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HOW COULD THINKING ABOUT OTHER RELIGIONS BE ENRICHED BY THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST?

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Abstract

Since the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), much has been written on the theology of religions and, in particular, on the question of salvation reaching those who follow other faiths. This article starts from Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, and the Letter to the Hebrews, and presents the priesthood of Christ as a high-priestly intercession that mediates salvation to all human beings and establishes a new covenant for all people. The article also draws on the letters of St Paul and the Gospel of John to emphasize the high-priesthood of Christ and propose a Christology of religions, which is developed at full length in the author's *A Christology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018).

Keywords: Christology, Hebrews, High Priest, New Covenant, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Salvation, Theology of Religions, Vatican II

In recent decades Catholic and other Christian scholars have written much about the saving work of Christ reaching those who follow other faiths. But they have not shaped their thinking by introducing the priesthood of Christ.

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How could the theology of religions be enriched by reflection on the high priesthood of Christ? We begin with the Second Vatican Council, then focus on the Letter to the Hebrews, and finish with Paul and John

Vatican II on Christ's Priesthood

Writers on Christianity and other religions have remained unaware that an image used by Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) is highly relevant for their area of specialization. The constitution quotes a passage from Pius XII's 1947 encyclical on liturgical worship, *Mediator Dei*,¹ significantly replacing "the Word of God" with "Jesus Christ, the High Priest of the New and Eternal Covenant." The language evokes the teaching on Christ's priesthood developed by the Letter to the Hebrews:

Jesus Christ, the High Priest of the New and Eternal Covenant, when he assumed a human nature, introduced into this land of exile the hymn that in heaven is sung throughout the ages. He unites the whole community of human kind with himself and associates it with him in singing the divine canticle of praise (SC, 83).

Earlier *Sacrosanctum Concilium* had limited itself to the Church, and taught that the risen Christ is present "when the Church prays and sings" (SC, 7; italics mine). Now the document speaks of one "divine canticle of praise," led by the High Priest himself, who unites *the whole human race* in singing this heavenly hymn that he has brought to earth. Whether they are conscious of this or not, all human beings, no matter what shape their religious affiliation takes, are joined with the incarnate High Priest in the priestly act of praising God.

It is only in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* that Vatican II links all human beings to Christ, presented explicitly in his universal, *priestly* role as praising God the Father. What sources does *Sacrosanctum Concilium* retrieve when it pictures Christ the High Priest as Choirmaster of this universal hymn of praise?

An immediate source is found in what the constitution quotes from *Mediator Dei* 144, which in turn cited St Augustine's *Exposition of the Psalms*: "it is the one Saviour of his [mystical] body, our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God who prays for us, who prays in us, and who is prayed to by us. He prays for us as *our priest*; he prays in us as our head; he is prayed to by us as our God. Let us therefore recognize in

¹"The Word of God, when he assumed a human nature, introduced into this land of exile the hymn that in heaven is sung throughout all ages. He unites the whole community of human kind with himself and associates it with him in singing this divine canticle of praise" (n. 144).

him our voice and in us his voice" (85.1; italics mine).² Augustine invokes here the priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ, but understands the Psalms as the voice not of all humanity but of the Church, the head and members who make up the *totus Christus*. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* could have looked back before Pope Pius XII and St Augustine to retrieve even earlier witnesses: for instance, Clement of Alexandria (d. circa 215).

At the start of his *Protrepticus*, Clement speaks of the Word, who was in the beginning and has now appeared on earth, as "the New Song" (1.3).³ Later in the same work, he pictures "the eternal Jesus, the one, great *high priest*," who "raises the hymn with us," invites us to "join the choir," and cries aloud: "I summon *the whole human race*... Come unto me and gather together as one, well ordered unity under the one God and under the one Logos of God" (12.33; italics mine). We might put together the two passages and speak of "the New Song," who as "the one, eternal high priest" gathers together "the whole human race" into the "well ordered unity" of an immense choir to sing a hymn of praise to the one God.

