

## THE CHRISTIAN ATTITUDE TOWARD NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

Some critical and positive reflections

by Paul Hacker

In the present study we intend to reflect on the Christian attitude toward paganism, not on the individual Christian's attitude toward individual non-Christians. As regards the latter, all agree today that Christians should meet with non-Christians in a spirit of dialogue. To be sure, there is no unanimity among writers about what dialogue is or should be. There are, however, some official statements on this matter by the Second Vatican Council, by Pope Paul VI and by the Secretariat for non-Christians. Reflection on the Christian attitude toward non-Christian religions seems to be an indispensable prerequisite for the meeting of Christians with individual non-Christians.

The Christian attitude toward paganism has a doctrinal and a practical aspect. The practical attitude is an expression of dogmatic presuppositions, whether these be reflected upon or not. We therefore treat the doctrinal aspect first.

### 1. A Critique of the "Anonymous Christians" Theory

The most noteworthy contribution to this subject in the last years has doubtless been KARL RAHNER's essay *Christianity and the non-Christian Religions*<sup>1</sup>. One cannot deal with our problem today without discussing RAHNER's position. The vast number of articles and books which over recent years have dealt with non-Christian religions have to a great extent been occasioned by Rahner's essay or were composed under its influence.

A critical analysis of any of Rahner's essays is not an easy task. The main difficulty stems from his peculiar style of thinking. He can begin by stating traditional doctrine with great emphasis, but then he goes on to evolve novel ideas that virtually neutralize or nullify his foregoing statements; at the same time he surprisingly intersperses passages which

<sup>1</sup> This essay is included in vol. 5 of KARL RAHNER's *Schriften zur Theologie* (1962). In the present article, quotations from this volume and reference to it are given according to K. H. Kruger's accurate English translation (K. RAHNER, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5, Baltimore and London, 1966, repr. 1969). After each quotation two page numbers are given in brackets; the first refers to the English translation and the second to the corresponding passage of the German original. Passages of other works of RAHNER have been translated by the present author, and references to their sources are given in the footnotes.



represent traditional opinions but which do not seem to be too coherent with the new context. In order to do full justice to Rahner, it would therefore be necessary to analyze his writings almost sentence by sentence. In the case of the essay concerning us here, an additional difficulty lies in the fact that its principal statements presuppose certain positions in philosophy, in Christology and in the doctrine of grace. Hence, a thorough critique of the article would be possible only as part of a critical analysis of the whole system of Rahner's philosophy and theology. Since we cannot undertake all this within the framework of an article, we must content ourselves with a compromise and treat Rahner's essay more summarily than it would deserve.

There are two points on which no Catholic can possibly disagree with Rahner's ideas. Rahner is certainly right in emphasizing, first, that the present situation of the world demands a reconsideration of the problem of the Christian attitude toward non-Christian religions; secondly, that a man who cooperates with the grace that God offers him can be saved even outside the Church. It is open to question, however, whether Rahner's new treatment of the subject — in particular, the way he construes the possibility of salvation for non-Christians — provides an acceptable solution.

The present situation of the world is characterized by the fact that "everybody today is determined by the intercommunication of all those situations of life which affect the whole world. Every religion which exists in the world is . . . a question posed, and a possibility offered, to every person" (117; 138). Rahner contrasts our time with a former epoch, namely the Middle Ages, when the West was more or less "shut up in itself". It is surprising, however, that he does not ask whether there are essential differences or similarities between the present situation and the situation of antiquity. In point of fact, there is at least one striking similarity. In the first four centuries the Church lived in a "religious pluralism" scarcely less multiform than the pluralism in which we find ourselves today. On the other hand, there is a difference in that atheism was not as great a factor in the pluralism of antiquity as it is today. But as far as the Christian attitude toward other religions is concerned, there is another, more important difference between our time and antiquity. Rahner, doubtless voicing the feeling of many Christians of our day, states, "The fact of the pluralism of religions, which endures and still from time to time becomes virulent anew even after a history of two thousand years, must . . . be the greatest scandal and the greatest vexation for Christianity" (116; 137). This is a feeling of frustration which, according to all we know, was quite alien to the Christians in antiquity. Nor does the opposite feeling, the hope of a final victory of Christianity in the whole world, seem to have determined the Christian consciousness in any noticeable measure. As long as to be a Christian meant to risk one's life, there could be no question of a hope of external triumphs



anyhow; and even after Christianity had become the principal religion of the Roman Empire, Christian writers took up a much calmer attitude toward the survival of paganism than many of us would perhaps expect today. Obviously the theology underlying the Fathers' attitude toward paganism was essentially different from the one that Rahner proposes.

