Church also. The mission of the Church would be better understood as a humble service that leaves the eternal salvation of persons to God whatever be their religion or faith, as Vatican II says, in a manner known to God.

Now that Cardinal Ratzinger is Pope Benedict XVI can we hope the universal pastorate would open his vision to the dimensions of humanity and of loving service of Jesus of Nazareth and Christ of the early Christian communities? A way would have to be found to reconcile the message of Catholic theology and the respect due for other religions, and for the universal goodness and salvific will of God. Perhaps, hopefully, in his first Encyclical Letter the new Pope may deal with these and other crucial issues.

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