

in any danger of reaching.

It is natural, therefore, to infer that Singer's arguments (as opposed, again, to *some* of his conclusions) should not be taken literally. Since Singer himself is not a famine relief worker but a philosopher with books on Hegel and Marx to his credit, he himself presumably does not take it literally.

But then a moral argument that should not be taken *literally* should not be taken at all. As Singer himself remarks:

We cannot rest content with an ethic that is unsuited to the rough and tumble of everyday life. If someone proposes an ethic so noble that to try to live by it would be a disaster for everyone, then—no matter who has proposed it—it is *not* a noble ethic at all, it is a stupid one that ought to be firmly rejected.

Quite so.

- 1 Peter Singer. *How are we to live? Ethics in an age of self-interest*. Oxford, OUP, 1997. Pp. 318. £8.99
- 2 Henry Sidgwick's phrase: *The Methods of Ethics*, VIIth edition, 382. The phrase and the thinking behind it is trenchantly criticised by Bernard Williams in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* 105–109, and *Making Sense of Humanity* 153–171. These are well known sources that Singer just ignores.
- 3 Not in fact that Singer is against sin; but I won't pursue that here.

The Latest Vatican Statement on Christianity and Other Religions

John Hick

Last year the Vatican issued a document, *Christianity and the World Religions*, prepared by its International Theological Commission and approved by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith¹. The document arises from a recognition that 'The question of the relations among religions is becoming daily more important', and that circumstances today 'make interreligious dialogue necessary'. Accordingly, the Commission sets out to 'clarify how religions are to be evaluated theologically' by offering 'some

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theological principles which may help in this evaluation'. And the Commission adds that 'In proposing these principles we are clearly aware that many questions are still open and require further investigation and discussion' (3–5).

Although the Report's title continues the traditional conceit that Christianity is not itself one of the world religions, these opening statements suggest a tentative and relatively undogmatic approach which contrasts with the 1996 address by Cardinal Ratzinger himself, in which in presenting the traditional absolutist position he attacked two theologians extensively by name, seriously misrepresenting their views as a result of not having read their writings for himself. His Eminence's failure to check the accuracy of the tendentious secondary source on which he relied is all the more surprising in view of the accurate and up-to-date section on the state of the discussion, based on a wide knowledge of the existing literature, in this Report of his own Theological Commission. Here all the main competing schools of thought, both Catholic and Protestant, are included and discussed. The Report was first drafted in 1993 and its expertise must have been available to the Cardinal, had he wished to have more reliable information.

The central issue is defined by the Commission as 'Do religions mediate salvation to their members?' (8). It recalls that prior to Vatican II two views were current within the Church. The older view was that the (other) world religions do not themselves have salvific efficacy. They have to be fulfilled in Christ and the Church. The newer view, advocated by Karl Rahner, was that the other world religions are responses to the universal divine grace, so that their adherents may, without knowing it, have an implicit faith in Christ which is sufficient for salvation. There is, then, salvation outside the Church, although not outside the atoning work of Christ.

In the burgeoning discussions since Vatican II a three-fold typology has developed and a form of it is adopted by the Commission: exclusivist ecclesiocentrism, inclusivist Christocentrism, and pluralist theocentrism. They note that the first was implicitly rejected by Vatican II. But 'Christocentrism accepts that salvation may occur in religions, but it denies any autonomy in salvation on account of the uniqueness and universality of the salvation that comes from Jesus Christ. This position,' the authors add, 'is undoubtedly the one most commonly held by Catholic theologians' (10)—and the same can be said today of Protestant theologians. But it is interesting that this is seen here as the current majority view but apparently not as the only one worthy to be considered.

The third option, pluralist theocentrism, 'claims to be a way of going

beyond Christocentrism, a paradigm shift, a Copernican revolution' (10) in which, instead of Christ being seen as the centre of the universe of faiths, all the religions, including Christianity, are seen as revolving around God, the ultimate transcendent divine reality. Here salvation is not seen as universally dependent on the work of Christ, but as consisting in a transformation, reached along different paths, from natural self-centredness to a new orientation centred in God, the Ultimate, the Real. Many today see this most prominently realised in the struggle for social justice and peace on earth.

The Report as a whole seems to include three different inputs, whose authors I shall dub the Accurate Reporter, the Interesting Theologian, and the Absolute Dogmatist.