The problem of the *true* religion was of prime importance for the Fathers; in Rahner's essay, however, it is not posed at all. Instead, Rahner states "that Christianity understands itself as the absolute religion" (118; 139). This expression suggests that there may also be a relative religion or relative religions. The idea of relativity is evoked once more by the formulation, "Christianity understands itself as..." instead of, "Christianity is..." Thus Christianity is represented as "the absolute religion" in so far as it understands itself to be such. This implies that the very notion of absoluteness is included in the domain of relativity. There is in fact a thoroughgoing, though not explicit, relativism in the argumentations of Rahner's essay. If this precludes the question about the *true* religion, it tallies very well with the idea of *legitimacy*. For, in relation to changing situations, laws can change, while truth is essentially immutable. Rahner uses the notion of legitimacy to explain why Christianity is "the absolute religion". Christianity, he says, "cannot recognize any other religion beside itself as of equal right", i. e., of equal legitimacy. The concept of "lawful" or "legitimate" religion dominates the whole essay. Non-Christian religions, Rahner contends, are lawful "until the moment when the gospel really enters into the historical situation of an individual" (121; 143). This moment occurs "where and when" Christianity "enters with existential power and demanding force into the realm of another religion" (118; 139), "wherever ... Christianity reaches man in the real urgency and rigor of his actual existence" (120; 142). These expressions can only be interpreted as implying that both the "absoluteness" of Christianity and the "legitimacy" of non-Christian religions ultimately depend on the impression that Christianity produces on men. Thus both absoluteness and legitimacy are relative. The other alternative, described by Rahner as the prevalent or common view, would hold that "the beginning of the objective obligation of the Christian message for all men" occurred "in the apostolic age" (119; 140f).

It seems, however, that we need not accept either alternative. What Rahner calls the common view may easily lead to the misunderstanding of redemption as a legal decree occurring within time. Rahner's alternative, on the other hand, seems objectionable on account of its anthropocentrism and situational relativism. If we leave out of account the notion of obligation, then what the sentences quoted refer to turns out to be the moment of conversion. It seems significant that Rahner's essay does not use the word *conversion* in a positive context (it occurs only in the negative phrase, "avoidance of immature conversions", 120; 141). We shall see presently that Rahner's system virtually precludes the term



*conversion* to denote the act of becoming a Christian. To the sentences we quoted others of a similar tenor could be added. Rahner's existentialist terminology refers to the human side of conversion only. We may paraphrase his statements by saying that Christianity becomes a man's obligatory religion when the impact of a situation brings it home to him that Christianity is, or ought to be, his religion.

According to Holy Scripture, however, the conversion of gentiles is of an eminently theological nature. It is a "mystery hidden for ages in God" but "now made manifest to His saints" (Eph 3:9; Col 1:26). This *now* of the manifestation of the mystery, this "day of salvation",<sup>2</sup> does not, of course, occur at the same chronological moment for all mankind and for each individual. Thus far we can agree with Rahner. But we must criticize his phraseology as not fully adequate to the subject. To be sure, Rahner's existentialism or existential idealism is not a pure humanism. Nevertheless, theology must take into account that the "day of salvation" is grounded in God's providence or predestination which, being eternal, is not a process within time. The Fathers realized this and were thus immune to both defeatism and triumphalism. Christ's deed of expiation, decreed from eternity and manifested within time in His suffering and death, is eternalized in his "holding the priesthood permanently", and in virtue of this priesthood "he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him" (Heb 7:24f). Thus the occurrence of the day of salvation at different points of time for different individuals cannot, as Rahner would have it, be grounded in "the real historicity of Christianity and salvation-history" (120; 141). Historicity, if it means anything at all, connotes occurrence within time, originating and perishing. Conversion, however, is the point where time and eternity meet. The eternalized reality of Christ's expiation brings salvation into equal proximity to every moment of time and to every individual. And "those who draw near to God" are themselves elevated into eternity in this very act of conversion. For the same reason, even persons who lived before Christ are not outside the reach of the effect of His redemptive passion. This would be impossible on the basis of mere "real historicity".

It is quite natural that Rahner's peculiar intertwining of the notion of obligation with a situational relativism leads straight to what modern jargon calls "dialectic". A contradiction is boldly interpreted as having a positive value. The Church, Rahner states, is opposed by non-Christian religions. In this antagonism, however, the Church "cannot feel herself to be just *one* dialectic moment". On the contrary, she "has already overcome this opposition by her faith, hope and charity. In other words, the others who oppose her are merely those who have not yet recognized what they nevertheless really already are (or can be) even when, on the surface of existence, they are in opposition; they are already anonymous Christians" (134; 157).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. ZMR, 1970, pp. 182ff.



In evaluating this theory we must note first that it is simply irreconcilable with a great number of statements in Scripture and Tradition, unless these are reinterpreted in a sense which the hagiographers and Doctors certainly did not intend. The whole Apocalypse, for instance, would be meaningless if, as Rahner intimates, even those who oppose the Church are already secretly saved, and Our Lord could not have said to the prophet that, at the end of all things, idolaters are to remain "outside" (Apoc 22:15). Idolaters, in the vision of the Apocalypse, are persons who oppose the Church. If they were already, or could be, anonymous Christians, they would not be banished from the City of God. Other texts inconsistent with Rahner's theory are those which refer to the conversion of Saul. As long as Saul — who was to become the Apostle Paul — persecuted the Church, he was "in opposition" to her not only "on the surface of existence" but in full reality. Otherwise Our Lord could not have said to him, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5). True, Saul was "a chosen instrument" of Christ (9:15), but his election included his conversion. If he had only been brought to realize what he already was, the story of his conversion would be quite different from what we read in the New Testament. The Pharisee Saul had been just as zealous in the service of God as was the Apostle Paul. Hence, if Rahner's theory were correct, one would expect that Paul should be the model case of a person who arrived at a reflex consciousness of what he had been before. But there is not the slightest hint of such an explanation in the Bible. On the contrary, St. Paul, looking back to his past, frankly repents of it, in saying, "I am . . . unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God" (1 Cor 15:9).