Whatever its precedents, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* portrays Christ the high priest actively present for all human beings. Through his incarnation, he inaugurated his high-priestly role of singing the divine praises. In doing that he associated with himself not only those who would come to know and believe in him but also the whole human community. Together they all form a choir of which Christ the high priest is the leader. This priestly unity of the human race with him began at the incarnation, and would be strengthened and perfected by the crucifixion, resurrection and outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It will be finally consummated when human beings enter the halls of heaven and share in the eternal praise of God.

By naming Christ as "the High Priest of the New and Eternal Covenant," *Sacrosanctum Concilium* sends us back to the Letter to the Hebrews. It contains the only explicit biblical account of Christ as priest. Written between 60 and 95 AD (more plausibly before 70), Hebrews aims at encouraging the faith and hope of a specific community, which had suffered considerable hardship (Heb 10:32-

²The psalms were interpreted as "the voice of Christ to the Father (*vox Christi ad Patrem*)," as well as "the voice of the Church about Christ to the Father (*vox Ecclesiae ad Patrem de Christo*)," and "the voice of the Church to Christ (*vox Ecclesiae ad Christum*)."

³With this title for Christ, Clement echoed the language of the Psalms about "singing a new song to the Lord," who comes to rule and bring salvation (Ps 96:1; 98:1; 149:1).

34). How does this particular message also yield a narrative of Christ the high priest exercising a universal office and offering salvation to the whole world?⁴

Hebrews on Christ's High-Priestly Intercession for All

When the author of Hebrews first mentions explicitly the *priestly* identity of Christ, he links it at once to *sacrificial* activity: Christ became “a merciful and faithful” high priest to expiate the sins of the people” (Heb 2:17). “People” points, at least immediately, to the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. Nevertheless, Hebrews envisages a group that is much broader than the one it addresses, a particular community that is being “tested” (Heb 2:18).

The horizon that the letter opens up will be as large as the entire human race. The author lists three qualifications that made Jesus the high priest of the new dispensation: “every high priest is [1] taken from among human beings and [2] appointed on behalf of human beings with respect to the matters pertaining to God, [3] in order to offer gifts and sacrifices for sin” (Heb 5:1). In other words, Christ has been (1) chosen from human beings, and (2) not self-appointed, but called by God to represent humanity (3) in the sacrificial offering he makes, in particular, for the expiation of sins.

At the incarnation (Heb 1:1-4), the Son of God took on the human condition. As high priest, he could represent all human beings, precisely because he shared their condition. As “high priest” he could “sympathize” with their “weaknesses,” by being tested in all ways (Heb 4:15). He grew, was tested, and made perfect through suffering (Heb 2: 10, 18), above all through enduring death (Heb 2:9, 14; 5: 7), a death by crucifixion (Heb 6:6).

As priest, Jesus shares humanity with all human beings, who are “the children” of the one God and Father, “for whom and through whom all things exist” (Heb 2:10). As “originator” of their salvation, Christ goes before his “brothers and sisters” to deliver them from being enslaved to the fear and power of death (Heb 2:10-15). Creation by the one divine Father makes one human family, who have been redeemed by the high priestly work of Christ. He became high priest not only for the descendants of Abraham and Sarah but also for all who belong to the human family.

⁴On Hebrews, see R.C. Bauckham et al., eds., *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009; C.R. Koester, *Hebrews*, New York: Doubleday, 2001; and P.T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010. For Hebrews on priesthood, see J.M. Scholer, *Proleptic Priests: Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991.

While death and exaltation proved the defining moment of Christ's priesthood, a priestly self-offering characterized his whole human existence (Heb 10:5-7). Hebrews links his priestly activity of purifying sin (Heb 1:2-4) with the incarnation, through which he entered into solidarity with all human beings. The incarnation allowed the Son of God to become a high priest and become that for everyone.

This global perspective also builds on the priest-king Melchizedek, who blesses Abraham (Gen 14:17-20) and is called "a priest forever" (Ps 110:4). The priesthood of the mysterious priest-king is earlier and greater than the Levitical (Jewish) priesthood (7:1-28). He "remains" a priest forever, unlike the Levitical priests who all died and could not continue in office. Abraham gives Melchizedek a tenth of the spoils from a victory over "the kings" and receives a blessing from him, thus showing how the mysterious priest-king is greater than Abraham and his descendant Levi (the head of the priestly tribe).