The Absolute Dogmatist ignores current debates and reiterates the traditional church teaching without taking any account of criticisms and alternatives. This is done by means of biblical quotations, and by citations from dogmatic pronouncements of the magisterium, treated as absolutely authoritative. The Dogmatist's use of the Bible is pre-critical with, for example, the Fourth Gospel sayings of Christ treated without question as historical (on pp. 21, 25, 34, 39, 40, and 41). Modern Catholic as well as Protestant New Testament scholarship is apparently regarded as irrelevant to the viability or otherwise of the traditional dogmas. There is no arguing with an absolute dogmatist—one has to submit or reject. Here we can only note that such anachronistic dogmatism is still at work in the Vatican.

We now turn to the work of the Interesting Theologian. In contrast to the Absolute Dogmatist he is someone with whom those who differ from him could nevertheless hold a profitable dialogue. He rejects the pluralist's central focus on the salvific transformation of human life. 'One should take more account,' he says, 'of the Christian perspective of *salvation as truth* and of *being in the truth as salvation*' (12)—the truth in question being of course that taught by the Catholic Church. He objects to the distinction between, on the one hand, God in Godself, the ineffable ultimate reality (the divine *noumenon*) beyond the scope of our human conceptual systems, and on the other hand that reality as humanly conceived, experienced, and responded to through the different conceptual systems and spiritual practices of the different religious traditions. For on this view, what are literal or analogical truths about the known deities of the theistic traditions (Holy Trinity, Adonai, Allah, Vishnu, etc) are mythological truths about the Godhead *a se*—true myths being stories or descriptions which are not literally true but that tend to evoke an appropriate response to the ultimate referent of the myth.

Concerning this pluralistic theo-centrism, the Interesting Theologian

says that 'such contrasting expressions of the *noumenon* [i.e. the ultimate reality] in fact end up by dissolving it, obliterating the meaning of the mythological truth. Underlying this whole problematic is also a conception which separates the Transcendent, the Mystery, the Absolute, radically from its representations; since the latter are all relative, because they are imperfect and inadequate, they cannot make any exclusive claims to the question of truth' (12–13). The pluralist position does indeed make this distinction between the ineffable Godhead and the humanly defined and experienced God-figures. But I would point out that virtually all the great theologians have affirmed the ultimate ineffability of God's eternal self-existent nature. For example, Gregory of Nyssa said that God is 'incapable of being grasped by any term, or any idea, or any other device of our apprehension. . . unthinkable, unutterable, above all expression in words' (*Against Eunomius*, 1, 42), whilst St Augustine said that 'God transcends even the mind' (*De Vera Religione*, 36, 67), and St Thomas that 'by its immensity, the divine substance surpasses every form our intellect reaches' (S.c.G., I, 14, 3). Pseudo-Dionysius, the most influential of the Christian mystics, wrote concerning God, the 'transcendent One', 'It is not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech, or understanding. It cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by understanding. . . .' (*The Mystical Theology*, 105D). What we are aware of in religious worship is not, then, the ineffable divine reality as it is in itself, but that reality as impacting human life and as conceived in human terms. For as St Thomas said, 'Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower' (ST., II/II, Q.1, art 2). And in relation to God the mode of the knower differs among the religious cultures of the earth. As a result, according to religious pluralism, different 'faces' of God, or different divine personae, have come about at the interface between the ineffable divine Reality and our human spiritual receptivity, a receptivity that has been variously formed within the different traditions.

The Interesting Theologian also criticises the idea that our criterion of a religion's authenticity has to be its fruits in human life. He says, 'But one can see that such expressions [as from self-centeredness to Reality-centredness] either manifest a dependence on a specific tradition (Christian) or they become so abstract that they cease to be useful' (13). And yet to be centred in God, the ultimately Real, is to be released from self-centredness to love one's neighbour; and the Commission endorses this criterion when it says that 'The religions can be carriers of saving truth only insofar as they raise men to true love' (56). This is also the criterion that operates within the other world traditions. The fruits of a life centred in the divine reality are most clearly seen in the truly holy

individuals, the saints, of the different faiths, who show a spiritual similarity that transcends their historical and cultural differences.