Rahner's surprising theory becomes understandable only on the basis of his doctrine of grace and, ultimately, his philosophy. We can only briefly indicate these doctrines here. Rahner contends that in man's spirit there is a tendency which always, even before objects are known, anticipates unlimited being (*Sein, esse*) in general. This movement of the spirit or mind does not aim at an object; rather, it is the precondition for any cognition of objects.<sup>3</sup> This conception of an anticipating movement or a transcendental anticipation (*Vorgriff*) of the human spirit reaching out for being has an eminently theological relevance. For the absolute Being toward which the urge of the anticipation moves, is God. The anticipation implicitly affirms the existence of Absolute Being or God, even though in this movement the mind has no explicit awareness of God.<sup>4</sup> Thus man, who is spirit, "lives his life in constantly reaching out toward the Absolute, in an openness to God . . . He is man solely by his always being already on the way to God, no matter whether he knows this explicitly or not, whether he wills it or not."<sup>5</sup> The anticipating movement

<sup>3</sup> K. RAHNER, *Geist in Welt* (2nd ed., Munich, 1957), pp. 153ff.

<sup>4</sup> K. RAHNER, *Hörer des Wortes* (Munich, 1941), p. 82.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 85.



toward being, ultimately toward Absolute Being or God, "belongs to the basic constitution of human existence,"<sup>6</sup> i. e., of human nature.<sup>7</sup>

Rahner's doctrine of grace is nothing but a theological transposition of this metaphysical schema. Man's transcendence, if seen from the side of God, is grace, and "in the experience of his own transcendence, of his own unlimited openness", man even "experiences the offer of grace." He can accept this offer "by really and wholly accepting himself," because through his self-transcendence revelation "speaks even within him." And this accepting is an "act of supernatural faith".<sup>8</sup> Thus nature has become supernatural. By accepting his own nature, man has a valid substitute for supernatural faith, quite as effective as real faith.

In 1940, Rahner asked whether man's faculty of self-transcendence would not make a word-revelation superfluous. And he tried hard to show that this was not the case.<sup>9</sup> In his later essays, however, the danger inherent in his metaphysics has become more and more manifest. If man's transcendence is sure to reach God in the mere act of his accepting his own existence or nature, then the essential distinctions between Christianity and paganism, as well as between moral conduct and sin, become ultimately irrelevant. Nor is there any necessity for conversion if a man in becoming a Christian only arrives at a reflex consciousness of what he already is. Rahner's philosophical description of man's irresistible self-transcendence is strikingly similar to, and in fact virtually coincident with, what he says about "those who have not yet recognized what they already are". In 1940, the philosopher wrote that man is "always already on the way to God, no matter whether . . . he wills it or not." In 1961, the theologian can speak of "the deed of God which bursts open and redeems the false choice of man by overtaking it" (124; 146). Though nominally acknowledging that man can refuse the offer of grace and that there are depravities in paganism, Rahner uses very emphatic formulations which virtually represent all depravities as irrelevant and exclude the possibility of a refusal of grace. He can say, for instance, "that every human being is really and truly exposed to the influence of divine, supernatural grace which offers an interior union with God and by means of which God communicates himself, whether the individual takes up an attitude of acceptance or of refusal towards this grace" (123; 145). In this way Rahner constantly blurs the difference, carefully observed by sound

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>7</sup> Rahner's term "existence" is a misnomer. It is a case of that essentialization of existence which is the inescapable tragedy of all existentialism. When he speaks of "existence" he is often referring to what in more adequate terminology would be called "nature" or "essence". His "existence" includes "existentials" (*Existentialien*). These are qualifications. Real existence, however, has no qualifications. What possesses qualifications, is substance or essence or nature.

<sup>8</sup> K. RAHNER, *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol. 6 (1965), pp. 547 and 549.

<sup>9</sup> *Hörer des Wortes*, Chapters 7—8.



theology, between objective redemption and man's subjective appropriation of it. Thus redemption and salvation become virtually identical.

From the foregoing it should be clear that it is Rahner's metaphysical project — which we may label "existential idealism" or "spirit-dynamism" — which has dictated his theory of Anonymous Christians. This predominance of philosophical speculation is also responsible for the atrophy of positive theology, i.e., theology based on Scripture and Tradition, and for the absence of any reference to concrete non-Christian religions in Rahner's essay. Rahner pleads that he need not refer to data of the history of religions because he is treating his subject as a dogmatic theologian (117f; 139). But can any science yield reliable results if it neglects the study of materials to which it has to refer constantly? As a matter of fact, Rahner can only dispense with the reference to facts — and to Scripture and Tradition — because he is evolving deductions from prior metaphysical speculation. In this respect too, his reasoning differs radically from the way of thinking of the Church Fathers who, when evaluating paganism, had in view definite doctrines and cults.

