

**CHRISTIANITY**  
**AND**  
**TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS**

Orientations for a Pastoral Approach

**Francis Anekwe Oborji**

## Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1</b>	
<b>What are Traditional Religions.....</b>	<b>15</b>
Between Traditional Religions and Christianity.....	17
The Supernatural and Traditional Religions.....	27
<b>2</b>	
<b>Traditional Religions and the Special Revelation in Jesus</b>	
<b>Christ.....</b>	<b>37</b>
Christian Revelation.....	42
Revelation in Salvation History and Teaching of the Church.....	49
Revelation in the Old Testament: .....	50
Revelation in the New Testament: .....	55
Revelation in the Thoughts of Church Fathers: .....	68
Revelation in the Magisterium Teaching.....	77
<b>3</b>	
<b>Traditional Religions and Salvation in Jesus Christ....</b>	<b>95</b>
Humanity's effort to attain Truth.....	98
Between salvation history and the secular history.....	103
<b>4</b>	
<b>Meeting African Traditional Religion (ATR).....</b>	<b>109</b>
Orientations for a Pastoral approach.....	109
The Case of African Traditional Religion.....	112
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>123</b>

## **Introduction**

For the past fifteen years or so, and especially when I began teaching at the Pontifical Urban University, Rome in 1999, I have dedicated most of my research and writings to the meeting of the Gospel with African reality, religious and cultural traditions. This effort has resulted in the publication of several of my monographic works on African theology and efforts of evangelization in the continent. However, with the passing of years, it became clearer that I have to widen the horizon of such studies, especially on the meeting of Christianity with African Traditional Religion (ATR) to embrace the reality of traditional religions in general. The modern theology's interest in the phenomenology and theology of religions brings with it the necessity to deepen our studies of the traditional religions and explore ways of promoting pastoral attention to adherents of these religions and of Christians converted from them. This entails, first, subjecting these traditional religions to the mystery of our faith in Jesus Christ in the light of the teaching of the Church, and then, to our theological assessments of their catechetical role in the work of evangelization. This is what I have tried to do in this

small book. Although, this is a much more ambitious project, but it is something worthwhile when we consider the global context in which we do our theological reflection today.

Therefore, our interest in this book is on how to relate the traditional religions to the theological categories of supernatural, revelation and salvation in Christ. The overall interest, however, is to find out the usefulness of such linkage between the traditional religions and these theological categories in the search for a catechetical value of the religions in the teaching of the Christian mystery. In other words, what is the role of traditional religions in introducing the people to the Catechetics of the Christian teaching on revelation and salvation in Christ? The book aims to examine the extent one could relate traditional religions to these theological categories, indicating the catechetical role of the religions. Since traditional religions are not revelational or salvific in nature, our thesis in this book, is that it is from the perspective of the missionary theory of *praeparatio evangelica* that one may proceed in the attempt to relate the traditional religions (e.g., ATR) to Christianity. It is a discussion on how the Providence has prepared the forbears of adherents of traditional religions for the

reception of the Christian faith through the proclamation of the Gospel. The book examines the role traditional religions can play in this case by contrasting and relating these religions to Christian teaching on revelation and salvation.

On 6<sup>th</sup> August 2000, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a “Declaration *Dominus Iesus* on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus and the Church.”<sup>1</sup> This is a very symbolic date, for the 6<sup>th</sup> of August is the Solemnity of the Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ. It makes one think that just as the Church celebrates the Transfiguration of our Lord and recounts the faith and glory that overwhelmed the Apostles with him, Peter and his companions – simple and young Jewish men still “learning from the Master” the mystery of our redemption, so also has the Church in this document as in her other magisterium teaching, envision the offering of the many peoples of the world to the service of the true and living God. At first glance, one may think only of the great religions (Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc.) as the only concern of the

---

<sup>1</sup> CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Declaration *Dominus Iesus*: AAS 92 (2000) 742-765.

Church in her teaching of how all peoples share in God's offer of salvation in Christ. But over the years the Church has always shown a positive and friendly attitude to traditional religions as well on the subject. This is particularly true of the African Traditional Religion from which the present book takes its bearing. In fact, it can be said that the conceptual framework for the Church's teaching and approach to the African Traditional Religion was initiated as early as the time the first missionaries from the northern hemisphere set foot on the sub-Saharan African soil. The same thing can be said for other continents in respect of their traditional religions and culture.

The respect that is being given to the value of other religious traditions and cultures was not just an instance of being courteous, tolerant or politically realistic towards those who are not Christians. It was based on the Church's missionary mandate and the new theological awareness of how all peoples are embraced by God's saving plan.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, a steady progress has been made in this regard, since the initiative of Pope Paul VI in 1964 to found a

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Among the New Testament passages that remind us of this primary task of the Church of proclamation of salvation of all peoples in Christ, the following can be mentioned: *Acts* 4:12; *Hebrews*. 11:6; *1 Timothy* 2:4; *Acts* 17: 27-28; *John* 1:2, 9).

Secretariat to develop relations with non- Christian Religions and the Vatican II Council's Decree *Nostra Aetate* (1965). In particular, Vatican II (as well as the post-conciliar documents) bear witness to this desire to promote positive relations first of all with Judaism and then with other religions. As already mentioned, at that time most people, theologians included, were thinking mostly of the "great world religions" such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc. But the Council also offered, though very brief, wisely stated reflection on traditional religions:

From ancient times down to the present, there has existed among diverse peoples a certain perception of that hidden power that hovers over the course of things and over the events of human life; at times, indeed, recognition can be found of a Supreme Divinity and of a Supreme Father too. Such a perception and such a recognition instil the lives of these peoples with a profound religious sense.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> VATICAN II, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate*: AAS 58 (1966) 740-744. (NA).

But the Council makes it clear that whatever values that these religions witness to and offer to humanity, at best they could be considered to be preparation for the Gospel:

Whatever good or truth is found amongst them (non-Christian Religions) is considered by the Church to be a preparation for the Gospel and given by him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life. ... Hence to procure the glory of God and the salvation of all these, the Church, mindful of the Lord's command, "preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mk. 16:16) takes zealous care to foster the missions.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, studies on relation between Christianity and other religious traditions and cultures are invited to witness to and emphasize this offer of salvation in Christ to the world – the Church's proclamation of Jesus Christ, "the way, the truth, and

---

<sup>4</sup> VATICAN II, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* (LG) 16: AAS 57 (1965) 5-75. (LG).

the life” (John 14: 1).<sup>5</sup> The declaration *Dominus Iesus* is both a landmark and an important document on this subject. The document, while encouraging scientific research on the subject of theology of religions, reminded theologians of the purpose of such endeavour:

It must therefore be *firmly believed* as a truth of Catholic faith that the universal salvific will of the One and Triune God is offered and accomplished once and for all in the mystery of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God.

The document goes on to say:

Bearing in mind this article of faith, theology today, in its reflection on the existence of other religious experiences and on their meaning in God’s salvific plan, is invited to explore if and in what

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE and THE CONGREGATION FOR THE EVANGELIZATION OF PEOPLES, Instruction *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 29: AAS 84 (1992), 424; see also VATICAN II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 22: AAS 58 (1966) 1025-1115. (GS).

way the historical figures and positive elements of these religions may fall within the divine plan of salvation. In this undertaking, theological research has a vast field of work under the guidance of the Church's Magisterium.<sup>6</sup>

It is in the light of the foregoing that we have discussed in this brief work, the meeting of Christianity with the traditional religions. Thus, our aim in this study as in our previous works on this subject is not to equate the traditional religions (e.g. ATR) with Christianity in any form at all or with any other religion for that matter. The study also does not aim to prove these traditional religions as supernatural, revealed or salvific, since in the history of religions, traditional religions have never been considered as possessing these qualities. Traditional religions cannot be considered as revealed or salvation religions. Since salvation can come to man only through the special help of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, only Christianity could be called salvific religion. Thus, there is a distinction between special revelation of God in Christ and religions of human

---

<sup>6</sup> *Dominus Iesus*, 14.

experience; between supernatural religion and natural religions. Since revelation, supernatural grace, man's inability to work out a solution by himself and God's intervention: all these are closely connected to salvation, the difference between Christianity as revealed and salvational religion and the non-Christian religions (including traditional religions) as non-salvational religions becomes quite clear.

To my colleagues at the Pontifical Urban University, who have offered me tremendous moral support and encouragement, I express my profound gratitude. In a special way, my sentiment of appreciation goes out to Msgr. (Prof.) Cataldo Zuccaro, the present Rector of the University, for his closeness and understanding which have contributed in no small measure in making this work see the light of the day. Special mention must be made also of Prof. Alberto Trevisiol (IMC), former dean of the Faculty of Missiology, and his successor, Prof. Benedict Kanakappally (OCD), for their trust and untiring support; to other colleagues in the Faculty, especially those whose initial suggestions have been very useful in maintaining the focus of the study, I am very grateful; and finally, many thanks to our students

in the Faculty for patiently sitting through my lectures and challenging me with their penetrating questions and active participation in the class. I would also like to thank the bishop of my home diocese, Most Rev. Valerian M. Okeke (Archbishop of Onitsha) for his moral support and encouragement. I cannot find enough words to express my deep appreciation and high regards for all my friends and acquaintances, who have sincerely, remained very close to me all these years. To each one of you, I say: *Daalu*.

As I was completing the writing of this book, I received the sad news of the death of Rev. Fr. (Dr.) Peter Ekwenze (1964-2009) from my hometown Aguleri, Anambra State, Nigeria. Both as a parish pastor and later chaplain of the State University campus in our Archdiocese of Onitsha (where he met his untimely demise on August 11, 2009, the feast day of St. Clare), Fr. Ekwenze gave priority to an authentic education and formation of our young people in sound Christian doctrine and the values of our culture. Though he was cut short in his prime in a very distressful circumstance, this priest has done more good in the world than anyone can count. It is an honour and privilege to have this little book dedicated to the loving memory of this holy, unoffending,

humble, zealous and resourceful priest of our generation: My dear Fr. Peter, may the most merciful God grant you the joy of His Kingdom, where you will meet our first priest and elder brother, Blessed Iwene Tansi of Aguleri, in the company all the heavenly hosts. Amen.

**Francis Anekwe Oborji**

Pontifical Urban University  
Rome, November 1, 2009

## **What are Traditional Religions?**

By the term “traditional religion”, today we mean normally those religions that used to be associated with the native or indigenes of Africa, Asia, Oceania, or Americas, and are still associated with the peoples of these areas who have not been converted to Christianity or to any of the great religions (e.g. Islam, Buddhism, etc.). In the past studies, perhaps because of their primordiality or of their inferiority to the great, classic, historical or *universalist* religions, terms such as “primitive” or “animistic” were used to describe the traditional religions. Typical of peoples, ethnic groups, or communities of predominantly tribal structure and pre-industrial conditions of objective technological civilisation and culture, the traditional religions were subjected over centuries to massive pressure from the historical religions – seeking the conversion of the adherents of the traditional religions. However, in spite of the progress made by the historical religions for the conversion of the people of the traditional religions (as the African case shows), the traditional religions have nonetheless

continued to survive, in one way or the other, in the life and philosophy of the people. In some regions or contexts, the traditional religions have continued to demonstrate, in varying degrees, a surprising vitality and creativity to the point of symbolizing national identity and resistance in situations of forced cultural change and of assuming in some cases a role of conscious criticism of modern process of secularism.

A general description of traditional religions are often given and passing over individual, regional details, a number of special characteristics immediately stand out as distinguishing them, in normal situations, from Christianity. It is worthy to note that in no case will the complex of beliefs, actions, and customs that in theology we regard as religious be clearly distinguishable in traditional cultures, which for their part are the bearers of the concomitant complex of beliefs, actions, and customs that in many cases are described as nonreligious: civic or profane, depending on whether we choose the (historical) dialectic civic/religious, or the (religious) dialectic sacred/profane. This means, on the one hand, the absence in the cultural conceptions of these societies of traditional religion an explicit and objective notion of “religion” (a concept moreover

very complex and elaborate even in the history of the study of religions); and on the other that we should be wary over the attempt to interpret everything in traditional cultures *sub specie religionis* (which is the position of religious phenomenology). Again, this does not mean that one can only speak of religion as an autonomous conceptual category even in a society with more advanced culture. In more culturally advanced societies, historically, distinction has always been drawn between the fields of religious and non-religious activity.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Between Traditional Religions and Christianity***

Contingent to the preceding is a first consideration: the contrast between traditional religions and Christianity. Here the first point to be made is that, unlike Christianity (and other great religions in their historical maturity: Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, etc.,) traditional religions figure as tightly interconnected with (and inseparable from) all the other aspects of the traditional cultures individually expressing them and in particular with their respective

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. D. VISCA, “Traditional Religions”, in: R. LATOURELLE – R. FISICHELLA (eds.), *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, 844.

dynamic systems. So, where we have farming populations with more or less developed systems of agriculture, and this is the situation most widespread over all, we shall find a type of religion centred on the earth, variously deified or worshipped, and on the cult of the dead, whereas among hunter-gatherers and fishing peoples there prevails a complex of beliefs that emphasize the hazardousness of their system of subsistence into the figure of some lord of the beast (of land or sea), and among nomadic stock-raising peoples a religious system centring on a supreme sky-god.

Furthermore, a great influence is also exerted on religious beliefs by social and political structure: the clan structure, which is a feature of most traditional societies, has its sanction on the religious plane through the cult of ancestor-veneration and the ritualization of solidarity and social control. In this case also, all individual life is governed by practices broadly speaking religious. In turn, the political structure is reflected in the system of beliefs by the mythical-ritual ratification of the social and political hierarchy in hierarchical societies (Africa, Polynesia), to the point of “deifying” the king in societies of monarchical structure (West Africa, pre-Columbian

America) and in the appearance of religious forms of polytheistic type in traditional societies of more complex, more articulated, and more diversified socio-political organisation.

Another important element distinguishing traditional religions from the historical religions and especially Christianity, is the total absence of proselytising. Traditional religions are tightly ethnic, often national, regional, or even community religions that neither form nor aspire to form a universal corpus of doctrine but, as already noted, are so many geographically conditioned systems responding to specific and limited cultural and social needs, rather than to intellectual and emotional ones.