But whilst this 'fruits' criterion seems intuitively right, and is in practice operated by us all, it opens up a major problem. It is often assumed—though not often stated—that because of the special divine grace flowing to us through the life of the church, and especially in the eucharist, we Christians taken as a whole must be better human beings, morally and spiritually, than non-Christians taken as a whole. But as a factual claim this is extremely dubious. In fact, I would say that it is manifestly false. It would certainly be most unwise to let the Church's claim to unique centrality stand or fall by it. But then we have to face the alternative—namely that Christians in general do not seem to be better human beings than Jews in general, or Muslims in general, or Buddhists, etc., in general. We now have to ask, What then is the religious advantage, the spiritual plus, attached to being a Christian rather than a Jew, etc? Or putting it the other way round, What is the religious deprivation, the spiritual minus, attached to being a Jew, etc, rather than a Christian? Any theologian and any Theological Commission dealing with 'Christianity and the world religions' must face this question.

The Interesting Theologian addresses it by implication when he suggests that non-Christians are on a lower religious level because the saving grace that Christians presently enjoy is only available to others at the end of their lives. He says 'According to the New Testament the necessity of the Church for salvation is based on the unique salvific mediation of Jesus' (44), but 'those non-Christians who are not culpable of not belonging to the Church enter into the communion of those called to the kingdom of God; they do so by putting into practice love of God and neighbour; this communion will be revealed as the *Ecclesia universalis* at the consummation of the Kingdom of God and of Christ' (48). At first sight, this makes Christian salvation available to the rest of humanity, if on less favourable terms because only at the end of earthly history. But on closer examination this is not the case. For any Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Taoist, etc. who deliberately adheres to his or her own faith, although well aware of the Church's claims, is presumably culpable of not belonging to the Church. What, then, is their fate? And again, how can Buddhists, however full of compassion (*karuna*) and loving-kindness (*metta*), love God when they reject the idea that the ultimate reality is a personal God? Are Buddhists therefore excluded from the possibility of salvation?

At another point however the Interesting Theologian introduces the much broader and more permissive notion of people of goodwill. He says that 'What it [the magisterium] says about Christians is also valid for all

men of good will, in whose hearts grace works in an invisible way. They also can be associated with the Paschal Mystery through the Holy Spirit, and they can consequently be conformed to the death of Christ and be on the road to the encounter of the resurrection' (pp. 46–7). Does this ambiguous formulation mean that Christians and non-Christians are to an equal extent recipients of divine grace, with the one knowing and the other not knowing its source? That is certainly a possible position. But later statements indicate that the writer's intention is rather that people of good will, even if culpable of not belonging to the church, can be saved in the end, in that they may already be 'on the road to the encounter of the resurrection'—'on the road' meaning not yet. So, once again, a delayed salvation, but one that can eventually include Buddhists and others who now 'culpably' adhere to other faiths.

So the religious plus consists in being now within the saved community, and the religious minus in being, so to speak, 'on hold' until a fateful encounter with the risen Christ, presumably at or after death. Christianity thus retains its unique priority and normativeness, its higher status, although the difference is no longer the stark difference of salvation versus damnation.

The Interesting Theologian now goes further than this. For in answer to the question, 'whether the [other] religions as such can have salvific value' (52) he answers that the Holy Spirit is at work 'not only in men of good will, taken individually, but also in society and history, in peoples, in cultures, *in religions*, always with reference to Christ' (52–3, my italics). There is thus an 'explicit recognition of the presence of the Spirit of Christ in the [other] religions' (54). This does not of course entail that every aspect of every religion is good: it is accepted that there is both good and evil within each. But at this point it might seem that the other world religions are on the same level as Christianity, with the Holy spirit present within them all.

However what is apparently thus offered with one hand is taken back with the other. For 'the universal presence of the Spirit can not be compared to his special presence in the Church of Christ... Only the Church is the body of Christ, and only in it is given in its full intensity the presence of the Spirit. . The religions can exercise the functions of a "*preparatio evangelica*"; they can prepare different peoples and cultures for welcoming the saving event which has already taken place' (54–5). Thus the Spirit of Christ is present in the other religions, but not as fully or closely as in the Church. Jews, Muslims Hindus, Buddhists still live under the shadow of a religious 'minus' in comparison with Christians.

Continuing his dialogue with religious pluralism, the Interesting Theologian points out that pluralism implies that the religions (including

Christianity) are all imperfect because all formed within imperfect human cultures, and that no one of them can properly make an exclusive claim to absolute truth. What makes this unacceptable to him is the conviction that Jesus was God incarnate (i.e. God the Son, Second Person of the Holy Trinity, incarnate). For if Jesus was God, and if he founded a new religion, then that religion is the only one to have been founded directly by God and must therefore be uniquely superior to all others.