With the cornerstone of Melchizedek in place, Hebrews argues that, being "a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek," Christ is superior to any Levitical high priest. He "holds his priesthood permanently" and "always lives to make intercession" for those who "approach God through him" (Heb 7:24-25). Christ is not only a priest for everyone but for always. His priesthood is exercised for all people and for all time.

Mediator of a New Covenant for All

As high priest, Christ functions as the "mediator of a new covenant" (Heb 9:15; 12:24). The new covenant provides a lynchpin, without which Hebrews would fall apart. This definitive commitment of God is interpreted against the background of the Mosaic covenant with the Jewish people, but stands in contrast with it as the "better" or fully efficacious covenant (Heb 8:7-13). Does this covenant mediated by Christ the high priest apply to the whole human race? At first glance, it appears to be limited to Christian believers.

The sacrifice of Christ, Hebrews declares, has opened a new way into the divine presence, and allows his followers to move towards the inner shrine of heaven, where Jesus their "forerunner" and high priest belongs forever (Heb 10:19-20). They continue to share in Christ's self-offering, knowing that he constantly "appears in the presence of God" on their behalf (Heb 9:24). He "lives always" to "make intercession" for those who "approach God through him" (Heb 7:25). But what of all "the others," who do not know him and so cannot consciously "approach God through him"?

Sometimes Hebrews seems comprehensive about the beneficiaries of Christ's priestly work. Jesus, it announces, "tasted [that is to say, experienced] death for everyone" (Heb 2:9). Yet it can also propose that he "became the source of salvation [only?] for all who obey him" (Heb 5:9). But what of those who, through no fault of their own, have never heard of Jesus and thus are not in a position to "obey" him, be delivered from death, and enjoy in heavenly glory the presence of God? Is salvation available only for those who know Christ's priestly work, and consciously approach through him God's "throne of grace" to "receive mercy" for past sins, and find grace for present and future "need" (Heb 4:10)?

Here we should remember the roll call of heroes and heroines of faith (Heb 1:1-12:1). It lists only those who lived before Christ and hence could not have consciously accepted redemption coming through his priestly work. Not surprisingly, Hebrews proposes an "open" version of faith: "the reality of things hoped for" and "the proof of things not seen. By this [faith] the elders received approval. By faith we understand that the universe was fashioned by the word of God, so that from what cannot be seen that which is seen has come into existence" (Heb 11:1-3). Another verse adds two rather general requirements to this "open" account of faith: "without faith it is impossible to please God; for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Heb 11:6).

Thus Hebrews 11 highlights faith but says little about its content. The passage hints at the *future*. Divine promises (presumably of some eternal inheritance) have aroused the hope of human beings and their trust that God will keep these promises, which concern future things that are "not seen." Faith also involves a conviction about the *past*. One understands by faith the unseen origin of the world: it was "fashioned by the word of God." Just as people of faith rely on the word of God about the *genesis* of the universe, so they rely on God's promise when expecting the *goal* of the world and of their own existence.

This account of faith makes no mention of Christ. He will appear later, when the list of heroes and heroines of faith finally reaches "the pioneer and perfecter of faith" (Heb 12:2). Hebrews 11 invokes "the elders" or "ancestors," people whom God honoured for their persevering faith. Then follow examples of those who have lived on the basis of faith, with specific attention paid to Abraham, Sarah, and Moses. Some of those who exemplify faith (Abel, Enoch, and Noah) existed prior to Abraham, Sarah, and the formation of the chosen

people. One figure of faith is “Rahab the prostitute” (Heb 11:31), an outsider involved in the conquest of the promised land (Josh 2:1-24; 6:22-25).