Finally, the discussion of the contrast between traditional religions and Christianity should also stress the elements that distinguishes the cultures of the countries of the Northern hemisphere with ancient Christian roots from those of the geographical zones of the global south that are still permeated by the influences from the traditional religions. This is observable in the different approach that each has in its way of understanding the world. For the traditional religions, one finds a mythical and cosmologising tendency; whereas in Christian countries of the

Northern hemisphere, it is historical and anthropologising the world.<sup>8</sup> Traditional cultures demand of myth and of matters that, being mythical, have no date the function of establishing that part of reality which they recognise as and wish to be changeless and hence not subject to human intervention, so neutralising human activity and hiding the function in a reassuring and protective way, whereas Western culture (for example), developing along the Greek-Roman civilisation and the Christian principles, has progressively considered the ever more ample portions of reality to be subject to change through the action of history. This is the same as saying that, whereas traditional cultures give cosmic dimensions to the real, Western culture with its Christian influence tends to give it human ones. As an overstatement, we might say as an example of the foregoing that whereas at a traditional level the real is “divinised,” in Western culture it has been “realised”: the Word became flesh and so the beyond-history came down into history, the religious truth of revelation acquired a historical basis through the

---

<sup>8</sup> Cf. D. VISCA, “Traditional Religions”, 845.

historical activities – life, passion, and death – of Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup>

To summarize, one can say that for most of the authors on traditional religions, two major points emerge from the above discussion. Firstly, traditional religions are viewed from their basic understanding as cultural beliefs at the base of a particular ethnic group, fruit of man's yearnings for the divine within his (man's) surroundings. Secondly, since traditional religions are viewed as man's effort to give meaning to the reality around him, they can best, be described as primitive modes through which man himself attempts to establish rapport with the divine, at that level. Viewed from these perspectives, one can begin to confront the question of how to relate Christianity to non-Christian religions. Since traditional religions are not revelational or salvific, they cannot offer man the full answer to his divine vocations. The answer to man's divine vocation rests on God, and only on God alone. "Only God can make God known or reveal Himself to man." Left on his own, man cannot know

---

<sup>9</sup> For more literature on the theme, see: A. BRELICH, *Introduzione alla storia delle religioni*, Roma 1966; H.C. PUECH (ed.), *Histoire des Religions*, vol. 18, Paris 1970; S. SUUTHERLAND, L. HOULDEN, et al (eds), *The World's Religions*, 5<sup>th</sup> part: P. CLARK (ed.), *Traditional Religions*, London 1988.

God as God is. Man cannot also understand fully his own destiny and divine vocation outside God.

Man's search for the divine in the traditional religions, and indeed in the non-Christian religions, points to the way the divine providence has prepared the adherents of these religions for the Christian faith through the proclamation of the Gospel. It is man's primitive but consciousness of his divine origin and destiny. Again, it points to the divine origin and destiny of man. As a creature of God, man is created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, the search for the divine in the traditional religions finds its fulfilment in the salvation which God has offered for the whole humanity in Jesus Christ. Christianity, in the new dispensation, is the only way God has ordained for the salvation of the whole human race.

In other words, it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear. In Christ, man finds his ultimate vocation, the offer of salvation – participation in the very life of God Himself. For this reason, all the truths about man's salvation and divine destiny find in Jesus Christ their source and their most perfect embodiment. The offer of salvation, of which Christianity is the vehicle, is thus founded in Christ in

a very profound way. This is not only because Christ alone is the saviour, who by his death and resurrection has liberated humanity from sin and has communicated his divine life to us, but also because the salvation he has communicated is his very own – the salvation that he, in his humanity, received from the Father, who, as the New Testament teaches, is also the saviour of humanity.<sup>10</sup> The salvation offered in Christ is universal and for all humanity. *Gaudium et spes* puts this fact in a very clear terms:

All this holds true not for Christians only but also for all men of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Cf. L.F. LADARIA, *Jesus Christ: Salvation of All*, Convivium Press, Miami 2008, 95.

<sup>11</sup> GS 22.

Still on the same point, the conciliar document states:

For by his incarnation, he, the son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each man. ... As an innocent lamb he merited life for us by his blood which he freely shed. In him God reconciled us to himself and to one another, freeing us from the bondage of the devil and of sin, so that each one of us could say with the apostle: the Son of God “loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the Church carries out its mission of proclamation of Christ and engages in inter-religious dialogue with people of other religions. In this way, people of other religious traditions, may come to the full embrace of what God has done for us all in Jesus Christ. John Paul II, in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, brought out clearly this fact:

In Christ, God calls all peoples to himself and he wishes to share with them the

---

<sup>12</sup> GS 22.

fullness of his revelation and love. He does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression, even when they contain “gaps, insufficiencies and errors”.<sup>13</sup>

This means that in Christ, man has found the definitive answer and fulfilment to all the questions of human existence and life. Christ is the fulfilment and God’s final answer to all the religious yearning of man. In Christ, man has found his destiny. The conciliar document *Gaudium et spes*, puts it this way:

Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling. ... He who is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15), is himself the perfect man who has restored in the children of Adam that

---

<sup>13</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, 55: AAS 83 (1991) 249-340. (RM).

likeness to God which had been disfigured ever since the first sin. Human nature, by the very fact that it was assumed, not absorbed, in him, has been raised in us also to a dignity beyond compare.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, and as the declaration *Dominus Iesus*, points out: “With the coming of Christ, God has willed that the Church founded by him be the instrument for the salvation of all humanity (cf. Acts 17:30-31).<sup>15</sup> The good news and his saving work has not, in fact, reached all human beings, to whom it is destined. These people also have the right to know what God has done for them and indeed the entire mankind in Christ. This implies that no matter how desirable inter-religious dialogue is and it needs to be promoted, it should in no way distract from the Church’s missionary mandate of proclamation of salvation in Christ: “The Church is duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (cf. 2 Cor 5:18-19),

---

<sup>14</sup> GS 22.

<sup>15</sup> *Dominus Iesus*, 22.

men find the fullness of their religious life.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, in this age of greater awareness of pluralism, it is very necessary that the Church insists on maintaining the unique and universal character of the salvation in Christ.

With these preliminaries serving to illustrate the specific differences between Christianity and the traditional religions now behind us, we can take a closer and more detailed look at the meaning and significance of supernatural, revelation and salvation in Christ, in their relation to our theme on the traditional religions.

### *The Supernatural and Traditional Religions*

We have already stated that traditional religions are not supernatural religions but rather natural religions on the level of the cultural practices and cosmological perception of the non-Christian people. This is true to all traditional religions that are today still found in the world. Thus, the first question is how do we relate such religions to a supernatural religion (Christianity)? Again, such an exercise can be done only in the context of evangelisation and in the sense

---

<sup>16</sup> NA 2.

of the traditional religion serving as a prepared ground for the reception of the Christian message through the proclamation of the Gospel. Some studies on traditional religions underline basic motivations of these religions and their values in relation to the theological category of the supernatural reality. They emphasize the basic characteristics of the religion. Drawing from the people's worldview, some of the authors speak of the concepts of the ultimate reality and meaning, man, community, good and evil, sacrifice, the after-life, etc. in the traditional religions. The intuition of the adherents of the traditional religions to conceptualise these ideas in their worldview, have made some authors to speak of the value of the religion in the study of the supernatural categories. But, and as we have noted already, these elements and aspects of the people's worldview come mainly from the phenomenology of the traditional religions and the local culture and so may not represent a supernatural reality. Therefore, they belong naturally to the level of cosmogonies and world views, as experienced in a typical pre-Christian community, by a given group of people.

In spite of this, in recent times attempts have been made in the works of some authors to discuss the

linkage between the natural and the supernatural in the level of religious studies. Here, it is still the same question of how to relate traditional religions to the supernatural. To what extent can the traditional religious ideas and intuitions be linked to the supernatural? Before we proceed on the discussion, it serves a good purpose to note that the people's worldview and cosmological elements have their limits in the way they can inform us about the supernatural. This means that, cosmological realities should not be confused with the supernatural. Though one can speak of the nature of the interaction that exists between the two, and it is the supernatural that impacts or can impinge on the creaturely reality, both realities are not intermixed as the traditional religions appear to portray them. The question of the spiritual realm as an essential aspect of the created reality in the traditional religions is the basic problem here: How does the created reality impact on the spiritual realm (or vice versa)? What is the nature of the interaction that exists between the two realities? What is the significance of such worldview in traditional religions for the theological category of the Supernatural? Thus, we are confronted with the

problem of how to avoid confusing the Supernatural with creaturely reality?

Our first preoccupation therefore, is on the meaning and significance of the Supernatural and its linkage to the traditional religions? How does one relate supernatural religion to the traditional religions? What significant role can a traditional religion play in the people's search in their cultures for the meaning of the Ultimate Reality? To answer these questions, we will have to begin with a clarification of the key term: Supernatural!

The word "supernatural", designates "that which goes beyond nature", but precisely the concept of nature is not clearly specified given the fact that it can also refer to the divine nature. A more precise meaning is "that which was not created and, as something uncreaturely, has effects on nature as the creaturely." For only when such effects are detectable can questions about the supernatural be sensibly posed at the level of the creaturely. The form of the word, and thus also the concept, exactly parallels that of metaphysics ("after," "behind," beyond," and in this sense, "above" nature), even if, in both cases, the notions objectively referred to contain an implicit

emphasis on directional priority of the above over the below.<sup>17</sup>

As a Christian term, “supernatural” refers to that aspect of reality which is not subject to the conditions of creation, but is nevertheless necessary both to reality and in view of it, while remaining beyond any sort of determination by creation. Hence, in the light of the Judeo-Christian revelation, a distinction of the proceeding kind is very necessary, though the problem of formulating adequate corresponding concepts leads to those *aporias* that accompany, and often mark out, the theological debate on the subject. H. de Lubac whose works on this subject is still very relevant, has traced the most important contours of the historical path of the theological debate on the topic.<sup>18</sup> The historical evidence of earlier use of the word in the late Middle Ages does not affect de Lubac’s material discovery that the concept, in its theologically influential sense, stems from the

---

<sup>17</sup> Cf. K.H. NEUFELD, “Supernatural”: R. LATOURELLE – R. FISICHELLA (eds.), *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, Crossroad, New York 1994, 1016-1019.

<sup>18</sup> For more on theological debate and clarification of the concept of “supernatural” through the history of theology; see: H. De LUBAC, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, New York 1967; ID., *Augustinisme et théologie moderne*, Paris 1965; ID., *Petite catéchèse sur nature et grâce*, Paris 1980; H. BOUILLARD, *Comprendre ce que l’on croit*, Paris 1971.

controversy around M. Baius and C. Jansen, in which context it was linked to the notion that there were more or less independent and complete orders of the supernatural and the natural, and that this was the decisive component of a total system.

In concrete terms, grasping the specifically Christian sense of the supernatural requires that it be conceived with a view to God's full, definitive self-communication in Jesus Christ. Only in this light, too, does the concept of creation show those features that allow it to be recognised and assessed in its relation to the supernatural itself.<sup>19</sup> However, these basic positions have undergone subsequent development, with the element of grace being made more precise through association with either knowledge, freedom, or beauty. Accentuating either, the true, the good, or the pleasing gives rise to still. Thus, one notices immediately the tendencies in some areas of contemporary theology to foster one sided position that often do not pay attention to the clarity and the true meaning of the supernatural in the economy of salvation in Jesus Christ. The kind of meaning attributed to the supernatural in these variously

---

<sup>19</sup> Cf. K.H. NEUFELD, "Supernatural," 1017.

accentuated theologies has implications especially for one's attitude and behaviour towards the world.<sup>20</sup>

Obviously, by means of the discernible effects, the supernatural can be indirectly experienced, although details of the possible forms of such experience cannot be given here. It suffices to say that the supernatural is present in such instances only as implicitly suggested, and acquires, for its precise clarification, verbal specification through the revelatory word of God – or concretely, through Jesus Christ and his message – so that it becomes comprehensible to man in its proper meaning. What is clear here then, is the Christological character of the supernatural as well as its Trinitarian foundation. Only since the appearance of Jesus Christ has God's self-communication acquired a name and a face in the world. Talk of the supernatural must refer constantly back to this in order to secure that concept materially and formally, which is always necessary if misunderstandings and abuses are to be avoided.

---

<sup>20</sup> This tendency is found in the works of some authors of the so called political theology and the contextual theologies that were developed in the context of the living conditions of the peoples of the third world countries. For more information on contemporary trends of theology of revelation, see A. DULLES, *Models of Revelation*, Image Books, Garden City, New York 1985.

Above all, such reference shows that separating and isolating the orders of reality, as involved in the notion underlying the “two-tiered” theory, is inadmissible. Rather, it suggests a view analogous to the Christological formula of the Council of Chalcedon, or the truth of the incarnation. With that, it also offers a starting point for reflecting on the supernatural and its characteristic dynamics from the view point of redemptive history. In other words, reflection on the supernatural must start from the Christ-event which is in the final analysis its ultimate goal.

The question now arises: What is the role of traditional religions (e.g., ATR) in our comprehension of the supernatural in the economy of salvation in Christ? From what we have said so far, it becomes obvious that the role of traditional religions and cultural elements in this case, is minimal. Reflection on the supernatural does not have to start, necessarily from the elements of traditional religions. It does not have to start either from the social or living conditions of the people. Those who are basically discussing the supernatural from these perspectives – should not overlook the fact that realisation of that goal can be furthered or obstructed through their practical

behaviour toward earthly realities. They should always not overlook the fact that the communication of the supernatural is the work of the supernatural itself – even if there are elements in the human culture or traditional religion that may appear as vicissitudes – as pointing to the reality beyond the sensible reality. The most one could assign to these cultural elements and realities and in the context of the theology of the “Seeds of the Word”, is a preparatory role in introducing the people of the traditional religion to the mystery of the supernatural and of the Christian faith. This also means that the supernatural and the creaturely should not be approached or studied as if the two orders are in opposition to each other. In the same context, the supernatural and the creaturely are not intermixed as some strands of contemporary contextual theologies seemed close to suggesting. Nevertheless, they interact. Indeed, their interaction is still the work of the supernatural, and it is through it that the supernatural itself imparts to creaturely existence the means necessary that corresponds to the essence and reason of our redemption in Christ.