However New Testament scholarship, since the modern rediscovery of the Jewishness of Jesus, strongly suggests that Jesus himself would have regarded as blasphemous the idea that he was God incarnate. Nevertheless the Church continues, on this extremely doubtful premise, to affirm its own unique religious status and authority. It is therefore to the Interesting Theologian's credit that, confronted today with the spiritual reality of the other world religions, he asks the question, 'How can one enter into an interreligious dialogue, respecting all religions and not considering them in advance as imperfect and inferior, if we recognize in Jesus Christ and only in him the unique and universal Saviour of mankind?' (15) He faces the dilemma, 'To break the [exclusive] link between Christ and God deprives Christianity of any universalist claim about salvation (and thus authentic dialogue with other religions would be made possible), but by implication one would then have to confront the Church's faith and, specifically, the dogma of Chalcedon' (16). The Interesting Theologian notes the suggestion of some contemporary Christian thinkers that the idea of divine incarnation is not a literal but a metaphorical concept: 'The meaning of the incarnation, in this view, is not objective, but metaphorical, poetic and mythological. It aims only to express the love of God which is incarnate in men and women whose lives reflect the action of God. Assertions of the exclusive salvific meaning of Jesus Christ can be explained in terms of the historico-cultural context' (16–17). This is indeed the pluralist position, and the Commission's implicit recognition of it as an option to be considered is welcome.

The Interesting Theologian's conclusion, then, is firmly inclusivist. That is to say, salvation is through Christ alone, but is nevertheless not confined to Christians. 'There is not a *Logos* which is not Jesus Christ, nor is there a Spirit that is not the Spirit of Christ' (51). But the possibility of salvation within other religions remains as a lesser blessing, incomplete until the eschaton.

But now the Interesting Theologian becomes enmeshed in what I shall call the Ecumenical Catholic's Dilemma—namely, that he wants both to engage in authentic dialogue with people of other faiths on an equal footing, and yet also to retain his belief in the unique superiority of

Christianity. And so, 'Faced with this way of setting the stage, we must show that Catholic theology in no way undervalues or does not appreciate the other religions when it affirms that everything true and worthy of value in the other religions comes from Christ and the Holy Spirit' (59–60).

At this point the Interesting Theologian engages again in debate with the pluralist theology of religions which, he says, 'not only is not justified in consideration of the truth claim of one's own religion but also because it simultaneously destroys the truth claim of the other side' (62). In other words, since each religion professes to have the final truth, the pluralist denies not only the Christian claim to be the one and only fully true religion, but also the similar claim of each of the other religions. And this is indeed the case. But does not the Christian inclusivist do exactly the same in relation to every religion other than his own? Does not the inclusivist believe that all claims to be the one and only true religion are false—except for his own Christian claim? In interreligious dialogue, Catholic inclusivists believe—although they are too polite to say so face to face—that they alone have the final and absolute truth, whilst their dialogue partners have only lesser elements of truth. For 'the religions talk "of" the Holy, "of" God, "about" him, "in his place" or "in his name". Only in the Christian religion is God himself the one who speaks to man in his Word' (66). Is this an acceptable answer to the initial question, 'How can one enter into an interreligious dialogue, respecting all religions and not considering them in advance as imperfect and inferior, if we recognise in Jesus Christ and only in him the unique and universal Saviour of mankind?' (15). The answer is manifestly No. One can be personally totally friendly and courteous to the dialogue partner, leaving one's true belief out of sight in the background; but nevertheless one cannot logically affirm the unique superiority of the Christian faith without 'considering [other religions] in advance as imperfect and inferior'. It is impossible to reconcile the traditional claim to the unique superiority of Christianity with the outlook required for genuine inter-religious dialogue. The Theological Commission has struggled with this dilemma but leaves it unresolved.

The conclusion that follows is that the 'further investigation and discussion' (5) at which the Report hints, is indeed required.

- 1 *Christianity and the World Religions*, Rome: Vatican Press, 1997.
- 2 Cardinal Ratzinger, "Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith Today", *Origins: CNS Documentary Service*, October 31, 1996; John Hick, "Response to Cardinal Ratzinger on Religious Pluralism", *National Catholic Reporter*, October 24, 1997, and *New Blackfriars*, November 1997, and *Dialog der Religionen*, No. 1, 1998.