Hebrews 11 sketches the shape that the faith of outsiders can take. “Pleasing God” means doing the divine will (Heb 13:16, 20-21). Such conduct need not depend upon a conscious relationship to Christ the high priest. A faith that “pleases” God is a possibility open to all. “Approaching” God in prayer does not necessarily come from being aware of the priestly intercession of the exalted Christ. Hebrews spells out an “open” account of faith. Salvation through such faith is offered to all people and offered on the basis of the self-sacrificing priesthood of Christ, even if many are not (or not yet) able to follow him in conscious obedience.⁵

When we pursue the biblical witness to the relationship between the priestly work of Christ and the salvation offered to all people, Hebrews is the standout. It is the one book of the New Testament that gives him the title of “priest” (six times) or “high priest” (ten times). Nevertheless, other New Testament authors also illuminate the priesthood of Christ and its impact on the whole human race.⁶ Let me limit myself to Paul and John.

Paul the Apostle

Paul writes of the risen Christ who “intercedes for us” at the right hand of God (Rom 8:34). Without applying to Christ the title of “priest,” the apostle expounds themes about the priesthood of Christ and its universal significance.⁷ The “us” for whom Christ intercedes includes everyone, as earlier chapters of Romans make clear.

Paul establishes that “all” human beings, Jews and Gentiles alike, “have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). At once the apostle introduces sacrificial, priestly imagery to present Christ as the means for wiping away the sins of humanity (Rom 3:25).⁸ He then contrasts the surpassing work of Christ for human salvation with the universal effects of Adam’s disobedience. Paul

⁵See further G. O'Collins, *Salvation for All: God's Other Peoples*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 248-59.

⁶On the New Testament and Christ's priesthood, see G. O'Collins and M.K. Jones, *Jesus Our Priest*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 1-68.

⁷O'Collins and Jones, *Jesus Our Priest*, 27-35.

⁸On Rom 3:23, 25, see J.A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, New York: Doubleday, 1993, 341-59. 1 John 2:2 speaks of Christ as “the means of expiating” not only “our sins” but also “the sins of the world”; on this verse and Rom 3:25, see O'Collins and Jones, *Jesus Our Priest*, 30-31.

passes from speaking of “all” (Rom 5:12) to speaking of “the many” (Rom 5:15), then back to “all” (Rom 5:18), and, finally, back to “the many” (Rom 5:19). For the apostle, “the many” are equivalent to “all.”⁹ Elsewhere, the apostle simply uses “all”: “One has died for all, therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves” (2 Cor 5:14-15). The priestly redemption, effected by Christ’s death, resurrection, and exaltation, has a universal impact.

In the first of the Pastoral Epistles (which most scholars would not simply attribute to Paul), Jesus is called “the one *mediator* between God and human beings, who gave himself as a *ransom for all*” (1 Tim 2:5). Hebrews also calls Christ “mediator” when presenting his priestly work as that of “the mediator of the new/better covenant” (Heb 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). Mark’s Gospel portrays Jesus as the Son of Man who came “to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). Here “many” is equivalent to the “all” of 1 Timothy and Romans 5. The priestly redemption mediated by Christ affects everyone.

The Gospel of John

John’s Gospel gets close to giving Jesus the title of “priest” through applying to him priestly imagery and themes. His priestly office of Caiaphas was involved in words that expressed simultaneously “a criminal human calculation and a divine plan of redemption.”¹⁰ He said: “It is better to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” A central truth about Jesus as priest and victim was revealed: he was about to die for the sake of and on behalf of the whole people, and that people would include not only Israel but also all the scattered children of God (Jn 11:49-52). The plan of Caiaphas to do away with Jesus had unwittingly set in motion a “universal plan of salvation to produce one people of God.”¹¹

This strikingly universal passage about Christ’s redemptive work as priest and victim should nourish any Christian theology of religions. But Christ as priest and victim remains sadly absent in theologies of religion.

Unlike the other Gospels, John does not report the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. Nevertheless, one finds clear Eucharistic references in Jesus’ earlier discourse about “my flesh for the life of the

⁹See Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 405-28.

¹⁰A. Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, Petersham, MA: St Bede’s Publications, 1986, 14.

¹¹A.T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to John*, London: Continuum, 2003, 330-31.

world" and the invitation to "eat my flesh and drink my blood" (Jn 6:51-58). By "becoming flesh" and assuming a complete human nature (Jn 1:14), the Logos became a priest.¹² He could now surrender himself in death "for the life of the world."¹³ Eating his flesh and drinking his blood involved the flesh being broken and the blood being shed.¹⁴ These verses in John 6, without explicitly referring to the institution of the new covenant, propose a priestly, sacrificial meal and a violent, sacrificial death, which bring life to the whole world.