What then is the relationship between traditional religions and the special revelation in Jesus Christ? Put in another way, what is the role of the knowledge

of the divine which comes to man through creation in comprehending the supernatural revelation of God in Jesus Christ? In the context of our present study, what is the role of traditional religions in the teaching of the Christian mystery of revelation and salvation in Christ? These questions lead us to our next consideration about how to relate traditional religions to the special revelation of God in Christ.

## **Traditional Religions and the Special Revelation in Jesus Christ**

Having looked briefly at the concept and significant of the Supernatural, it is logical that we should pass on to consider the concept of revelation, for the discussion on the Supernatural is meant to serve as a prelude to our central theme on revelation and salvation in Christ and their relation to the traditional religions. Thus, there is a close link between these theological categories. Indeed it is through man's encounter with revelation that the Supernatural can be grasped in the realm of the creaturely reality. And revelation itself is manifested to the world primarily in categories of salvation: "Most intimately bound up with this self-revelation of God is the revelation of his *will* ... This will at the same time signifies salvation *for* all men. From the *Proto-evangelion* to the fulfilment in Christ, the history of revelation is a salvation history."<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> W. BULST, *Revelation*, Sheed & Ward, New York 1965, 82.

In the context set by contemporary thought the theme of revelation is the focal point of all questions and all challenges. For despite the attempts in some trends of thoughts to brush aside the question of man's encounter with the Supernatural, humanity still continues to have a spiritual life, a life that surpasses the merely physical world in which we live. Men and women still seek answers to the questions of love and hate, birth and death, fear and joy. In his book, *Introduction to Christianity*, Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI), reminds us of the scope of the question:

What in fact is “God” really? In other ages this question may have seemed quite clear and unproblematical; for us it has become a genuine inquiry again. What can this word “God” signify? What reality does it express, and how does the reality concerned make contact with man?<sup>22</sup>

No doubt there is a certain value to be discerned in the contemporary thought debate, in that we need to

---

<sup>22</sup> J. RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1990, 103.

rid ourselves of certain ways of conceiving God that are contrary to the biblical witness and Christian tradition. It is not uncommon nowadays however, to see how some, following in the foot steps of some thinkers of the past, still nurture a certain way of conceiving God in purely philosophical or psychological categories. Some of these thinkers would like to rid themselves of the God question altogether, saying that God is merely a creation of man's psyche, a projection which has its origin in man's fears and desires. Others, while willing to admit the possibility of God's existence would claim that it is impossible for man to form any idea of what is meant by the term "God", for God is, by definition, the "totally Other", the completely hidden One.<sup>23</sup> And on a more serious note, on the theological level, it is no longer a news to hear about those authors of the radical theology of religions, who speak of some sort of revelations also in the non-Christian Religions. In the context of the traditional religions, some authors even speak of the continuity and discontinuity to be established between the concepts of God in the

---

<sup>23</sup> Cf. J.P. BRENNAN, *Christian Mission in a Pluralistic World*, St Paul Publications, Slough 1990, 40-41.

traditional religions and the God of the Bible.<sup>24</sup> In this situation, it is not uncommon to find some extreme positions in contemporary theology that appear to becloud the genuine effort that is being made to relate non-Christian religions to the mystery of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Hence, we are faced with the question: How does one relate the special revelation in Judeo-Christian religion to the type of revelations that are being associated with the non-Christian religions? The question hinges on how the special and unique self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ can be seen in relation to man's conceptions of the divine in the realm of cosmic or rather creaturely reality and our mission to proclaim Christ to the whole world?

The discussion on how these supposed kinds of revelations in the non-Christian religions (which in traditional Christian theology are often referred to as natural or cosmic revelations) are related to the unique and final revelation of God in Jesus Christ has given rise to a number of divergent theological formulations and positions. To avoid ambiguity or creating of

---

<sup>24</sup> This was the theme of a "Consultation of African theologians on Revelation and African Beliefs", which was held at Ibadan, Nigeria in 1965. Acts of this Conference have been collected and published under the title: *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (K.A. DICKSON AND P. ELLINGWORTH (eds.): Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1969).

unnecessary confusion on how to relate the special revelation in Christ with those of other religious traditions, *Dominus Iesus* is a sure guide on the subject.<sup>25</sup> It is not within our scope here to delve into the variant theological positions or debate on this matter.<sup>26</sup> As already mentioned, the declaration *Dominus Iesus* has clarified the matter. Here also, it is not our purpose to write a treatise on revelation as it is understood within Christianity but merely to show how the concept can be seen in relation to the traditional religions (or peoples of other non-Christian Religions).

It is precisely for this reason that the question of revelation has, in modern times, entered the centre of the theological arena. Most discussions on the topic, have, however, as we mentioned above, created complex conceptual and epistemological tangles that are difficult to understand and sometimes impossible to unravel. At first, theologians tended to ask about the *content* of revelation, *what* is it that revelation makes known to us. Today the question is, what is

---

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Dominus Iesus*; see especially, nos. 5-8.

<sup>26</sup> For a good and brief summary of the theological debate and the Magisterium response, see: A. BELLAGAMBA, *The Mission of the Church: A Commentary and Reflection on the Encyclical Redemptoris Missio* by John Paul II, St. Paul Publications – Africa, Nairobi 1993.

revelation *itself*? Revelation has been defined, or better, described in a number of ways.<sup>27</sup> And while being aware of the limitations of human language, here we will use the word “revelation” in its generally accepted connotation within Christian understanding.

### ***Christian Revelation***

Christianity is based on the conviction that a *historical* revelation took place. Some religions are based on man’s reflection on his existential situation and, from that, developing a set of beliefs upon which to orientate and give meaning to his life. Others believe that God has indeed revealed something to man but that this revelation was, as it were, dispersed, ahistorical. For Christianity, however, revelation took place in a special way at specific points in time and to

---

<sup>27</sup> Of the many books available today on the subject of Revelation the following are of particular interest: R. LATOURELLE, *Theology of Revelation*, Alba House, Staten Island, New York 1966; G. MORAN, *The theology of Revelation*, Herder and herder, New York 1966; ID., *The Present Revelation*, Herder and Herder, New York 1972; G. O’COLLINS, *Foundations of Theology*, Loyola University Press, Chicago 1966; A. SHORTER, *Revelation and Its Interpretation*, Geoffrey Chapman, London 1983; A. DULLES, *Models of Revelation*; H. von BALTHASAR, *Word and Revelation*, Herder and Herder, New York 1964; H. FRIES, *Revelation*, Burns and Oates, London 1970; J. ALFARO, T. CITRINI, *Rivelazione cristiana, fede e Teologia*, Queriniana, Brescia 1986; J. RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1990.

specific people: “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets.”<sup>28</sup> It is for this reason that revelation has been called within Christianity, “the fundamental principle of theology and faith.”<sup>29</sup> At the same time, when we speak about revelation as God’s self-disclosure we do not thereby deny his ultimate incomprehensibility and profound mystery of his being. The various formulations of dogmatic theology can be seen as protectors of the mystery of God against all attempts at rationalization.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, the word “revelation” comes from the Latin word “*revelare*” (“*apokalypsis*” in Greek). In plain language, it means “to take away the veil”, to uncover that which was previously covered. Thus, it includes the action of revealing and that which is revealed. It is different from discovery, in the sense that we discover something for ourselves while we reveal it to others. In Christianity this action of revealing is performed by God himself and it could only be so precisely because for Christian God is absolutely inaccessible. As Jean Daniélou puts it:

---

<sup>28</sup> *Hebrews* 1:1.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. H. FRIES, *Revelation*, 17.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. J.P. BRENNAN, *Christian Mission in a Pluralistic World*, 41.

“The first article of the Christian faith is the doctrine of the Creator-God, that is, the radical distinction between God and man. Accordingly, God alone is able to raise man to this participation in him which is the supernatural life.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, we can only know God if God chooses to make himself known. If we can know God through the contemplation of creatures, it is because he has freely chosen to reveal himself in this way. If we can perceive him in certain historical events and persons it is, again, because he has chosen to manifest himself in this manner. What he reveals is his plan or mystery which was conceived from all eternity and hidden in his own innermost being, a plan of salvation for all humanity, and it is this which forms the background, the inner dynamic core of revelation.<sup>32</sup>

Paul reminds us that creation is the action which initiates this process:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.

Ever since the creation of the world his

---

<sup>31</sup> J. DANIÉLOU, “The Transcendence of Christianity”, in J. DANIÉLOU, et al., *Great Religions*, Fides Publishers Inc., Notre Dame, Indiana 1964, 137.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *Revelation and Theology*, Vol. 1, Sheed & Ward, London 1967, 9.

invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and divinity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, in creation God reveals himself and since man is the highest aspect of this creation known to us then man himself is the highest aspect of this type of revelation. Through reflection on his own being and on the world about him man can achieve a certain, albeit limited and open to distortion, knowledge of God and of his will. This is because the creature must necessarily in some way reveal its creator, since God himself has created man in his (God's) image and likeness. This type of revelation is usually referred to as "natural" revelation although the adjective is not without its difficulties and in the same regard, some speak of "cosmic" revelation.

Again, it must be pointed out that we can only speak about revelation in this way because in Christianity God is conceived of as personal. As Brennan puts it:

---

<sup>33</sup> *Romans* 1:19-20.

The “absolute” as such, the “transcendent”, cannot speak. Revelation can only be conceived as meaningful for us if God is first and foremost conceived as personal, capable of communicating, of entering into relationships, for, strictly speaking, revelation can only take place between two subjects, between two minds. There cannot be revelation between an object and a subject, for the simple reason that an object is incapable of *disclosing itself*, taking away the veil from its inner being, as it were. That can only happen between two persons. Revelation, therefore, is between a Divine subject, God, and a human subject.<sup>34</sup>

What this implies is that, revelation, as understood within Christianity, is not the revelation of knowledge *about* God but the revelation of God, the *self-disclosure of* God. It means also that revelation, in the religious sense of the term, demands not only that God “speaks” to man but also that man can “hear” God. Humanity’s being must have the capacity to be “open” to God, to be able to receive his revelation.

---

<sup>34</sup> J.P. BRENNAN, *Christian Mission in a Pluralistic World*, 43.

What is the implication of the preceding discussion? The implication is that we have access to God only through the revelation that has come to us in Christ in which we have been invited to receive in the faith. Only through this way can we begin to understand and appreciate the profundity of the mystery revealed in Christ through which, in his infinite goodness, God has willed to make us partakers for our salvation and that of the whole world. Furthermore, in the Christian concept of revelation, a distinction is made between the form of revelation which human beings, contemplating their own natures and the world about them, can come to know by means of their reasoning powers and the revelation which God grants to them and which they, unaided, could never have achieved. This is usually referred to as “supernatural” revelation. It transcends the natural powers of human being although the human being has the capacity to receive it. This second form of revelation comes to man not through the works of God in creation but through the word of God, spoken by God to humanity. This word of God was spoken in time, to chosen agents, but achieved its definitive and absolute form in the Son of God who is his Word in a special way. Natural revelation is

sometimes said to be atemporal, in the sense that it is co-terminous with creation (although, to be revelation in the true sense, it can only take place in the historical encounter with a person or persons). Creation can be the vehicle by means of which God communicates himself but that communication requires the encounter with a historical subject if it is to take place. Supernatural revelation is, in a similar way, said to be temporal, in the sense that it took place at particular times within history. The distinction made here is not really acceptable, for it presupposes revelation as an object “something” rather than the self-disclosure, self-communication, of God. Revelation, as we have said, is not so much the communication of truths about God’s nature as the giving of himself in communion.

However, the Church also affirms the possibility of a knowledge of God that can come to man through the created reality. By reflecting on his being and the created reality around him, man has the possibility of gaining some sort but limited and often distorted knowledge of God. It is precisely in this sense that we have the term, of man’s natural knowledge of God, because it is something acquired through the data of nature. This type of knowledge is contrasted with that

which we can only arrive at through the mediation of the supernatural revelation.<sup>35</sup> The constitution *Dei Filius* of Vatican 1, used this terminology, precisely after its teaching on the possibility of man's knowledge of God from creation, but it affirms immediately and unequivocally, that God has revealed himself and his will through another means supernatural. This corresponds to the final supernatural to which God has destined man, the participation in his own divine goodness.<sup>36</sup> Thus, one can speak of *supernaturalis revelatio*.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Revelation in Salvation History and Teaching of the Church***

The Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium affirm in clear terms that our access to the knowledge of the true inner life of God came only through the revelation mediated in Christ. Supernatural revelation is necessary if man is to know the destiny to which God has called him. Mankind's vocation is one,

---

<sup>35</sup> Cf. L.F. LADARIA, *Il Dio vivo e vero: Il mistero della Trinità*, Edizioni Piemme, Cassale Monferrato 1999, 443.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. DS 3004-3006.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. P. SEQUERI, *Il Dio affidabile: Saggio di teologia fondamentale*, Queriniana, Brescia 1996, 55ff.

divine. It reveals to the human person the meaning of his or her existence here on earth and how he or she is to live out his or her life in order to achieve the destiny to which he or she is called. Because of supernatural revelation we now know that humanity has been created for God and that therefore the human heart cannot rest “until it rests in God.” Thus truth is not something which we could discover by our own powers. We can indeed hear God’s word, but that God would have chosen us to share his own life could never have been deduced by us from our existential situations. The ability to hear this special Word of God, to accept and respond to it, is called faith and is itself a gift from God.<sup>38</sup> As Christians, it is our firm conviction that God has indeed revealed himself. This is our faith. Without pretending to enter into a detailed treatment of the subject in the Bible, Tradition and Magisterium, it suffices to say that the same orientation is found in them.