Rahner is inclined to see the Old Testament "in many respects as a divinely interpreted model of pre-Christian religion rather than as an absolutely and in every respect unique and incomparable quantity" (106; 125). This sentence includes some qualifications: "in many respects", "absolutely and in every respect". Such indefinite restrictions, characteristic of Rahner's style, seem to leave a vague margin for statements to the opposite effect. Nevertheless, the sentence is revolutionary. It undermines the very basis of that vision of the economy of salvation which has been authoritative in the Church right from the time of the New Testament. Even Clement of Alexandria, with all his appreciation of Greek philosophy, did not attribute to it the same dignity as to the Old Testament. The New Testament becomes fully intelligible only if read against the background of the Old Testament, much as the Old Testament discloses its meaning only if it is seen as the preparation for the gospel. If the New Testament is unique as the message of the Incarnation, then the Old Testament is just as unique as the message of God's economy that was preparatory for the Incarnation. Rahner's view might be true if the Old Testament ended with the story of the Noah Covenant. But there are also the records of the covenants which God made with Abraham, with the Israelites at Sinai, and with David. What distinguishes the Old Testament from documents of other religions is not only the fact, which is certainly essential, that in it history is "divinely interpreted"; rather, this interpretation reveals the unique nature of the *events* related and imparts *knowledge*, not obtainable from any other source, of God, of His will and designs.

God's economy, according to Scripture, takes account of the fact that "the imagination of the thoughts of man's heart is evil continually" (Gen 6:5; 8:21). This fact necessitated a narrowing of the range of



salvation-history. In the case of Noah as well as in the case of Abraham one single man was the recipient of God's revelation and salvific promise. The Israelites were a small and insignificant ethnic group as compared with the great contemporary nations. Yet it was this group that God chose as His own people. If this seems too narrow a view to our human speculation, we must ask ourselves if our speculation really serves to elucidate revelation or whether, conversely, we are trying to adapt the data of revelation to our speculative project. Such adaptation was practised on a large scale by Hegel. Rahner's theological transposition of his existential idealism or spirit-dynamism bears a disconcerting resemblance to Hegel's adventure.

We cannot discuss Rahner's Christology in detail here. But we must note that his Christology, an application of his philosophical spirit-dynamism rather than an interpretation of the facts of revelation, makes it impossible for him even to describe the uniqueness of the New Covenant in adequate terms. Rahner thinks that the mystery of Christ's two natures, traditionally described in „ontic-substantial categories“, can also be expressed in “existential categories”. These latter refer, as Rahner explains, to man's “*geistigen Selbstvollzug*”<sup>10</sup>, i. e., to the spiritual act or event of man's self-realization. But Rahner's existentialism disregards the fact that an act presupposes a being that is able to perform it and that the basis of such an ability is the nature or essence of the being concerned. It is not true, as Rahner would have it, that a statement in terms of substance or essence or nature can be transposed into a statement in terms of event or process or act. As a matter of fact, as far as Christ's humanity is concerned, Rahner does make statements about His nature. Instead of treating of Our Lord's divine nature, however, he contends that two acts or events — God's self-communication and Jesus' perfect acceptance of it — have reached their absolute goal in Jesus. But Rahner also holds that God offers His self-communication to all men and man's spiritual self-transcendence responds to it. Thus there is no difference in nature between Jesus and other human beings. The difference between Him and us concerns only the success of self-transcendence. This success is perfect in Jesus' case, and this is why He becomes God's “pledge of grace to us” (184; 212: *Zusage der Gnade an uns*). Rahner can say, “In the depths of his existence man is divinized (at least in the manner of an offer). The history of the spatio-temporal tangibility of man's finding himself in God ... reaches its historical culmination and its supreme goal ... in Him whom we call the God-Man *par excellence* in the midst of divinized mankind”<sup>11</sup>. This implies that the divinity of Christ is reduced to an *event* which, though in a far lower degree, occurs in all human beings. If Rahner's Christology is correct then either Christ is by nature not God at all or every human being is God, though at a far

<sup>10</sup> K. RAHNER, *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol. 8 (1967), p. 215.

<sup>11</sup> *O. c.*, pp. 160f.



distance from Christ. It can hardly be maintained that this reinterpretation brings out the uniqueness of the Person of Christ as defined by the Council of Chalcedon.

Neither is the uniqueness of Christ's work treated adequately in Rahner's system. The meaning of Christ's passion is watered down to the exceptionally successful case of a man's self-transcendence in which God's self-communication becomes manifest. For Rahner, the decisive event is not Christ's passion as a whole but the abstract fact of His death because this is the completion of Jesus' self-transcendence<sup>12</sup>. The "possibility of forgiveness" of sin "comes from that power of God's self-communication on which, on the one hand, depends the development of the whole history of the cosmos and which, on the other hand, . . . by establishing its own goal, becomes manifest in the existence and existential realization of Christ. And this is the meaning of the proposition which states that we have been redeemed by Christ from our sins" (186; 215). Thus the concepts of expiation, redemption and sacrifice, hallowed by Christian tradition right from the time of the New Testament, become virtually meaningless. As an inevitable corollary, sin loses its fatal character of severing man's relationship with God. Rahner can say, "Sin is from the outset embraced by the will to forgive" (186; 215). This minimization of the gravity of sin is a necessary consequence of the doctrine that man's spirit is always reaching out toward God, whether he wills it or not.