Unlike the other Gospels, John links the cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem with some words of Jesus about the coming destruction of the Temple and its rebuilding. To critics who demanded a "sign" to justify what he had done in driving out of the Temple those whose business defiled it, Jesus replied: "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." The evangelist comments: "he was speaking of the Temple of his body" (Jn 2:13-22). Jesus will *replace* the Temple and its priestly cult with a new, better, and final priestly temple that will bless everyone: his risen body.¹⁵

When talking with a Samaritan woman (Jn 4:21-24), Jesus announces that the time has come when God will be worshipped in "Spirit and truth," now made available in abundance by Jesus himself who is full of the Spirit (Jn 1:33; 2:34) and truth (Jn 1:16-17). It is no longer appropriate to worship in Jerusalem or on Mount Garizim (where the Samaritans once worshipped). Jesus himself is the new place of the divine presence, the new priestly Mediator between God and all human beings.

In the Fourth Gospel's portrayal of Jesus, he fulfils the significance of several major festivals, above all, the Passover. The feeding of the five thousand and the discourse on the bread of life occur, as only John observes, at the time of the Passover (Jn 6:4). Andrew Lincoln writes: "As the true bread from heaven, Jesus fulfils what was signified not only by the manna of the exodus but also by the

¹²That the priesthood of Christ, mediator between God and human beings, began with the incarnation is teaching common to Hebrews, St John Chrysostom, Pierre de Bérulle, the Second Vatican Council (see above), and other notable Christian teachers and witnesses; see O'Collins and Jones, *Jesus Our Priest*, 80, 184-88.

¹³Lincoln writes: "As a result of Jesus giving up his life, the world, which is at present alienated from the divine life, will be enabled to experience the gift of this life. A central theme of the Gospel is sounded here — life for the world is at the expense of death for Jesus" (*Gospel According to John*, 231).

¹⁴Lincoln, *Gospel According to John*, 232.

¹⁵On the "replacement" motif which expresses aspects of Jesus' priestly identity and function, see Lincoln, *Gospel According to John*, 76-77.

unleavened bread of Passover, and Jesus' flesh and blood are now the food and drink of the true Passover meal (6:51-58)."¹⁶ Through his priestly self-gift Jesus has replaced the Passover meal and done so for everybody.

At the start of the Fourth Gospel, John the Baptist witnesses to Jesus as "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29, 36). At that point the remark remains mysterious and is left unexplained. But in this Gospel the death of Jesus occurs at the hour when the Passover lambs are being slaughtered (Jn 19:14, 31). Through citing in 19:31 some words from Exodus 12:46, John compares the crucified body of Jesus with that of the Passover lambs and invests the Jewish "lamb-cult" with new meaning. In his sacrificial death Jesus proves not only the priestly mediator but also *the acceptable victim* who takes away the sins of the world and pours out on the world the superabundant gift of the Holy Spirit (Jn 7:37-39; 19:30, 34; 20:22-23).

John never explicitly calls Jesus a "priest." But — in particular, through the replacement motif — his Gospel allows us to glimpse aspects of Jesus' priesthood. Add too the prayer about Jesus "consecrating" himself "for the sake of" his friends (Jn 17:19). He is replacing the activity of the Jewish high priest on the Day of Expiation. As priest and victim, Jesus is preparing to die for his friends, who are in fact all people. He is sanctifying himself for his priestly task.

Conclusion

This article has sampled teaching from Vatican II and the New Testament that illustrates the high priesthood of Christ and its significance for the salvation of all human beings.¹⁷ Some of that testimony is explicit (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* and the Letter to the Hebrews); some of the testimony is expressed equivalently (Paul and John). It is high time for this testimony about the priesthood of Christ to be incorporated into the theology of religions. That would rework the theology of religions into new shape and help change this discipline into a richer Christology of religions. I have tried to do just that in *A Christology of Religions*.

¹⁶Lincoln, *Gospel According to John*, 77.

¹⁷G. O'Collins, *A Christology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018) treats this theme much more fully.