### *Revelation in the Old Testament:*

The Old Testament (OT) uses a variety of words to depict what we now call revelation. Taken in its totality as a complex phenomenon that involves a

---

<sup>38</sup> Cf. J.P. BRENNAN, *Christian Mission in a Pluralistic World*, 45.

multiplicity of forms, means, and expressions, revelation is presented as the experience of the unexpected action of a sovereign power, an action that alters the course of history for peoples and individuals. But this action is not a manifestation of raw power, rather it is seen as an encounter between a communicator and a recipient. “Understood in a wide sense, revelation is a *dialogue* of intelligent beings, of persons.”<sup>39</sup>

Like most peoples of antiquity, the Hebrews accepted that God could use such means like divination, dreams, casting of lots, omens, etc., to make his will known.<sup>40</sup> For example, Joseph excels in the interpretation of dreams.<sup>41</sup> For a long time the OT retained these techniques to some extent, allowing them some value but stripping them of their links with polytheism or magic.<sup>42</sup> It is also significant that Israel always refused to allow some of the classic techniques for gaining knowledge of the divine mind, especially hepatoscopy, which was used in sacrificial divination through the ancient East. Thus, gradually, a distinction is made between dreams which God sends

---

<sup>39</sup> R. LATOURELLE, “Revelation”, 907.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. *Genesis* 20:3; 28:12-15; 37:5-10; *1 Samuel* 28:6.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. *Genesis* 40-41.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. *Leviticus* 19:26; *Deuteronomy* 18:10ff; *1 Samuel* 15:23, 28.

to genuine prophets<sup>43</sup> and those of professional diviners who sprout false dreams.<sup>44</sup> The OT shows great reserve in regard to visions of God, be these direct or indirect. The important thing in theophanies is not the seeing of God but the hearing of his word. God's call to Abraham takes the form exclusively of divine speech.<sup>45</sup> It is also significant that Moses, who was able to converse with God as friend with friend could not see his face.<sup>46</sup> As for the prophets, even when they have visions, the essential thing is the words they hear. The revelation given to Samuel takes the form of an audition.<sup>47</sup> (1Sam 3). In the OT vocabulary of revelation the roots most often used have to do with action of communicating, saying, speaking, telling, so much so that the phrase "word of God" is the privileged description of divine communication. It is through his word that God gradually leads human beings to a knowledge of his interior life, until finally he gives the supreme gift: his very Word made flesh.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *Numbers* 12:6; *Deuteronomy* 13:2.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. *Jeremiah* 23:25-32; *Isaiah* 28:7-13.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *Genesis* 15:1ff.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. *Exodus* 33:11; 21-23.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *1 Samuel* 3.

<sup>48</sup> R. Latourelle has an interesting presentation of the stages and forms of revelation in the OT: a) Patriarchal revelation; b) Mosaic revelation; c)

In fact, in OT, it is the word that gives the process of revelation its unity. The various Greek philosophies and religions of the Hellenistic period focus on the vision of the godhead. OT religion, on the other hand, is a religion of the heard word. This predominance of hearing over seeing is an essential trait of biblical revelation. This points also to the great respect God has for human freedom. He addresses himself (through the word) to human beings and calls upon them, but they remain free to accept or reject. Again, the word, which is the most spiritual form of human communication, is also the means par excellence of spiritual dealings between God and humanity. Sin consists in human beings hardening their hearts so as not to hear the word. Depending on whether they accept or reject revelation, it becomes life or death for them. Thus, the aim of revelation is life and salvation for human beings, a covenant that leads to communion. OT revelation acquires its momentum from the promise God made to Abraham, and it

---

Prophetic revelation; d) Sapiential revelation. In the same context, our author lists some quite specific characteristics of OT revelation: a) OT revelation is essentially *interpersonal*; b) OT revelation is due to the *initiative* of God; c) It is the *word* that gives the process of revelation its unity; d) The aim of revelation is *life* and *salvation* for human beings, a covenant that leads to communion. Cf. R. LATOURELLE, "Revelation", 908-912.

moves toward fulfilment of that promise. The prophets see the present as only a partial actualisation of a future that is announced, awaited, and prepared for, but still hidden. The present derives its full value solely from the promise, made in the past, of what will be in the future. Each prophetic revelation signifies a fulfilment of the word, but at the same time it gives the hope of an even more decisive fulfilment. History thus moves toward a fullness of time that will see the carrying out of the divine plan of salvation in and through Christ.

To sum up, in OT, revelation is the gracious and free intervention in which the holy and hidden God makes himself progressively known in the realm of history and in connection with historical events that he interprets through the prophets, using quite varied means of communication. God reveals not only himself but his saving plan of entering into a covenant with Israel and, through Israel, with all peoples, in order that he may bring to fulfilment in the person of his anointed one (Messiah) the promise he once gave to Abraham that in the latter's posterity he would bless all nations of the world: "This divine action is conceived of as the word of God urging human beings to faith and obedience; this word is essentially

dynamic, and makes salvation a reality at the same time as it announces and promises it.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, in OT, Israel understood itself as a people who entered into a relationship with God, not from the contemplation of nature but on account of the events of their own history even though the full significance of these events was not always perceived or accepted by those on whose behalf they took place. Later in their history, their apocalyptic writers tended to see the different historical actions of God as moments of one single history, a history that awaited its completion. The different words/events were aspects of the definitive word/event which still lay in the future. The revelation which is initiated in the Old Testament seeks its fulfilment in the New.

*Revelation in the New Testament:*

In the New Testament (NT) revelation, Jesus Christ is the definitive Word/Event of God. In him all other words and events are subsumed and received their definitive expression. For that reason Jesus Christ *is* the revelation of God, both as the action of revealing and the content of what is revealed. This revelation comes to its supreme expression in the

---

<sup>49</sup> R. LATOURELLE, “Revelation”, 912.

paschal mystery. There, in the death and resurrection of Jesus, we find the most profound concentration of Christian revelation. Jesus is the “mystery”, the “*sacramentum*” of God, hidden from all eternity, the plan of God “for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”<sup>50</sup> He is, indeed, the “Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.”<sup>51</sup> He is “the light of the world”<sup>52</sup> and in this light we can come to a knowledge of the truth of creation, come to a knowledge of God and of his plan for humanity. Jesus Christ is the criterion of revelation, seen as an action of unveiling and also as the contents which are thus unveiled. He is the unique Word of God existing from all eternity which is made present in the world.<sup>53</sup> Revelation, therefore, in its most definitive form is Jesus Christ himself. In him God manifests himself to us in a personal, historical and totally grace-filled way.

Therefore, the central NT insight is that between the two covenants an absolutely fundamental event has occurred: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in

---

<sup>50</sup> Cf. *Ephesians* 1:10.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. *Revelation* 21:6.

<sup>52</sup> *John* 9:5

<sup>53</sup> Cf. E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *Revelation and Theology*, 40-41.

these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.”<sup>54</sup> In Jesus Christ, the Word interior to God, the Word in whom God knows all things and expresses himself totally, takes to himself the flesh and language of human beings; he becomes gospel or word of salvation in order to call his fellow men and women to the life that does not end. In Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, the Son is present among us and, using human language which we can understand and assimilate, he speaks, preaches, teaches, and bears witness to what he has seen and heard in the bosom of the Father. Christ is the summit and fullness of revelation, revealing God and revealing human beings to themselves: such is the great novelty, the inexhaustible mystery whose splendour the sacred writers unfold for us, each emphasizing a different aspect of it.

For instance, in the synoptic gospels, we see the evangelists tracing the progressive manifestation of Jesus as Messiah and Son of the Father, the one who reveals himself and reveals the Father through his words, especially his parables, and through his works, especially his miracles, his examples, his passion, and his death, but who meets with rejection by his own

---

<sup>54</sup> *Hebrews* 1:1.

people. In the synoptic tradition, the terms that describe Christ's revelatory action include the following: preach (*kēryssein*) and teach (*didaskein*). Christ preaches the good news of the Kingdom, and conversion as the way of entering it: "Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand."<sup>55</sup> This decisive news involves Jesus so directly that it makes him the beginning of the Kingdom in his own person: "Today" the time of grace announced by the prophets is at hand.<sup>56</sup> "Here I am", the Rabbi, the Teacher who teaches with authority. His teaching is new, his authority is unparalleled,<sup>57</sup> an authority that puts him on the level of God: "Amen", "But I say to you."<sup>58</sup> For the crowd who listened to Him (recalling Deuteronomy 18:18), he is the prophet who was to come at the end of time. But Jesus when he speaks of himself he never claims the title of prophet, because as revealer, he is greater than the prophets.<sup>59</sup> He preaches and teaches, but in virtue of being the Son of the Father.<sup>60</sup> "No one knows the Son except the father,

---

<sup>55</sup> *Matthew* 4:17; *Mark* 1:14-15.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. *Luke* 4:21.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. *Matthew* 7:29.

<sup>58</sup> *Matthew* 5: 22, 28, 32.

<sup>59</sup> *Mark* 6:14ff., 8:28; *Matthew* 17:1-13; *Luke* 7:18-23; 9:28-36.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. *Matthew* 7:21; 10:32-33; 11:25-27.

and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.<sup>61</sup>” No one “knows (Lk: *gignōskein*; Mt: *epigignōskein*), with an experiential knowledge, the nature and the interior, innermost life of the Son, except the Father; and no one knows the interior, innermost life of the Father, except the Son. As R. Latourelle puts it, the Father and the Son “know each other because they are face to face with each other as two equal magnitudes of the same order. And no one can share in this mystery of reciprocal knowledge without a freely given revelation. Christ, who is the Son, is the perfect revealer of the Father.”<sup>62</sup> To the disciples whom he has chosen he grants the favour of knowing the mysteries of the Kingdom of heaven. The Father also reveals the mystery of the person of Christ to the “little ones” who recognise their poverty before God; but this revelation, too, is a gift of God, an interior light granted to them by the Father but withheld from the “wise” in their pride.

Consequently, in the synoptic tradition, this proclamation of the kingdom, as well as the revelation of Christ as Son of the Father, takes place through

---

<sup>61</sup> *Matthew* 11:25-27.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. R. LATOURELLE, “Revelation”, 913.

“actions and words,” parables, and miracles, according to a strictly incarnational economy. In other words, Christ is revealer insofar as he proclaims the good news of the kingdom of heaven and teaches the word of God with authority. In the final analysis, he reveals because he is the Son who knows the innermost life of the Father. The essential content of revelation is the salvation offered to human beings in the form of the Kingdom of God which Christ proclaims and inaugurates. Christ is at once the one who proclaims the Kingdom and the one in whom the Kingdom becomes a reality. In the Acts of the Apostles, in continuity with the synoptic tradition, the apostles are presented as witnesses to Jesus, men who proclaim the good news and teach what they have received from the master. Witnessing, proclaiming the gospel, teaching: these belong to the apostles.<sup>63</sup> The testimony of the apostles is given in the power of the Spirit,<sup>64</sup> who fills them with courage and confidence and acts in the hearts of those who hear them, so as to make God’s word penetrate the soul and be accepted by faith.<sup>65</sup> Again, like Christ, the apostles proclaim the

---

<sup>63</sup> Cf. *Acts* 1:8, 21-23; 3:13-16; 4:2, 33; 5:30-31; 10:39, 41-42; 13:31.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. *Acts* 1:18.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. *Acts* 16:14.

good news of salvation,<sup>66</sup> they constantly “taught and proclaimed the word of the Lord.”<sup>67</sup> Their function, then, is to be witnesses and heralds. Their message is dynamic and explosive. They can not remain silent about the salvation given by Christ, for this is the only worthwhile news, the only news capable of transforming hearts and setting the world on fire so that love may be enkindled. This testimony of these apostle-witnesses is the object of our faith; it is testimony given not by words alone, but by examples of how we are to live, by attitudes and rites. This concrete, comprehensive testimony brings about the growth of the church under the action of the Spirit.

In the Johannine tradition, we do not have such terms for revelation as *apokalyptō*, and *apokalypsis*, nor the contrasting “hidden” and “unveiled.” Again, as we shall see shortly, John does not use Paul’s language of “mystery”, but instead the language of Hellenistic circles: *zoē*, *logos*, *phōs*, *alētheia*, and *doxa*, these being seen as incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ. Also in Johannine writings, we find those terms which call for the response of faith and which emphasize the acceptance of revelation. The reason

---

<sup>66</sup> Cf. *Acts* 2:14; 8:5; 10:42.

<sup>67</sup> *Acts* 15:35; 18:25; 10:31.

why John has a new set of words for revelation is that something new has been brought by Christ who is already God-among-us. In his person he is the Truth, the Word, the Light, the Life. In fact, for John, Christ makes the invisible God visible. The incarnation is revelation made a reality. Furthermore, for John, Christ is the Son who tells of the Father: he “testifies to what he has seen and heard.”<sup>68</sup> The Father in turn bears witness to the Son through the mighty *works* which he has given the Son to do,<sup>69</sup> and through the attraction which he produces in souls, as he enables them to give their assent to the testimony of Christ.<sup>70</sup>

Consequently, from the outset, in his prologue, John equates Christ, Son of the Father, and the Logos. Three factors make Christ the perfect revealer of the Father: his pre-existence as Logos, of God,<sup>71</sup> his entrance into the flesh and history,<sup>72</sup> and his unbroken sharing of life with the Father, before the incarnation as well as after it.<sup>73</sup> John thus gives revelation its maximal meaning and extension. In the synoptic

---

<sup>68</sup> *John* 3:32; 8:38.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. *John* 5:36.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. *John* 6:44-45.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. *John* 1:1-2.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. *John* 1:14.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. *John* 1:18.

tradition, Jesus is the Messiah who teaches, preaches, and proclaims the good news of the Kingdom. In John, the full identity of the Messiah is made known: he is the Son of the Father. What the Son tells us is the interior life, the reciprocal love, of Father and Son: a love which the Father wills to communicate to all human beings, in order that all may be one. It is a revelatory mission with its source in the life of Christ within the Trinity, and of which Christ himself speaks and bears witness: he is the Son who tells of the Father,<sup>74</sup> the witness who declares what he has seen and heard and who is faithful.<sup>75</sup>

Finally, John speaks of the goal of revelation, namely, that humankind “may become completely one,” and that they may thus know that the Father has sent the Son and he loves human beings as he does his Son.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, for John, the final word about revelation is that it is a work of love and salvation that has its origin within the Trinity.

In Pauline corpus, one pair of words, which takes us to the heart of Paul’s thought on revelation, is, *mystery-gospel*. For Paul, in Jesus Christ, the mystery,

---

<sup>74</sup> Cf. *John* 1:18.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. *Revelation* 1:5; 3:14.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. *John* 17:23-25.

hidden initially, is now disclosed, preached, and made known, in order to elicit faith. The mystery of which Paul speaks is the divine plan of salvation, hidden in God from all eternity and now disclosed, by which God establishes Christ as the centre of a new economy and makes him, through his death and resurrection, the sole source of salvation for both Gentiles and Jews and head of all who exist, both angels and human beings. The mystery is the complete divine plan (incarnation, redemption, sharing in glory), which in the final analysis is reducible to Christ and his boundless riches.<sup>77</sup> Concretely, then, the mystery is Christ;<sup>78</sup> and participation in him: everything is “recapitulated” in him. The world, which was created in unity, returns to unity through Christ, the saviour and universal Lord.