Thus it is in the thin atmosphere of Rahner's existential idealism that his theory of Anonymous Christians could thrive. This philosophy makes it impossible to see the uniqueness of Christ's person and work and, accordingly, the uniqueness of both the Old and the New Covenants as compared with other religions. As an inevitable consequence, Christianity is reduced to the "explicit expression of what the Christian hopes is present as a hidden reality even outside the visible Church" (133; 156).

But Rahner's metaphysics is not the sole support of his theory of Anonymous Christians. In addition, he maintains the principle of the necessary social constitution of religion. He admits that he deduces this idea from the nature of Christianity; but he thinks this principle can be extended so as to apply to all religions (120; 142). This implies, however, a misinterpretation of both Christianity and non-Christian religions. The social constitution of Christianity is incomparable because it is grounded in the supernatural reality of the Body of Christ. A special social organization and specific kinds of social behavior are therefore an essential and exacting reality in Christianity, distinguishing it from all pre-Christian religions. The Bible teaches us that the Nations live under the Noah Covenant. This covenant is an emergency ordinance

<sup>12</sup> K. RAHNER, *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol. 4 (1960), pp. 164f.



which does not institute a social structure on a religious basis. The same nations which live under this covenant are also under the curse that divided mankind (Gen 11:1—9). St. Justin and St. Augustine were well aware that precisely the depravities of the pagan religion were intimately tied up with the society in which it was practised. Moreover, both the Old and New Testaments teach us that he who wants to fulfill God's will must in certain situations even risk a rupture with the society in which he lives (Gen 12:1; Matt 10:37; Luke 14:26). Such a break can be a prerequisite for a man's incorporation into the supernatural society of the Covenant. Rahner's vindication of the legitimacy of paganism on the ground of the social nature of religion seems untenable. As a consequence of the Fall, it can and does happen that precisely the aberrations and depravities of religious practices are tied up with a social structure.

There are still more objections which may be raised against Rahner's essay. What prevents us from assenting to him is not primarily and essentially the term *anonymous Christians*. This expression is indeed a misnomer or even a contradiction in terms. There is a rich symbolism in the concept of "name" which forms an important part of the theology of the New Testament, cf. Luke 10:20; John 10:3; Apoc 2:17; 3:5; 13:8; 17:8 and other passages. God's personal relationship to the Christian is expressed in the doctrine that the Christian has a new name by which Christ calls him, which is written in the book of life, and which Christ confesses before His Father. This whole theology is destroyed if there are anonymous Christians. Neither can a true Christian's religion ever be *implicit*. On the contrary, the Christian is obliged to make his religion explicit by professing it in word and deed. More fateful, however, than the terms "anonymous" and "implicit" are the doctrines connected with them. If the proclamation of the gospel is nothing but the bringing of men to a reflex realization of what they already are, then a large part of Christian doctrine is virtually invalidated.

## 2. *Reflections on the Doctrine of the Second Vatican Council*

If, then, we cannot agree with our time's most original and fascinating presentation of a "Christian attitude toward non-Christian religions", how and where are we to find guidance in formulating such an attitude? Before venturing speculations, we have to ask what Scripture and Tradition say about our theme, and we must take due cognizance of the declarations of the *magisterium*. Moreover, we must take into consideration the results of research on non-Christian religions. Unlike Rahner, the Fathers of the Church had in view concrete religions when they reflected on the Christian attitude toward paganism. While utilizing the Fathers' writings as testimonies of tradition, we have to ask whether their judgments need modification so as to accord with the results of our historical experience.



In a previous article<sup>13</sup>, we studied relevant statements and narrations of Holy Scripture. In another article<sup>14</sup>, we found a far-reaching consensus among the Church Fathers regarding essential points of our theme. We will now consider statements of the Second Vatican Council, while keeping in mind what we found in Scripture and in the Fathers. There are a number of documents in which the Council has touched upon the question of the Christian attitude toward non-Christian religions. Rahner, who acted as a *peritus* for the Council, certainly cooperated in formulating some of the texts; but this does not imply that the Council has sanctioned his personal views. We must take the Council's documents as expressing what they say explicitly. We may not single out individual statements from their context but must interpret the documents as a unity, with certain statements qualifying or complementing others.

In conformity with Scripture and Tradition, the Council affirms that men who without their guilt are ignorant of the gospel and the Church can attain eternal life if they, guided by God's grace, seek God and follow the dictates of their conscience<sup>15</sup> (E 16). Without faith, however, man cannot be pleasing to God. We must assume that God can lead those ignorant of the gospel to faith by ways which He alone knows (*vis Sibi notis*, M 7). This implies that the salvation of non-Christians is ultimately a mystery which we cannot unveil by scrutinizing.

It may be in place here to reflect for a moment on this mystery. Former generations found it easier to construe the possibility of salvation outside the Church, and in our day some scholars have ventured new theories to elucidate this mystery. We cannot, however, accept certain legends as historical, nor can we speak of "holy pagans of the Old Testament" as examples of saints outside of God's salvific covenant, nor can we attribute to the Noah Covenant a significance beyond the one which is expressly described in Scripture. We have to accept at face value the words of Scripture about the darkness in which the Nations live (Is 60:2; Luke 1:79) and about "the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God" (Eph 3:9; cf. Col 1:26). The darkness does not only consist in the Nations' ignorance. It is darkness for our vision too. In the more ancient writings of the Old Testament even the eternal destiny of those within the Covenant is left in the dark. To a much higher degree the same holds for those outside the Covenant. The darkness is dispelled and the mystery is made manifest not earlier than when — whenever — the gospel is proclaimed and accepted. Theology can do nothing but interpret the contents of this proclamation and acceptance. The gospel

<sup>13</sup> ZMR, 1970, pp. 161—185.

<sup>14</sup> ZMR, 1970, pp. 253—278.

<sup>15</sup> Documents of the Second Vatican Council are referred to with the following abbreviations: E = Const. dogm. de Ecclesia (Lumen gentium),  
M = Decr. de activitate missionali (Ad gentes),  
NC = Decl. de Ecclesiae habitudine ad religiones non-christianas (Nostra aetate).



does not reveal that the past of a convert or the life of an infidel is condoned without his knowing it and in spite of his aberrations. On the contrary, in so far as the gospel sheds any light at all on the past, it uncovers men's sin and invites them to repent (Matt 3:2; 4:17). Positively, the light of the gospel opens the prospect of eternity in bringing men to believe in Christ, and it reveals that through faith both Jews and Gentiles are incorporated into the Mystical Body of Christ. In this way "the old has passed away" through the light of the gospel, and "the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17). We must certainly assume that even in the darkness of the Nations some persons, enlightened by God, can and do follow the guidance of His grace. But the Council, in conformity with Scripture, warns that we should not take this as the normal case. "More often (*at saepius...*)", a Council text says, it happened that men "became futile in their thinking and exchanged the truth about God for a lie, in worshiping the creature rather than the Creator" (Rom 1:21.25). Thus the Church is ever concerned to make the gospel known to all men (E 16).

But the question of the possibility of salvation outside the Covenant is not the only, and perhaps not even the most important, aspect of the problem of the Christian attitude toward non-Christian religions. We are not allowed to set limits on God's mercy by condemning the non-Christians. Neither is it the task of theologians to work out an expert opinion to be used by the counsel for the defense when the case of the pagans comes up before the court of heaven. We have simply to face the reality of the non-Christian religions as they are.

The documents of the Council admit that there are positive values in the non-Christian religions (NC 2; M 9). The Church does not reject anything which is "true and holy" in the other religions. "For not seldom do they reflect a ray of that Truth which illuminates all men" (NC 2). But the values contained in non-Christian religions are intermixed with negative elements. Although it was the purpose of the Council to make positive statements only, the negative features of paganism have not been passed over in silence or in any way condoned. These features are mentioned within the framework of positive statements on the Church. Thus one of the documents says that men's religious efforts need to be "illuminated" and "healed" by the Church (M 3). There is much in the religions "which differs widely from what the Church holds and proposes" (NC 2). It is doubtless the consideration of the negative features of non-Christian religions which prevented the Council from stating that pagans are saved *through their religions* or that their religions as such have a *salvific significance*. The thesis of the "legitimacy" of pagan religions has received no sanction or support by the Council.

In the documents of the Second Vatican Council the *magisterium* has for the first time enunciated certain principles which had been known to the Church from the time of the Fathers. On one or two points only does the Council go beyond what the Fathers had said expressly. The



Fathers condemned all myths and rites of the pagans. In saying that the Church does not reject anything that is true and holy in other religions, the Council has not approved as true and holy any of the myths and rites of these religions. But it does acknowledge something in them. A document says: "In Hinduism, men scrutinize and express the divine mystery in an inexhaustible abundance of myths and penetrating philosophical efforts, and they seek emancipation from the plight of our situation through forms of asceticism or deep meditation or through taking refuge with God in love and confidence... Similarly, the other religions also ... strive in various ways to remedy the disquietude of the human heart by proposing ways of life, i.e. doctrines and precepts, as well as sacred rites"<sup>16</sup> (NC 2). If we analyze these texts carefully, we find that they refer to the anthropological aspect of religion. They describe religious efforts undertaken by men of various religions and they approve of the fact that men thus seek God; but they remain silent regarding the possibility of reaching the goal through these efforts, nor do they say anything about whether the myths contain truth or whether the rites and practices are in conformity with the will of God.

The Church Fathers saw in the myths of their time a claim to express objective truth and, in the rites and practices, their intimate connection with idolatry and polytheism. From these points of view myths, rites and practices had to be rejected uncompromisingly. Nor can the Church ever take up a different attitude as long as myths are believed to be objectively true and practices are performed in a religious framework which is objectionable from the point of view of the truth. Even the Second Vatican Council, with all its understanding openness and reserve, has not hesitated to state or indicate that there is inveiglement by the Devil and evil defilement in non-Christian religions (*a Maligno decepti*, E 16; *imperium diaboli* and *contagia maligna* M 9). It may also be noted in passing that two of the Council's documents expressly state that no one can be saved if he has come to know the Church as necessary for salvation and still refuses to join her or remain in her (E 14; M 7).