Again, Paul makes “gospel” and “mystery” equivalent terms.<sup>79</sup> Once it has been revealed to chosen witnesses,<sup>80</sup> the mystery is made known to all human beings. Mystery-gospel are concerned with one and the same reality, namely, the divine plan of salvation, but each looks at this plan from a different

---

<sup>77</sup> Cf. *Ephesians* 3:8.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. *Romans* 16:25; *Colossians* 1:26-27; *1 Timothy* 3:16.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. *Romans* 16:25; *Colossians* 1:25-26; *Ephesians* 1:9-13; 3:5-6.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. *Ephesians* 3:5; *Colossians* 1:25-26.

angle. In one case, there is question of a mystery that is hidden, then disclosed and manifested; in the other, of a good news, a message announced and proclaimed. Divine plan hidden and revealed; divine plan proclaimed: gospel and mystery have the same object or content. This object has two aspects: *soteriological*, that is, the entire economy of salvation as accomplished through Christ,<sup>81</sup> and *eschatological*, that is, the promise of glory, which includes all the blessings of salvation, these being intended for the Gentiles as well as the Jews.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, since the mystery is the union of Jews and Gentiles in Christ, the church becomes the definitive goal of the mystery, the radiant concretisation of the divine economy, its visible and abiding expression. The plan of salvation is not only revealed, then proclaimed through the gospel, it is also made a reality in the church, the “body of Christ.”<sup>83</sup> The founding of the church means that the time has come for the subjection of all things to Christ.<sup>84</sup> Just as Christ is the mystery of God rendered visible, so the church is the mystery of

---

<sup>81</sup> Cf. *Ephesians* 1:1-10.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. *Colossians* 1:28; 1 *Corinthians* 2:7; *Ephesians* 1:18.

<sup>83</sup> *Ephesians* 4:13.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. *Colossians* 1:16.

Christ rendered visible. The times are fulfilled; the salvation announced is at hand.

Furthermore, Paul speaks of a tension that always remains between historical revelation and eschatological revelation, between the first and last epiphanies of Christ, the former veiled, the latter glorious.<sup>85</sup> Beyond a doubt, the mystery, formerly hidden, is revealed “now”,<sup>86</sup> and the preaching of the gospel takes place “now.” But Paul therefore looks forward all the more eagerly to the eschatological revelation of the mystery, when the “revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ” will come in its fullness,<sup>87</sup> and when the glory of all who have become like Christ will also be revealed.<sup>88</sup> This tension between history and eschatology, faith and vision, lowliness and glory, is characteristic of Paul. In other words, for Paul, revelation is the free and gracious action by which God, in and through Christ, makes the economy of salvation known to the world: makes known, that is, his eternal plan to unite all things in Christ, the saviour and head of the new creation. The communication of this plan is accomplished through

---

<sup>85</sup> Cf. *Philippians* 2:5-11.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. *Romans* 16:25.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. 1 *Corinthians* 1:7; 2 *Thessalonians* 1:7.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. *Romans* 8:17-19.

the preaching of the gospel, which is a ministry entrusted to the apostles and prophets of the NT. The human response to the preaching of the gospel is the obedience of faith, which is achieved under the enlightenment action of the Spirit. Faith in turn gives rise to a process of deepening understanding of the mystery, a process that will reach its term only in the revelation that comes with the vision of God.

To sum up the preceding discussion on the NT teaching on revelation, one can say that for the sacred writers, revelation is the sovereignly loving and free action by which, through an economy involving the incarnation, God makes himself known in his innermost life and makes known, too, the love-inspired plan which he has conceived from all eternity of saving all human beings and bringing them back to him through Christ.<sup>89</sup> This divine action is accomplished through the exterior testimony of Christ and the apostles and the interior testimony of the Spirit who works from within to effect the conversion of human beings to Christ. The Father thus makes known and carries out his plan of salvation through the joint action of the Son and the Spirit: It is only in this context that we can truly talk of revelation.

---

<sup>89</sup> Cf. . R. LATOURELLE, "Revelation", 915.

*Revelation in the Thoughts of Church Fathers:*

For the early Christians, the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ is a self-evident fact. Thus, they were concerned less with “proving” that revelation is possible than with proclaiming to the whole world the overwhelming, unheard-of event of God’s irruption among us in the flesh and message of Christ. Hence, many of the problems raised today in the modern treatise on revelation, undoubtedly never disturbed the early Christians. The first problem, therefore, that arises for them is the problem of what in today’s theology could be called the *inculturation* of Christian revelation in the Greek world. In other words, Patristic thought possesses some inexhaustibly fruitful principles from which our contemporary systematic approach to revelation can draw some benefits. In the first place, Patristic thought remained close to the original event and develops within a comprehensive vision of the Christian mystery. Inspired by Scripture, the Patristic Fathers retained contact with the first witnesses and their writings drew from that source and developed in that setting. All discourse was centred on God who creates, saves, and reveals. This means that in the writings of the Church Fathers, there

is an implicit theology of revelation and salvation in Christ. Furthermore, in their effort to answer objections, heresies, and reductive views, Patristic Fathers developed a broad perspective that would better illustrate the points of contact with other cultures and religions, but also the uniqueness and specific character of the Christian faith.

Through this broad perspective and approach, the Church Fathers have left us with a renewed and an imposing image of Christian revelation in its totality. Moreover, the contextual character of their reflection, with all its surprises, provides us, today, with a sharper awareness and deeper understanding of Christian revelation. Among the themes the Fathers gave attention, were the questions of the relationship (differences and unity) between the OT and NT; the progressivity to be seen in the stages of revelation, in the economy, and in the pedagogical aspect of the divine plan; the centrality of Christ; the tension in the mystery of God, which is revealed, yet always remains hidden; the need of the Spirit's action both in gaining access to revelation and in understanding it. For want of space and in respect of the purpose of the present article, I think it more useful to comment, briefly, on the teaching of the Church Fathers on the

problem of the relationship of the two testaments (OT and NT), since through their treatment of this theme they shed some light on other aspects of revelation.

In the first place, the Church Fathers were to be confronted with two divergent positions concerning the relationship between the OT and NT revelation. Judaziers wanted to give priority to prophetic revelation, while the followers of Marcion saw the two testaments as opposed to each other. Between these two positions, we are faced with, on the one hand, an inadequate grasp of the newness of the Gospel. This was particularly the tendency that dominated the traditional Jewish circles; and on the other, an insufficient appreciation of the OT and a rejection of it. The Marcion group, indeed, depicted Christ as the revealer of an utterly new God who had been unknown to the Jewish world, thereby setting up a radical opposition between the God of OT and the God of the NT.

However, the Church Fathers, in addressing this problem, followed a middle path.<sup>90</sup> Justin, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, emphasized the continuity and profound unity of the two testaments. For these Fathers, one and the same God is author of

---

<sup>90</sup> Cf. R. LATOURELLE, "Revelation", 918ff.

all revelation through his Word or Logos: creation, the theophanies, the Law and the Prophets, and the incarnation are the stages of the one, continuing manifestation of God in the course of human history. The Church Fathers also emphasized with equal clarity the *progress* made in moving from one economy to the other. Though, they saw the progress from different angles. For Justin, the manifestation of the Logos in the OT is partial and obscure; only in the NT is the manifestation clear and complete.<sup>91</sup> Irenaeus assigned to OT a pedagogical role: the OT is a preparation, an education of the human race, hints and promises of the incarnation. While in the NT, we have the fulfilment and gift of Christ.<sup>92</sup> Clement of Alexandria, on his own part, says that the OT contains enigmas and mystery; the NT brings the clarification of the prophecies. Finally, for Origen, in the OT the

---

<sup>91</sup> For Justin's basic works: two apologies against the pagans, and his Dialogue with the Jew Trypho; see Greek text in A. WARTELLLE, *Introduction, texte, critique, traduction commentaire et Augustinienne*, Paris 1987; Italian translation in C. BURINI, *Gli apologeti greci*, Città Nuova, Roma 1986, pp. 83-149; 151-167. See also CH. MUNIER, *Justin: Apologie*, Fribourg 1996; J. QUASTEN, *Patrology* Vol. I, Christian Classics, Allen Texas 1996, 196-219.

<sup>92</sup> For basic thoughts of Irenaeus on the theme; see *Sources Chrétiennes*, Paris (SCh) 264ff; J. QUASTEN, *Patrology*, Vol. I, 287-313. See also, L.F. LADARIA, *Il Dio vivo e vero: Il mistero della Trinità*, 171-176.

mystery is made known; in the NT it is fulfilled and possesses: there is a passage from shadows and images to truth, from letter and history to the Spirit.<sup>93</sup>

From this background, the Church Fathers went further to discuss the encounter of the Christian message with a current of thought dominated by non-biblical, philosophical categories. In order to make the Gospel accessible to pagans, Christian thinkers adopted some philosophical categories that had been developed by Platonism and Stoicism, a philosophy that brought with it the danger that revelation would be seen primarily as a type of knowledge, a higher gnosis, to the detriment of its historical character. Thus, the origin of Justin's theme of *Logos spermatikos* ("generative Logos). In order to make a bridge between God's radical transcendence and his self-revelation in history Justin draws attention to the mediatorial function of Christ. Before Christ there existed *spermata tou Logou* ("seeds of the Logos"): these seeds are participations in the form of an inferior and partial knowledge, which only Christ, the incarnate Logos, can bring to completion. By making the Logos the focal point, Justin placed revelation

---

<sup>93</sup> For the theologians of the Alexandrian school (Clement and Origen), see J. QUASTEN, *Patrology*, Vol. II, chapter 1.

under the sign of knowledge.<sup>94</sup> The same tendency can be found in Clement of Alexandria<sup>95</sup> – whose system of thought is based on a theology of the saving and revealing Logos. By opting for a Logos who is source of light and truth, Clement makes revelation a Christian “gnosis,” thus responding to the desire for knowledge that was the inspiration of his cultural milieu: “The Father’s face is the Logos, by whom God is brought out of his hiddenness and revealed.”<sup>96</sup> For Clement, only the incarnate Logos, and not the Gnostic mysteries, bestows “the revelatory initiation of Christ.” There is no doubt that knowledge of God has first place in Clement’s thinking, even more than the history of salvation. Consequently, for him, the Logos is our sole teacher. We are God’s pupils: it is his very own Son who gives us instruction that is truly holy.”<sup>97</sup> Thus, the incomparable superiority of Christianity is due to the fact that it has the Logos for its teacher, from whom it receives a teaching superior

---

<sup>94</sup> Cf. *Apol.* 1.46.2-3).

<sup>95</sup> The three basic works of Clement of Alexandria: *Protrepticus*; *Paedagogus* and *Stromata*. English translations: W. WILSON, *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, Edinburgh, 4, 12, 22, 24 (1867-1872); ID., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Buffalo and New York, Vol. 2 (1887); see also J. QUASTEN, *Patrology*, Vol. II, 5-36.

<sup>96</sup> *Paedagogus*, 1.57.2; *Stromata*, 7.58.3-4.

<sup>97</sup> *Stromata*, 1.98.4; *Protrepticus*, 112.2.

to any other. Before Christ came, philosophy had given the Greeks a third testament to lead them to Christ. Once Christ came, philosophy is at the service of faith. It is now only the incarnate Logos who teaches us how human beings can become children of God; he is the universal teacher who joins together the Law and the Prophets, and the Gospel. Hence, in Clement, the historical dimension of salvation is maintained by acknowledging stages, but it is subordinated to the principle of complete knowledge. True gnosis exists only in Christianity, but its source is God, who through it leads human beings to a salvation that is inseparable from Christ.<sup>98</sup>

Other Church Fathers as in Clement of Alexandria also developed their ideas on revelation by taking as their starting point the Logos, who is faithful image of God. For instance, for Origen, in the Word, who is God and image of the invisible God, we see the Father who begot him. Revelation takes place because the Word becomes flesh and, in ways proper to the incarnation, that is, through the flesh of his body and the flesh of the Scripture, makes it possible for us to understand the invisible, spiritual Father. The Logos is mediator of a revelation that begins with creation and

---

<sup>98</sup> Cf. *Stromata*, 2.9.4-6); see also R. LATOURELLE, "Revelation", 919.

moves on to the Law and the Prophets, and the gospel. Revelation reaches its first summit in the incarnation of the Logos. Origen stresses the passage from preparations to fulfilment; and the action of grace, of the coming of God.<sup>99</sup>

In a nutshell, in the thoughts of these Alexandrian theologians (Clement and Origen), one can see an honest effort to bring the Church out of its isolation and into encounter with the Hellenistic culture. This is a positive effort at reconciliation with the ancient world, though the approach of the theologians ran the risk of indulging in an excessive “intellectualisation” of biblical revelation, thereby cutting revelation off from its historical connections. The compliant voiced on the eve of Vatican II all emphasized the impoverishment which the idea of revelation had suffered over the years as a result of a kind of intellectualism that had reduced revelation to the communication of a system of ideas rather than to the manifestation and self-giving of a Person who is Truth.<sup>100</sup>

But it is to the credit of these Church Fathers of the first centuries that they were able to avoid the

---

<sup>99</sup> J. QUAASTEN, *Patrology*, vol. II, 48.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. R. LATOURELLE, “Revelation”, 919.

dangers just mentioned. They were able to do so because they never lost contact with the categories of the Bible. Again, their theology never ceased to reflect on the history of salvation. This focus on history served to counterbalance a conception of revelation as pure knowledge. In this regard, the theology of Irenaeus, which was a response to the Gnostics, is a point of reference which no historical account can overlook. In his response to Gnosticism, which opposed the NT and OT, Irenaeus emphasizes the unity of the history of salvation. As a result, the theme of revelation is linked to the broader theme of the action of the Word of God, who is both creator and saviour. With this, Irenaeus stresses the organic unity of the history of salvation: The one God brings to fulfilment, through his Word, a single plan of salvation that reaches from creation to the vision of God. Moreover, under the guidance of the Word the human race is born, grows, and matures until the fullness of time. In fact, almost all the Fathers – notably Justin, Clement, Origen, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine, join Irenaeus in emphasizing this “economic” aspect of revelation. Revelation is seen as an infinitely wise plan of salvation which God conceives from all eternity and patiently carries out,

following ways he foresees, preparing the human race, educating it, bringing it to maturity, and progressively revealing to it what it is capable of grasping at any moment.

Also, connected with this idea of gradual stages is that of period of waiting before the coming of Christ. Thus, in constantly recalling the stages of this economy and this pedagogy, the Fathers are constantly asserting the historical nature of revelation: its profound connections with history in the preparation for it and the proclamation of it, in its fullness in Jesus Christ, and in its communication to the whole world through the Apostles and the Church. Certainly, each of the Fathers approached the issue in his own way, especially as regards the place assigned to the prophets and the Apostles, as well as the importance assigned to philosophy. Be that as it may, all the Fathers agreed and emphasized the fact that revelation culminates in Christ, the Son of God, the incarnate Word or Logos and, therefore, the perfect revealer.

### *Revelation in the Magisterium Teaching*

The magisterium statements on revelation have continued to widen the scope and the thoughts of the

patristic and medieval periods. During the first centuries and throughout the Middle Ages, the existence of revelation was never challenged. No one thought of denying or calling into question that God had spoken to humanity through Moses and the prophets and then through Christ and the Apostles. Thus, as a rule, the Magisterium intervenes only to correct or condemn a serious deviation from the truth. Within the two periods, the controversies that occupied the attention of the Church had to do mainly with the Trinity, the incarnation, and the mysteries of Christ. It is from this background that one meets what has been described as the fullest medieval statement of the idea of revelation issued by the Fourth Council of the Lateran in 1215: “This Holy Trinity ... communicated the doctrine of salvation to the human race, first through Moses, the holy prophets and its other servants, according to a well ordered disposition of times. Finally, the only-begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ ... showed the way of his life more clearly.”<sup>101</sup> Like the Fathers of the Church, the Council emphasizes the themes of the economy and development of revelation, which culminates in Jesus

---

<sup>101</sup> *DS* 800 – 1.

Christ. Again, like Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas, it also emphasizes the doctrine of salvation.

However, the word revelation came to be used more extensively with the convocation of the Council of Trent, which among other issues, had to address the Protestant controversy with its *sola scriptura* principle, as well as the excesses of Protestant illuminism. The excesses in the Protestant approach which saw each individual as having an immediate revelation of the Spirit, caused theologians to turn their attention away from the historical and incarnational aspect of revelation and to become preoccupied chiefly with objective revelation, the message of the faith, and the guarantee of its divine origin. The Council of Trent, for its part, endeavoured to ward off the most immediate danger, namely, too exclusive a focus on Scripture to the detriment of the Church and its living tradition.<sup>102</sup> The Council thus conforms to the medieval usage and the language of the Council of the Lateran on revelation and salvation in Christ. It accepts with equal loyalty and reverence both the Scriptures (OT and NT) and traditions preserved in continuous succession in the Catholic Church. This is why everything contained in the word

---

<sup>102</sup> Cf. *DS* 1501

of God, whether written or otherwise transmitted must be believed. In the Council of Trent, the *message* of salvation, the *doctrine* taught by Christ, is undoubtedly seen as primary in revelation; the centrality of Christ as person, source, mediator, and fullness of revelation, is equally emphasized.

If in the preceding Councils, the word *revelation* was not as such directly used, it was not so in the Vatican Council I. In fact, it has been observed that it was in the Vatican I, that a council, for the first time, uses the word *revelation*. However, in the Vatican I, the subject of discussion is not yet the nature and specific characteristics of this revelation, as will be the case at Vatican II, but the *fact* of its existence, its possibility, and its object. As in the Council of Trent, attention is focused less on the original revelatory action than on the result, the object of this action, that is, the doctrine of the faith and its content: God and his decrees, his mysteries. This can be understood when one recalls the historical context under which the Council was convoked. As a result of European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the requirements of thinking subject had come to occupy the first place in the Western consciousness. The inevitable result of this

development was to raise the problem of a transcendent divine intervention.

Thus, from the Catholic position on this point, Vatican I had to respond, among other things, to the theoretical speculations that were built around the theories of pantheism and Desim.<sup>103</sup> In its response to these theories, the Council asserts the fact of a supernatural revelation, its possibility, its suitability, its purpose, its recognisableness, and its object. The four chapters of the Constitution *Dei Filius* of Vatican I set forth the Church's teaching on God, revelation, faith, and the relations between faith and reason. In particular in its chapter two, the Council distinguishes two ways by which human beings can come to know God: the ascending way, which takes creation (*per ea quae facta sunt*) as its point of departure, has the light of reason as its means of knowing, and reaches God, not in his inner life, but in his causal relationship to the world. The second way originates in God who speaks, God as author of the supernatural order, who makes himself, and the decrees of his will, known to his creatures.<sup>104</sup> Thus, Vatican I continued with the preceding councils teaching on revelation, but adds

---

<sup>103</sup> Cf. *DS* 3027-28.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. *DS* 3004.

something new not found in Trent, for example. It uses the word revelation to designate the content of the divine message: *haec porro supernaturalis revelatio*. The words spoken by God and contained in Scripture and tradition are object of our faith. The human response to God's revelation is faith. The motive for this faith is the authority of God who speaks. Faith, says the Council:

Accepts what is revealed “not because the intrinsic truth of things is recognised by the natural reason, but because of the authority of God Himself who reveals them, who can neither err or deceive.”<sup>105</sup>

Therefore, Vatican I regards revelation both in the active and objective sense as an action of God for the salvation of humanity, an action by which he makes known himself and the decrees of his will. The faith in revelation, which is a free acceptance of the preached Gospel, is made possible by an interior action of the Spirit, who makes the heard message bear fruit. When compared to that of Vatican II, this contribution of

---

<sup>105</sup> *DS* 3008

Vatican I may seem minimal, but it has to be judged in its context.

In the climate in which the Vatican II was convoked, there was already a new awareness of the importance of the theme of revelation. Again, it was discovered that the new currents of thought in which revelation was being discussed then was insufficiently insensitive to the movement of history and to the personal character of both revelation and faith. The theological currents then gave more attention to the objective aspect of revelation than on the revelatory action itself and the rich treasure it yields. However, it needs to be emphasized once more, that a good number of the seemingly irreconcilable positions taken in this area are due to the very complexity of revelation, its paradoxes, and the multiplicity of aspects which it manifests. The sheer number and variety of elements to be considered constantly subject theologians to the danger of emphasizing one aspect to the detriment of another and thus of giving an unbalanced picture. It is this experience and diversity of approaches that make it all the more necessary to appreciate the clarity with which Vatican

II conciliar and postconciliar theology presents the theme of revelation.<sup>106</sup>

In the Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, Vatican II presents some specific features of Christian revelation. R. Latourelle identifies four distinguishing features of Christian revelation in the teaching of *Dei Verbum* that are very significant for our present study.<sup>107</sup> We shall make a brief allusion to these features of Christian revelation as presented in the conciliar teaching.

The first feature is that Christian revelation is the organic connection between revelation and history. Though, in a general sense, it can be said, of course, that other religions may claim to be historical in as much as they coexist with history. However, Christian revelation is special, in that it not only exists in history and has its own history: it also develops through historical events, the deeper meaning of which is made known by authoritative witnesses, and it reaches its full form in a supreme event, namely, the incarnation of the Son of God, an event that takes place at a chronologically defined point and in a particular situation and context within universal

---

<sup>106</sup> Cf. A. DULLES, *Models of Revelation*, 19ff.

<sup>107</sup> Cf. R. LATOURELLE, "Revelation", 930-947.

history. Thus unlike other religions (e.g. traditional religions), which allow no place for history or attach little importance to it, the Christian faith is by its nature faced with “events” that have “happened.” The Scriptures recount facts, present persons, and describe institutions. In other words, the God of Christian revelation is not simply a God of the cosmos but a God of unexpected interventions and irruptions into human history: a God who comes, intervenes, acts, saves. It would not be possible to speak of OT and NT revelation or of promise and fulfilment, apart from a series of events located in time and in a particular cultural setting, and apart from a series of mediators who act in God’s name to make known the “meaning” of this history as it moves towards its definitive completion in Jesus Christ. However, *Dei Verbum* emphasizes no less strongly that revelation is not to be identified with opaque tissue of historical events. Rather, it teaches that it is necessary to hold tight to both a history and its authentic interpretation. This organic connection between revelation and history has never been denied or forgotten in the teaching of the Church down the centuries. However, Vatican II judged it opportune to reassert firmly the historical character of revelation.

Secondly, in addition to the historical character of revelation, Vatican II emphasizes the incarnational principle as well. More specific is the Council's teaching that the revelation comes through the incarnation of the Son of God in the midst of humanity. The incarnation introduces the time of fullness, the moment when the rhythm of history rushes headlong as it were and comes to a point in the person of the Word made flesh. Through his incarnation, Christ not only brings revelation: he is the revelation, the epiphany of God. *Dei Verbum* articulated more aptly this incarnational principle:

Thus, it is he (Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh) who crowns and completes revelation by his whole presence and self manifestation, and confirms it by attesting that God himself is with us.<sup>108</sup>

This implies that in the incarnation, Christ involves his whole being in the work of revealing the Father and his love. In fact, his earthly public ministry shows this fact very well – it points to the means by

---

<sup>108</sup> VATICAN II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* 4: AAS 58 (1966) 817-835. (DV).

which he reveals to us his own mystery, the mystery of the life of the Trinity, and our mystery as God's adopted children. Also by becoming incarnate the Word of God assumes the various cultures of the human race in order to proclaim Christian salvation to each people and to bring these cultures to their completion. Furthermore, although it is true that Christ belonged to a particular culture, nonetheless, by reason of his transcendence as the Absolute, he saves all cultures, including his own, from their deviations and off-scourings, purifies them, rectifies them, elevates and completes them. The incarnation in the economy of salvation demonstrates also that what Christ comes to reveal to all human beings, is a new way of life, that which is totally different from what men are used to in their oral teaching and imagination. That is why Christ, who within the Trinity is the Son of the Father, came among human beings to reveal to them their status as God's children and to do so by himself living as a child of God. It is therefore through Christ that our status as God's children is revealed to us and learn how God loves his Son and all other human beings, called to be his adopted children.

Furthermore, Vatican II stresses, with clarity the unqualified centrality of Christ in revelation. Christ is both the mediator and fullness of revelation. It follows that he plays an utterly unique role in the Christian faith, a role that distinguishes Christianity from all other religions. Christianity is the only religion whose revelation is embodied in a person who claims to be living and absolute Truth. To believe in Christ is to believe in God. Christ is not simply the founder of a religion; he is both immanent in history and the completely transcendent One.<sup>109</sup> Again, one of the principal merits of *Dei Verbum* is that it presents Christian revelation not as an isolated mystery but (following the Patristic tradition) as a far-reaching “economy.” It is an infinitely wise plan which God unveils and brings to fruition in ways for which he has provided. This economy, which arises from the Father’s initiative, enters into history and has its culmination in Jesus Christ, who is the fullness of revelation; it then continues on, under the action of the Holy Spirit, in the ecclesial community, through tradition and Scripture and under the sign of expectation of the eschatological consummation. All the elements of this economy support and shed light

---

<sup>109</sup> Cf. *DV* 2-4.

on each other and form a whole, whose principle of unification and influence is Christ and the Spirit. Also, in this economy the OT has the threefold function of preparation, prophecy, and prefiguration.<sup>110</sup>

Again, and in order to describe the unique relationship which revelation establishes between God and the human race through events and their interpretation, Vatican II follows the lead of the Scriptures and the entire Patristic and theological tradition and uses the analogy of the word: God has spoken to humankind. As understood here, the analogy of the word includes the forms of communication attested in the Scriptures: words, dialogue, friendly conversation with human beings. But what depth this analogy reveals when it is applied to God and purified of all its deficiencies. Analogy involves drawing of similarities and differences between two or more realities. However, analogy does not mean total identity between the realities compared. Though, by reason of its dialogical structure which marks the whole of OT and NT revelation, but which also distinguishes it from, the

---

<sup>110</sup> Cf. *DV*, chapter 2.

words of human beings, Christian revelation as the word of God, is utterly original and special.

Thus, in the teaching of Vatican II, the decisive revelatory event has taken place in Christ. In him salvation has been announced and made reality, and the future has begun. To say that revelation culminates and reaches its completion in Jesus Christ is to say that since Christ is God-among-us as Word of God, the dialogue with God has reached its climax, for in this dialogue God's purpose is not so much to give human beings a certain number of truths, as it is to communicate *himself* through his word.

Finally, on the tension between history and eschatology, Vatican II emphasizes one central point: there is an essential difference between the first and the final expectation of Christ, between revelation given in history and the revelation at the parousia. In the OT, the promise has its fulfilment in a future that has not yet arrived. With the coming of Christ, however, the decisive event in relation to both past and future has now happened. With Christ the future has already been given, it has already begun. History has a threshold, an unexpected landing as it were on the ascending stairs, in the person of Christ, who is eternal life among us. If we hope for the *return* of

Christ, it is because he has *already come*. It is not the parousia that explains the NT; rather it is the Christ-event, with all that it includes, that explains the future. The future is *certain* because the Christ-event has shed its light on the before and after, which until then were wrapped in darkness.