The fact that today we can evaluate non-Christian myths, symbols, rites and practices in a more positive sense than Scripture and the Fathers did involves no abandoning of the fundamental principles which guided the hagiographers and saints and which remain valid. It is only a consequence, (1) of a differentiation, (2) of a widened perspective, (3) of historical experience.

<sup>16</sup> Ita in Hinduismo homines mysterium divinum scrutantur et exprimunt inexhausta fecunditate mythorum et acutis conatibus philosophiae, atque liberationem quaerunt ab angustiis nostrae condicionis vel per formas vitae asceticae vel per profundam meditationem vel per refugium ad Deum cum amore et confidentia. ... Sic ceterae quoque religiones ... inquietudini cordis hominum variis modis occurrere nituntur proponendo vias, doctrinas scilicet ac praecepta vitae, necnon ritos sacros.



(1) We make a distinction between the human or anthropological and the strictly theological or dogmatic aspects of religion. Even St. Paul, speaking on the Areopagus, appreciated the fact that the Athenians "in every way" were "very religious" (Acts 17:22) and he could use a Stoic term when he said that men "should seek God in the hope that they might *feel after him*" (17:27). This appreciation, however, in no way involved an approval of the way in which the Athenians sought God and practised their religion. On the contrary, the Apostle told the Athenians in plain words that their ways of worship were a gross aberration. His censure did not invalidate his appreciation, nor did his approval imply a condonation of the depravities in the Athenians' religion. Evidently, the Apostle was judging the pagan religion from two different points of view. We may differentiate them as the anthropological and the theological points of view. If seen in the light of revelation, the Athenians' religious behavior came under the verdict of the First and Second Commandments. Again, the anthropological evaluation has two levels. Not only does it appreciate the good will and earnestness of those who practise the pagan religion, but it sees this earnestness under a theological aspect also. Such an evaluation enables us to discover in the other religion an element which, though distorted in its pagan context, is still expressive of man's quest for God and thus exhibits a reflection, however dim and deflected, of that Light which "enlightens every man" (John 1:9). God himself has engrafted in man a restlessness that impels him to seek after his Author. This movement is misoriented in non-Christian religions. The Christian, therefore, cannot dispense with pointing out that the First and Second Commandments never cease making their stern demands on man. On the other hand, he cannot but recognize with joy that the one true God, who wills that man seek Him, is at work even in the adherents of non-Christian religions. If the movement of their yearnings and practices is misdirected, it can nevertheless be reinstated and reoriented.

(2) Such differentiation already involves a widened perspective. The Fathers confined their appreciation to philosophers and certain poets because they found in their works statements which they could accept as true without any readjustment. Today we could cull such statements especially from the writings of Indian philosophers. Yet there were in pre-Christian philosophy many doctrines which the Fathers could not approve of. Actually, however, the Fathers, and even the hagiographers of the New Testament before them, took over quite a number of concepts which, though objectionable in their pre-Christian context, still contained precious germs of truth. These concepts could be used to enrich the exposition of the truth of revelation if their partial truth was set free by their inclusion in the new context. Now if we take the proper precautions, we may very well extend the procedure of assimilation and



reorientation to pre-Christian symbols and to elements of myths and religious practices.

(3) We are all the more justified in doing this because we can observe that in the course of time the Church, certainly not without the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has actually, though without really thinking it through, exercised such adaptation on a large scale. It may suffice here to recall that Christian rites are in a great measure adaptations of pre-Christian customs, and as for myths and symbols, we limit ourselves to referring to HUGO RAHNER's works *Griechische Mythen in christlicher Deutung* (reprint, Zürich and Darmstadt, 1957) and *Symbole der Kirche* (Salzburg, 1964).

The theological justification and the purpose of such adaptation are succinctly expressed in the following sentences of a decree of the Second Vatican Council: "Through a sort of secret presence of God, elements of truth and grace are found already among the gentiles. (Missionary activity) liberates all these elements from evil defilements and restores them to Christ who is their Author. He overthrows the dominion of the Devil and wards off the manifold malice of evil deeds. Therefore, all those good elements which are found in a germinal form in the hearts and minds of men or in the rites and cultures peculiar to particular peoples, are not destroyed; on the contrary, they are healed, elevated and perfected for the glory of God, for the humiliation of Satan and for the beatitude of men"<sup>17</sup> (M 9).

Thus the study of relevant texts from the Council documents eventually leads us to the practical attitude toward non-Christian religions. This attitude presupposes discrimination between truth and error, between virtue and sin, and this discrimination in its turn presupposes careful investigation of non-Christian religions. The Church Fathers did all this with the methods at their disposal. If we wish to remain faithful to the tradition of the Church, we must follow their lead. We must learn from them the fundamental principles that can guide us in our attitude toward non-Christian religions. But while applying these principles we must also utilize materials and practise methods which they could not yet know.

The practical attitude toward non-Christian religions consists mainly in what the Fathers called *utilization* (χρησις, *usus justus*). Utilization connotes, (1) that the assimilated elements are made subservient to an end different from the context from which they were taken, (2) that they can be taken over because some truth is contained or hidden in them,

<sup>17</sup> Quidquid autem veritatis et gratiae iam apud gentes quasi secreta Dei praesentia inveniebatur, a contagiis malignis liberat et Auctori suo Christo restituit, qui imperium diaboli evertit et multimodam scelerum malitiam arcet. Itaque quidquid boni in corde menteque hominum vel in propriis ritibus et culturis populorum seminatum invenitur, non tantum non perit, sed sanatur, elevatur et consummatur ad gloriam Dei, confusionem daemonis et beatitudinem hominis.



(3) that they must be reoriented in order that the truth might shine forth unimpeded. It is thus a much more deliberate process than the mere reception of influences. As a matter of fact, the Fathers, when using concepts of pagan origin, knew what they were doing and why they were justified in doing it. Similar processes of assimilation can of course be traced outside the domain of Christianity too. This shows that *chrêsis* has an anthropological basis. Nevertheless, within the Church *chrêsis* has a unique aspect which is grounded on its theological foundation.

*Chrêsis* is no obstacle to dialogue. On the contrary, since it makes Christian thinking easier to understand for non-Christians, it can essentially contribute to the success of dialogue. True dialogue, after all, is not non-committal talk but engagement in a common search for the truth. In practising *chrêsis*, the Christian shows to his non-Christian partner the truth he can acknowledge in his partner's way of thinking and, at the same time, the framework of reference into which he is convinced this truth must be placed in order to be safe from misuse. Clement of Alexandria certainly knew what true dialogue is, and he practised *chrêsis* profusely. Even today we still can learn from him.

The study of *chrêsis* in the history of Christianity would be an immense task. The utility of such a study for us today would be to show us what we still have to accomplish in our relations with the great religions of the world. As we stated in the beginning of this article, our situation resembles that of the Fathers in that we are, as they were, constantly faced with the reality of other religions. The Fathers knew, and we have to learn anew, that this is even the normal situation of Christianity in the world. There is, therefore, no reason for a feeling of frustration. In the Middle Ages the situation was objectively the same. But because of the lack of communication with the outside world, the Christians had simply come to overlook the fact that they were a minority among the Nations. Therefore, since Catholicism essentially lives on tradition and since the immediate past does not throw much light on our problem, would it not be necessary to seek guidance from the Fathers whose situation was so similar to ours? Would it not be necessary to study their practice of *chrêsis* in order to learn how to adapt it to our situation?

I cannot enter here into details concerning studies on *chrêsis*. I confine myself to mentioning one or two works of scholars who freed themselves from the simplistic method of tracing "influences" and who have investigated cases of what the Fathers called *chrêsis* (though these scholars did not use this term). JEAN DANÉLOU has treated the mystical theology of Gregory of Nyssa in his work, *Platonisme et théologie mystique* (revised ed., Paris, 1944; reprinted 1953). One of the main intentions of this book is precisely the demonstration of how St. Gregory, while using neo-Platonic concepts, transformed and transposed them so that they might enrich the expression of Christian truth. With a similar



intention, ENDRE VON IVÁNKA wrote his book, *Plato Christianus*, (Einsiedeln, 1964) investigating the thought of Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus Confessor and some other authors. Even though *chrêsis* naturally was an urgent task primarily for the Christians in antiquity who were in constant contact with living paganism, it can also be applied in other cultural situations. ÉTIENNE GILSON, in his work, *L'être et l'essence*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Paris, 1962) has shown how St. Thomas Aquinas, carefully weighing and screening the results of many non-Christian philosophers and of St. Augustine, arrived at his conception of being which, while indebted to the truth contained in the achievements of his non-Christian and Christian predecessors, was at the same time a perfect expression of the Christian belief regarding God and creation.

*Chrêsis* is not only a subject for learned investigation; it can be, and is, practised even in our day. An example of this has been presented by the American mystic THOMAS MERTON. In his work, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, (British ed., London, 1962) he has felicitously adapted from Indian metaphysics the concept of "illusory person" or "false self" (p. 26 f)<sup>18</sup>. Merton's case seems instructive because it shows, first, that today Christianity is newly aware of the fact that it coexists with pre-Christian religions; secondly, that a contemplative attitude, concentrated on the truth as such, is a prerequisite for the practice of true *chrêsis*. While keeping our mental gaze focused on the content of revelation, we must allow our discursive thinking to move in the framework of symbols, linguistic or other, which are offered by a pre-Christian religion or metaphysics. The symbols that are taken up in this process are placed into a new framework of reference. This preserves the truth that is contained in them and, to use a term from a Council text, "heals" it. The attention of the hagiographers and Fathers was certainly concentrated on the content of revelation when they tried to express this content with the aid of concepts taken from Hellenic thought. But *chrêsis* cannot always be brought about within the process of meditation. In many cases, it requires a prior thoroughgoing scrutiny of the religious or metaphysical system whose symbols are to be "utilized".

<sup>18</sup> See also: Th. MERTON, *The New Man* (London, 1962), pp. 44 ff.