What all this implies is that for Vatican II, the term “revelation” is thus reserved for God’s historical self-manifestation and self-communication in Jesus Christ. Creation and parousia are called “manifestations” of God, while the only manifestation of God in history through the incarnation of the Word is given the name “revelation,” which remains a precious technical term. Faith and hope are in movement toward the glorious return of Christ, but in Christ the future already belongs to us. When he comes, we shall discover, to our amazement and joy, the one who in faith has already been our everyday companion.<sup>111</sup>

Therefore, *Dei Verbum* insists that in Christian revelation the deepest truth about God and the salvation of humanity shines forth in Christ, who is at the same time the mediator and the fullness of all

---

<sup>111</sup> Cf. *DV* 3-4; see also R. LATOURELLE, “Revelation”, 941.

revelation.<sup>112</sup> This is the reality and truth which post-conciliar magisterium has always taught and preserved in its teaching on Christian revelation. For instance, in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II discusses this issue in relation to the missionary activity among followers of other religions. The followers of other religions (including traditional religions) are objects of mission and they belong to that class of people with whom God wishes to share the fullness of his revelation and love in Christ. Again, the desire to share the Gospel with non-Christians also rests on the fact that God prepares individuals and entire peoples through their own spiritual riches (as seeds of the word), as essential expressions and as a preparation for the Gospel.<sup>113</sup> Here it suffices to recall once again, the teaching of *Dominus Iesus*. The document dismisses as dangerous the theological current that speaks of a limited, incomplete, or imperfect character in the revelation in Jesus Christ, which would be revealed better in a complementary way in other religions. Such a position is in radical contradiction with the Christian faith according to which the full and complete

---

<sup>112</sup> Cf. *DV* 2.

<sup>113</sup> Cf. *RM* 55.

revelation of the salvific mystery of God is given in Jesus Christ. According to *Dominus Iesus*, Jesus perfected revelation by fulfilling it through the mystery of his incarnation, death, and resurrection; and finally with the sending of the Spirit of truth, he completed and perfected revelation and confirmed it with divine testimony. Christianity, in the new dispensation, is therefore the new and definitive covenant put in place by God for the salvation of all peoples. The fact that this truth is spoken in human language does not reduce or abolish the definitiveness and completeness of the revelation of God's salvific ways. Rather, it remains unique, full, and complete, because he who speaks and acts is the incarnate Son of God.<sup>114</sup>

---

<sup>114</sup> Cf. *Dominus Iesus*, 5-6.

### 3

## **Traditional Religions and Salvation in Jesus Christ**

As is already evident from the preceding chapters, the topic of revelation in Christian theology carries with it that of salvation in Christ. Jesus Christ is the point of departure for any and every theological reflection on salvation and revelation. He is the unique point of reference for the history of salvation and of revelation and the sole source of their intelligibility. This view and approach to revelation in Christ as the universal criterion in regard to salvation and revelation is not a sign of contempt for or distrust of other religions; on the contrary, it is the only means of situating them and appreciating their value. Thus, John Paul II, in the *Redemptoris Missio*, reminds us the salvific universality of Christ embraces all the aspects of his mission of grace, truth and revelation:

The Word is “the true light that enlightens every man” (John 1:19). And again, “no one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in

the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (John 1:18); cf. Mt 11:27). God’s revelation becomes definitive and complete through his only-begotten Son: “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom he also created the world” (Heb 1:1-2; cf. John 14:6). In this definitive Word of his revelation, God has made himself known in the fullest possible way. He has revealed to mankind *who he is*.<sup>115</sup>

Thus, John Paul II affirms in clear terms the fact that this definitive self-revelation of God is the fundamental reason why the Church is missionary by her very nature, and why she cannot do other than proclaim the Gospel, that is, the fullness of the truth which God has enabled us to know about Himself. Thereafter, the Pope goes further to emphasize the universal salvific mediation of the Word made flesh, and how through it, all who live in their context also

---

<sup>115</sup> RM 5.

participate in the supernatural divine grace and Christ's redemptive work:

Christ is the one mediator between God and mankind: "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, the testimony of which was borne at the proper time. ... No one, therefore, can enter into communion with God except through Christ, by the working of the Holy Spirit. Christ's one, universal mediation, far from being an obstacle on the journey towards God, is the way established by God himself, a fact of which Christ is fully aware. Although participated forms of mediation of different kinds and degrees are not excluded, they acquire meaning and value only from Christ's own mediation, and they cannot be understood as parallel or complementary to his."<sup>116</sup>

---

<sup>116</sup> RM 5.

## *Humanity's effort to attain Truth*

All this implies that the Spirit which is at work in the heart of every person, through the “seeds of the Word”, is also at the origin of human initiatives – including religious ones and in man’s efforts to attain truth, goodness and God himself.<sup>117</sup> It is the same Spirit which offers the human race “the light and strength to respond to its highest calling.” In other words, through the Spirit, “mankind attains in faith to the contemplation and savouring of the mystery of God’s design. The Spirit of God with marvellous foresight directs the course of the ages and renews the face of the earth. This is the same Spirit who was at work in the incarnation and in the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus, and who is at work in the Church. He is therefore not an alternative to Christ, nor does he fill a sort of void which is sometimes suggested as existing between Christ and the Logos:

Whatever the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures and religions serves as a preparation for the Gospel and can only be understood in

---

<sup>117</sup> Cf. AG 3, 11, 15; GS 10-11, 22, 26, 38, 41, 92-93.

reference to Christ, the Word who took flesh by the power of the Spirit “so that as perfectly human he would save all human beings and sum up all things.”<sup>118</sup>

Therefore, the Risen Christ is now at work in human hearts through the strength of his Spirit, not only instilling a desire for the world to come but also thereby animating, purifying and reinforcing the noble aspirations which drive the human family to make its life one that is more human and to direct the whole earth to this end. It is the Holy Spirit that offers everyone the possibility of sharing in the Paschal Mystery in a manner known to God. “The Spirit, therefore, is at the very source of man’s existential and religious questioning, a questioning which is occasioned not only by contingent situations but by the very structure of his being.”<sup>119</sup> Again, it is the Spirit who sows the “seeds of the Word” present in various customs and cultures, preparing them for full maturity in Christ.<sup>120</sup> Mindful of this fact, the Church’s relationship with other religions is dictated

---

<sup>118</sup> RM 29; cf. LG 16; GS 45; Encyclical Letter *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 54.

<sup>119</sup> RM 28, cf. *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 54.

<sup>120</sup> RM 28, cf. GS 26, 38, 93.

by a twofold respect: “Respect for man in his quest for answers to the deepest questions of his life; and respect for the action of the Spirit in man.”<sup>121</sup>

In order to appreciate fully the Christian concept of salvation or rather, the universal salvific mediation of Jesus Christ, we shall now discuss, though, briefly, the significance of the term in the economy of salvation. When we look at the OT the concept of salvation that emerged among the people of Israel was a concept formed over many years and was based on their experience of Yahweh and his dealings with them. In the first place, they experienced being saved by him as a people, as a community. And secondly, they experienced him active in their individual lives. It was Yahweh who had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, who had fought on their behalf against their foes and won for them possession of the Promised Land. He it was who had led them through the desert. They themselves were a stiff-necked and disobedient people, totally incapable of winning their liberation from slavery, of entering the Promised Land.<sup>122</sup> They were sinners; so salvation was something that they had never earned. It was totally the result of the

---

<sup>121</sup> RM 29.

<sup>122</sup> Cf. *Exodus* 13:21.

goodness of God, his love for them, and nothing else. Moreover, he cared for them, not only as a community, as his people, but also as individuals. Therefore, in OT, God is both the author and bearer of salvation. Salvation is not the work of human beings but that of God.

In the NT all these ideas are enriched and fulfilled in Christ. Christ is the Saviour, *Soter*, the one in whom God's love for man manifests itself in all its fullness. The NT era opens with Jesus proclaiming the fulfilment of the OT prophecies.<sup>123</sup> He announces that the Kingdom of God is near,<sup>124</sup> that in fact it is present in his work,<sup>125</sup> but requires repentance and return to God.<sup>126</sup> There is a paradox here: salvation has come in Jesus;<sup>127</sup> yet its final realisation is in the Parousia, Jesus' return at the end of history in judgement.<sup>128</sup>

Furthermore, central to various theologies of the NT are "salvation history" perspectives. Lukan theology divides all time from the creation to the judgement into three epochs: that of the Law and the

---

<sup>123</sup> Cf. *Luke* 4:16-21; *Matthew* 13:17.

<sup>124</sup> Cf. *Mark* 1:15.

<sup>125</sup> Cf. *Matthew* 12:28; *Luke* 10:17-19; *John* 12:31-32.

<sup>126</sup> Cf. *Mark* 1:15.

<sup>127</sup> Cf. *John* 5:25-27; *Hebrew* 2:10-18.

<sup>128</sup> Cf. *Matthew* 24:29-31; 25:31-46; *Acts* 3:20-21.

Prophets which is a preparation for the Christ, the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, and the era of the Church which continues the work of Jesus.<sup>129</sup> Pauline theology has also three ages: Adam to Moses, a time of sin; Moses to Christ, the period of the Law; and Christ to the end.<sup>130</sup> Embracing this entire history is the hidden plan of the Father, revealed in the Gospel, by which every creature would be reconciled to him through Christ, forming that Kingdom which Christ will turn over to the Father.<sup>131</sup> Johannine theology stresses more the uniqueness of Jesus' earthly ministry as the time of eschatological salvation<sup>132</sup> and the source of the Church's life and institutions. But the historical aspect is not lost sight of since the "hour" of Jesus' glorification is the culmination of a long period of preparation which looks forward to a final judgement.<sup>133</sup>

---

<sup>129</sup> Cf. *Luke* 16:16; *Acts* 10:37-42.

<sup>130</sup> Cf. *Romans* 4:15; 5:13; 10:4.

<sup>131</sup> Cf. *Ephesians* 1:9-10; 1 *Corinthians* 14:24-25,28.

<sup>132</sup> Cf. *John* 6:47; 8:51.

<sup>133</sup> Cf. *John* 6:39-40, 44.

## *Between salvation history and the secular history*

Contemporary theology has wrestled with the question of the relationship between salvation history and the secular history. The new input of reflection on salvation history is also linked with theological and philosophical conceptions about the meaning of the whole of history, which have Augustine as their remote ancestor, and G.W.F. Hegel as their most influential recent exponent.<sup>134</sup> The debate has moved between the biblical sense of salvation and the broader theological context where it affirms that salvation takes place in history and that all history is salvific. There is no way in which secular history can be isolated from salvation history in the sense that there is no moment when one's historical existence is not also affected by grace. God's salvific will, therefore, is directed toward redeeming the sinful condition of humanity, and also brings about those events in various times and places which will offer grace. It means that salvation will be brought about within the historical context of human activity itself,

---

<sup>134</sup> Cf. T. McCREESH, "Salvation History", in J.A. KOMONCHAK, M. COLLINS, D.A. LANE (eds.), *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Gill & Macmillan, Dublin 1990, 929-931.

and has past, present, and future phases. This offer of salvation, however, is hidden in secular history, and must be made clear through the interpretive works of God and especially through Christ.<sup>135</sup> Thus is derived the notion of salvation history in its special sense – the history of Israel as interpreted authoritatively by the word of God in Scripture.

All this implies that Christ is at the heart of the salvation of all humankind, precisely because, He is the only begotten Son of the Father who through his incarnation, death and resurrection, has made us adopted children of God. Jesus is the Saviour and his actions are saving actions.<sup>136</sup> In his teaching, he continually emphasized the infinite value of each individual and the fact that his mission was “to seek and save the lost.”<sup>137</sup> “I did not come to judge the world but to save the world.”<sup>138</sup> He speaks that men might be saved.<sup>139</sup> Again, by his miracles of healing, he underlines that salvation includes, physical as well

---

<sup>135</sup> Cf. K. RAHNER, “Jesus Christ – the Meaning of Life”, *Theological Investigations* Vol. XXI, Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1988, 208-219.

<sup>136</sup> Cf. Y. CONGAR, “Non-Christian Religions and Christianity”, in M. DHAVAMONY (ed.), *Evangelisation, Dialogue and Development* (Documenta Missionalia 5), Gregorian University Press, Rome 1972, 135.

<sup>137</sup> *Luke* 19:10.

<sup>138</sup> *John* 12:47.

<sup>139</sup> Cf. *John* 5:34.

as spiritual healing, that it has to do with wholeness. He fully assumes the biblical anthropological tradition of total unity of man, body-soul. By his life, death and resurrection Jesus heals the broken relationships of humankind, bringing about reconciliation between God and humankind, and between humankind and creation. In himself salvation has come. Jesus Christ, his life, death and resurrection, is what gives definitive meaning to man's existence here on earth.<sup>140</sup> What the risen Christ now is – that is what each one is called to be. Jesus is the destiny of each and every human being. In him is fulfilled all of humankind's longing. In Jesus, God offers to humanity the gift of wholeness, integrity, the gift of freedom, the freedom to be fully and truly man, the freedom to be what God has called us to be.<sup>141</sup>

Furthermore, through his incarnation, Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity became man, God took to himself man's finitude, man's sin and fallen situation. In other words, Jesus Christ identified himself with man's suffering and in doing so liberated man from his bondage. For that reason Jesus is the sacrament of man's salvation and

---

<sup>140</sup> Cf. K. RAHNER, "Jesus Christ – the Meaning of Life", 208-219.

<sup>141</sup> Cf. J.P. BRENNAN, *Christian Mission in a Pluralsitic World*, 30.

the mediator or rather the only and unique way whereby it is effected. “Salvation”, therefore, is not just a saving from condemnation because of our sinfulness, because of our rebellion against God, but it is also the attainment of our destiny, the attainment of that for which we were created. The Gospel is therefore “the message of this salvation”<sup>142</sup> and the “way of salvation.”<sup>143</sup>

For Vatican II teaching, the history of salvation is coexistence with the history of the human race. God “ceaselessly kept the human race in his care, in order to give eternal life to those who perseveringly do good in search of salvation.”<sup>144</sup> However, Vatican II, did not on that account identify revelation and salvation. Each phase of history that preceded Christ is part of the history of salvation, but it is not, strictly speaking, part of the history of revelation, since it is not aware of itself even as being part of the history of salvation. Apart from Christian revelation we cannot know with certainty what is going on at the heart of human history. Salvation may be everywhere present, but it is “fully revealed” only in Jesus Christ. It is Christ,

---

<sup>142</sup> *Acts* 13:26.

<sup>143</sup> *Acts* 16:17.

<sup>144</sup> *DV* 3.

taken together with the OT which announces him and prepares the way for him, who makes the history of salvation aware of itself and of its special character in relation to secular history (political, juridical, social, economic, military, cultural, etc.). In fact, in the conciliar teaching, since Christ is God-among-us and the fullness of revelation, it follows that he provides the only authentic interpretation of all forms of salvation that preceded or were contemporary with or followed upon his historical coming.

The non-Christian religions lack a criterion to judge and interpret correctly even the hidden salvific values which some of them claim to possess. Christ alone is “the fullness of religious life.”<sup>145</sup> Only the Gospel of Christ, as proclaimed by the Church, is an event which provides its own infallible self-interpretation, for the source of the interpretation here is God himself in Jesus Christ. The Word does, however, enlighten the various religions in different ways, so that they contain as it were rays of the truth which enlightens every human being who comes into this world. These religions can be said to represent the human *awareness* or an *enlightenment* of God through the cosmos, through the ways of knowledge, or

---

<sup>145</sup> NA 2.

through other experiences, thus showing the Word acting on humankind: nothing eludes this action, which is the source and standard of all truth.<sup>146</sup> Christian revelation (and salvation in Christ), on the contrary, is a very specific reality, not to be confused with others that are related or contain only partial elements.

---

<sup>146</sup> Cf. *NA 2*.

## **Meeting African Traditional Religion (ATR)**

In this concluding chapter of our study of the relationship between traditional religions and Christian teaching on revelation and salvation, we wish to indicate, following the result of our investigations so far, some orientations for a pastoral approach to the traditional religions, with special attention to ATR. We shall begin with general orientation for pastoral attention to the traditional religions.

### ***Orientations for a Pastoral approach***

Our pastoral orientation for the meeting of Christianity with the traditional religions can be determined from the already indicated two major aspects of the Church's relationship with other religions. First, is the appreciation of the way adherents of these religions have searched in their cultures and life, answers to the deepest questions of human existence; second, is the respect for the action

of the Spirit, who is mysteriously present in every human heart.<sup>147</sup> Thus, there are appreciative positive elements of traditional religions that can be said could be easily harmonised with the gospel value in the light of our theory of preparation for the gospel. Primary among these values of the traditional religions, are the belief in a Supreme Being, who is seen as Eternal and Creator.<sup>148</sup> Ascribed also to these traditional religions, is their teaching on moral conduct. In the traditional societies religion is in a way, a system of integration of the individual in the community as he knows it; that is to say, a way of ensuring an active and voluntary attitude of harmony and of participation of the individual in the community, an attentive effort to help an individual adopt a just conduct before the visible and invisible reality as conceptualised in his society.<sup>149</sup>

However, in traditional societies, religions are not conceived from the perspective of redemption or salvation. In traditional societies, religion is not meant

---

<sup>147</sup> Cf. RM 29.

<sup>148</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, 67: AAS 88 (1996) 5-82.

<sup>149</sup> Cf. M. DHAVAMONY, "Today's Challenge: Salvation offered by Non-Christian Religions", in: *La Salvezza Oggi* (Acts of Congresso Internazionale di Missiologia, Pontificia Università Urbaniana), Urbaniana University Press, Rome 1988, 89

to obtain salvation as we know it in Christian tradition nor is religion meant to offer man the self-disclosure of God. Rather, the goal of religion in the traditional societies is to enlist the help of the *Supreme Being*, the deities and the ancestors and to harness the forces below man to strengthen the life of man on earth. The overall aim is to maintain the harmonious relationship between beings in the universe, especially, between man and other beings, to strengthen man, and make his life pleasant and joyful. The highest one can hope for at death, is ancestral communion, life in the spirit-world of ancestors, which in turn is conceptualised in anthropomorphic categories.

This implies that the value of traditional religions in their relation to Christianity should be evaluated from the perspective of their role in preparing the people for the reception of the Christian message through the proclamation of the Gospel. Even the role the traditional religions could play in introducing the local people to the catechesis or the teaching of the Christian mystery of revelation and salvation is also very limited. No one gives what it does not possess. We cannot proceed from the traditional religions to learn about the Christian mystery. It is true that non-Christian religions of human history may be judged as

standing in a positive relation to the Christian mystery, but the quality and correctness of their content are beclouded in ambiguities, deviations, and errors; and so they need to be improved, ennobled, purified and to find their fulfilment in Christianity.

### *The Case of African Traditional Religion*

In the African context, what is the consequence of the above point to the issue of ATR in its relation to Christianity? For me, the overall consequence is to appreciate the positive attitude and pastoral attention of the Church to the cultural and religious heritage of the forbears of Africa and of the Christians converted from that background. This means a pastoral approach based on the missionary theory of preparation for the gospel. The traditional religion permeates African life so much that any adequate explanation of it requires complete investigation in all the various spheres of culture, such as social and political organisation, education, customs, laws, language, art, technology, as well as the historical situation and the physical

environment. J.S. Mbiti and some other authors have published important seminal works on this topic.<sup>150</sup>

The Church has always shown positive attitude to the African religion and culture.<sup>151</sup> In the conciliar and post-conciliar documents of Vatican II, the Church manifested a positive and open-arms approach not only to the great religions of Asia but also to the religious and cultural traditions of Africans and others. In the African context, however, this began to take a definitive shape with the publication of Pope Paul VI's Apostolic message *Africae Terrarum* (1967).<sup>152</sup> The significant thing about this document is that it appeared shortly after the publication of the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*,<sup>153</sup> and the establishment of the Vatican Pontifical Council for Inter-religious

---

<sup>150</sup> See especially, J.S. MBITI, *Concepts of God in Africa*, SPCK, London 1970; ID., *Introduction to African Religion*, (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), Heinemann, Oxford 1991; among other works of the same author. See also, C. NYAMITI, *African Tradition and the Christian God*, Gaba Publication, Eldoret 1978; B. IDOWU, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, SCM Press, London 1973; E.E. EVAN-PRITCHARD, *Nuer Religion*, Oxford University Press, New York 1956; and others.

<sup>151</sup> Cf. W. KASPER, "The Unicity and universality of Jesus Christ", in G. COLZANI, P. GIGLIONI, S. KAROTEMPREL (eds.), *Cristologia e Missione Oggi* (Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Missiologia, Pontificia Università Urbaniana), Urbaniana University Press, Roma 2001, 40.

<sup>152</sup> PAUL VI, Apostolic Message *Africae terrarum*: AAS 69 (1967) 1073-1102.

<sup>153</sup> PAUL VI, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesiam suam*: AAS 56 (1964) 609-659.

Dialogue (PCID). The encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* and the Vatican II declaration on the Church's relation with other religions *Nostra Aetate*<sup>154</sup> as well as the other documents of the Council, consolidated and provided the needed guidelines for the then emerging interests among theologians on the relationship between the Church and the non-Christian religions.

In particular, however, the publication of *Africae terrarum* was an important and powerful response by Pope Paul VI. The document inspired the consultation on ATR initiated by the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue (PCID), and which resulted in the publication of yet another document, *Meeting African Religions* in 1968.<sup>155</sup> Twenty years later, Cardinal Francis Arinze (the then President of PCID), sent out a letter, entitled: *Pastoral Attention to the Followers of African Traditional Religion*. In this Letter, Cardinal Arinze spelt out the aim of Church's pastoral attention and encouragement of scientific research on ATR: namely:

---

<sup>154</sup> VATICAN II, *Nostra Aetate*.

<sup>155</sup> P. ROSSANO, *Meeting African Religions*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 1968.

The desire of the Church to enter intimately into dialogue with adherents of ATR who do not want to become Christians; and to offer pastoral attention to adherents of ATR who want to become Christians and to Christians converted from ATR. This is with a view to a more adequate presentation of the Gospel so that the Church will have deeper roots in Africa.<sup>156</sup>

In his African Report and intervention at the Synod of Bishops, XII General Assembly on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church, Archbishop John O. Onaiyekan, relates ATR to Christianity within the context of the theology of *semina Verbi* and of *preparatio evangelica*. Citing the Synod of Bishops, I Special Assembly for Africa, he says:

But the basic truth is that the Supreme Being, Creator of Heaven and Earth is the target of the

---

<sup>156</sup> F. ARINZE, "Pastoral Attention to African Traditional Religion," 102: *Bulletin* 68 (1988) 102-106

worship and prayers of our African Traditional Religion. The basic norms of morality in these religions, imperfect though they may be, reflect rays of “the light which enlightens every mind” (John 1:9). All this has not been without the grace of God, as Vatican II clearly states (LG 15).<sup>157</sup>

However, for the African Bishops, the value of the African religion is its role as *preparatio evangelica* for the eventual reception of the Gospel message and of the religion serving as a welcoming environment and a fertile soil for such announcement of the Word of God.<sup>158</sup> This is a call to bear witness to Christ and to make him known to all those who have not yet received the Gospel message, and to intensify the work of deepening the faith of African Christians who came from the background of the traditional

---

<sup>157</sup> J.O. ONAIYEKAN, “Africa: A fertile land for the Proclamation of the God’s Word” (intervention at the Synod of Bishops, General Assembly on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church) in: *L’OSSERVATORE ROMANO* (Weekly English Edition – n. 43), 22 October 2008, 14.

<sup>158</sup>Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, 57: AAS 88 (1996) 5-82.

religion. In this way they will come to love and follow him, because in him is the life and salvation which the Africans and indeed the whole humankind very much need.

Therefore, in discussing ATR (and indeed all traditional religions) in its relation to Christianity, one must proceed from the missiological standpoint, and show how the Providence has prepared the forbears of Africa through their religious tradition and culture for the reception of Christian message through the proclamation of the Gospel. In other words, the link between ATR and Christianity becomes clear when it is considered from the perspective of the missionary theory of *praeparatio evangelica*. As Pope Paul VI states:

The teaching of Jesus Christ and His redemption constitute, in fact, the fulfilment, the renewal and the perfect end of all good things which exist in human tradition. This is why the African, becoming Christian, does not have to deny

himself, but he recovers old values “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).<sup>159</sup>

And in the teaching of Pope John Paul II:

A serene and prudent dialogue with African Traditional Religion will be able on the one hand, to protect Catholics from the negative influences which condition the way of life of many of them and on the other hand, to foster the assimilation of the positive values such as belief in a Supreme Being who is Eternal, Creator, Provident and Just Judge, values which are readily harmonized with the content of the faith. They can even be seen as a preparation for the Gospel, because they contain precious *semina verbi* which can lead, as already happened in the past, a great number of people to be open to the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ through the proclamation of the Gospel.<sup>160</sup>

---

<sup>159</sup> PAUL VI, Apostolic Message *Africae terrarum*, 14.

<sup>160</sup> *Ecclesia in Africa*, 67.

Moreover, in the teaching of Pope Benedict XVI, the newness of biblical faith makes it more urgent the call to intensify the work of evangelisation among the followers of non-Christian religions:

The world of the Bible presents us with a new image of God. In surrounding cultures, the image of God and of gods ultimately remained unclear and contradictory.<sup>161</sup>

Even though in some of the non-Christian religions, some talk of concepts of Supreme Being and worship of him, and of moral conduct worthy of respect, but the fact remains that biblical teaching on God is totally and radically different from the notions of divine beings and religious practices that are found in the non-Christian religions (including traditional religions).<sup>162</sup> The Final Message of the XII General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the Word of

---

<sup>161</sup> BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est* 9: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2005.

<sup>162</sup> Cf. CONGREGAZIONE PER LA DOTTRINA DELLA FEDE, *Nota su alcuni aspetti dell'Evangelizzazione*, 7: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2007, 11.

God in the Life and Mission of the Church explains this matter in more clear terms:

That the divine Word has put on a face is at the centre of Revelation. That is precisely why the ultimate finality of biblical knowledge is “not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”<sup>163</sup>

And addressing precisely the question of pastoral attention to traditional religions, the Synod Fathers put it in the following terms:

Even with the traditional religions with their spiritual values expressed in the rites and oral cultures, we would like to pay our cordial attention and engage in a respectful

---

<sup>163</sup> SYNOD OF BISHOPS, XII Ordinary General Assembly on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church, *Message 6: L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO* (Weekly English Edition, n. 44) 29 October 2008, 6-9.

dialogue with them ... and offer in dialogue our genuine witness to the Word of God that can reveal to them new and higher horizons of truth and love.<sup>164</sup>

---

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, *Message* 14.

## Conclusion

At the end of this brief study of the relationship between traditional religions and Christianity, we are left with one basic fact, namely: that the link one can make between traditional religions and Christianity must be understood in its right context, that is, in the sense of the traditional religion serving as a fertile ground for the reception of Christianity. This understanding is essential to deepening the faith of the Christians converted from traditional religions and promoting the work of evangelisation on their environment. This approach distinguishes the traditional religions debate from the unnecessary emergent strands in the theology of religions in relating those non-Christian religions to Christianity. In the context of traditional religions, the emphasis is on the catechetical value of these religions for Gospel proclamation and teaching of the Christian faith in the context of inculturation and evangelisation.<sup>165</sup> This is the perspective under which we have discussed here the relationship between traditional religions and the theological categories of revelation and salvation in Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>165</sup> Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. a.1, ad 1.

**CHRISTIANITY AND TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS**  
Orientations for a Pastoral Approach  
**Francis Anekwe Oborji**

Modern theology's interest in the phenomenology and theology of religions embraces also the study of traditional religions in the light of our faith in Jesus Christ, the teaching of the Church, and of our theological assessments of the catechetical role of these religions in the work of evangelization.

This small book posits the question of the theological value and catechetical role of traditional religions by relating these religions to the theological categories of supernatural, revelation and salvation in Christ. Since traditional religions are not revelational or salvific in nature, the book argues that it is from the perspective of the missionary theory of *praeparatio evangelica* that one may relate these religions to Christianity. It discusses how the Providence has prepared the forbears of adherents of traditional religions for the reception of the Christian faith through the proclamation of the Gospel. The book examines the role traditional religions can play in this case by contrasting and relating these religions to the Christian teaching on revelation and salvation in Christ.

This is a book, not only for experts and students of theology of religions but also for all those who work in those areas where traditional religions still condition the life of the people.

**Francis Anekwe Oborji**, a Nigerian diocesan priest, is professor *ordinarius* of contextual theology at the Pontifical Urban University in Rome. He is one of the founding officers of the International Association of Catholic Missiologists, and author of several books and articles on mission theology and evangelization in Africa.

All rights Reserved: 2009 by Francis Anekwe Oborji

First published 2009

---

LEBERIT SRL Press

Via Aurelia, 308 – 00165 Rome, Italy  
Tel./Fax: 06.66.20.695

## **DEDICATION**

*In Loving Memory  
of  
Fr. Peter U. Ekwenze (1964-2009)*