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'DISTINCT BY GOD'S WORD: DIVERSITY AND THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS'

I

On October 28, 1965, the bishops of the Roman Catholic Communion, gathered at St. Peter's for the Second Vatican Council, promulgated *Nostra Aetate, On the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*. This document had an interesting but up and down history at the Council. That Council, which had been called to renew the Church, was naturally led to promoting Ecumenism among Christian ecclesial bodies. Promoting Ecumenism among Christians led to the question of the relationship of the Church of the New Covenant to the abiding reality of the people of Abraham's stock, the sons and daughters of the Mosaic Covenant. A Statement on Judaism had originally been appended to the *Decree on Ecumenism*. Once separated from the treatment of Christian Ecumenism, the Council's Statement on Judaism was expanded to include the other non-Christian religions. Thus it was only as an afterthought to the Church's relationship to Judaism that the Council gave consideration in a formal way to the rest of God's People, those neither Jews nor members of the visible Church in any of its forms. This extremely cautious afterthought is nevertheless a startling revival of the very old tradition of the Christian faith as the complete expression of truths only incompletely expressed in the religions, a tradition which viewed revelation in quantitative terms as a progress toward fullness.

This tradition is narrow in its analogical conception and no longer adequate since it is based on a much too simple historical track of one path through history. In the end *Nostra Aetate* is a transitional document of polite remarks so many of which even in 1965 still gave offense. A Church which could plump the heart of its faith in Christ and produce the bold affirmations of the documents *On the Church* or *On Religious Freedom*, whose momentum carried through to the sections on Judaism of *Nostra Aetate*, had only enough depth left to produce, as Thomas Berry puts it, this 'brief incidental declaration of the Council which evidently felt itself

forced to say something significant without venturing very far into a subject too sensitive for any thorough treatment at the time.¹ We might say the bishops did not have the heart, nor the mind. They opened the door but did not step through.

In historical perspective, this non-step is understandable. To the historian, it is not surprising that Catholicism was haunted by the ghost of the Church Past, i.e., the memory of an imagined Christendom with one society, one shepherd, and uniform sheep listening to one word coming down one track of history. I stand in deep respect of the theologians, chiefly European, who re-sourced the Church within what is a basically Patristic Christology and ecclesiology. A deepened sense of the Church as an assembly of the baptized with a mission to be a *lumen gentium*, the light of Christ to the nations, and not the house of the saved, gave an adequate resolution to the centuries' old problem of who may be saved. Catholics need no longer be distracted by the question of Salvation. The answer, with the highest note of authority, is clear: through Christ God offers a possibility of being graced to every human being at every time and at every place.²

This brings us to the question of the 'nations,' no longer as a subset of the tract on salvation or on the Church. What is the meaning and significance of the 'nations'? This must be asked as a question at the heart of Christian faith, not as a corollary to some other question. At the time of the Council the Church did not really know what to say about the nations although there were new developments in what the Church no longer wanted to say. A lot is known about the sower, Jesus Christ, and the seed, the Gospel of his death and resurrection, but so little about the soil of the religious history of humankind. In order to widen the periphery of ecclesiology a renewed Christology was brought forth. Yet this renewed Christic ecclesiology of *lumen gentium* founders on the *gentium*. It has so far not been adequate. It has not been deep enough to develop a theology of relationship to the diverse realities of the religions themselves. I believe that it is no so much a problem of the form of Christian theology, rather

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1. Thomas Berry, 'The Earth: A New Context for Religious Unity' in *Thomas Berry and the New Cosmology*, edited by Anne Lonergan and Caroline Richards, (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1987), p. 28. Berry's work, especially his references to Aquinas, helped provide the context for this essay. His conclusions differ.
 2. See *Lumen Gentium*, 16, in Walter Abbott, S.J., ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966). All translations are from this edition.

it is a problem of not going deep enough into the heart of faith in Christ. That renewed and deepened sense of the Christic reality of the Church, which was achieved at Vatican II, has enabled us to perceive Christian diversity as partly a blessing and not just a threat, yet it has not been deep enough to sustain a confident vision of the Triune God speaking the Word from within the diversity of humankind's cultural and religious developments.³

Nostra Aetate, in conjunction with the rest of the Council's teaching, affirms that God is not absent from the non-Christian world, that all things true, beautiful, and good be acknowledged, preserved, and promoted, that all humans form one community with one origin and a single destiny, guided by a single providence⁴. However, there are significant hints of anxiety about the actual diversity of human history as if that diversity were a threat to the community's pilgrimage toward the Father, as if diversity of religions were a threat to the transcendent unity of the origin of all things from the Father. The Council's anxious caution speaks in words like these: 'the elements of goodness and truth which such religions possess by God's Providence' (OT 16)⁵; 'Whatever goodness or truth is found among them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the gospel. She regards such qualities as given by him . . .' (LG 16)⁶; 'precious elements of religion and humanity' (GS 92)⁷; 'the ascetic contemplative traditions whose seeds were sometimes planted by God in ancient cultures prior to the preaching of the gospel' (AG 18)⁸; 'whatever truth and grace are to be found among the nations as a sort of secret presence of God' (AG 9)⁹; 'seeds of the Word which lie hidden among them' (AG 11)¹⁰; 'often reflects a ray of that truth which enlightens all men' (NA 2)¹¹; and 'The Holy Spirit who calls all men to Christ by the seeds of the Word' (AG 15).¹² 'Elements, seeds, rays!' 'Whatever, sometimes, often!' 'Cautious metaphors and weakening adverbs! Why not, instead, bright beams of light illuminating the

3. See Daniel P. Sheridan, 'Grounded in the Trinity: Suggestions for a Theology of Relationship to Other Religions,' *The Thomist*, L (April 1986).

4. *Nostra Aetate*, 1.

5. *Optatam Totius*, 16.

6. *Lumen Gentium*, 16.

7. *Gaudium et Spes*, 92.

8. *Ad Gentes*, 18.

9. *Ad Gentes*, 9.

10. *Ad Gentes*, 11.

11. *Nostra Aetate*, 2.

12. *Ad Gentes*, 15.

history and experience of humankind's religions and spiritualities? Why not confidence rather than anxiety and caution?

The problem is one of a failure of imagination and of analogy. For example, a too simple historical analogy based on 'Old-New Covenants,' or 'Jerusalem-Athens,' or the 'City of God-City of Man,' still reigns centuries after historians have abandoned and moved beyond these motifs. The limited imagination which results from clinging to these motifs, as in the Document *On Revelation*, often prevents the diversity of religions from being perceived in positive relationship to the revelation of the Father in Christ. This obscuring anxiety is a possible sin against the mark of the catholicity of the Church. Catholicity is rooted in the reality of the incarnate Word. Such a catholicity is not just *Universalis*, all turning around a single point, but also *Kataholos*, through the whole.¹³ In place of this anxiety a Christian sensibility should range through the whole of created reality, the whole of history, listening to all of God's words in all their diversity, searching for 'All things counter, original, spare, strange' (G.M. Hopkins).

This same anxiety runs through much of the theology of religions among Catholics conceived since the Council. In the last twenty years here has been much action at the periphery of a much fractured theology.¹⁴ With the center weakened, calls arise for a new, substitute theology with a low Christology or, even more extremely, with a theocentrism as its theme; witness the works of Hans Kung,¹⁵ Lucien Richard,¹⁶ Raimundo Pani-

13. Sheridan, 'Grounded in the Trinity,' pp. 270-272.

14. See Paul Knitter, 'Catholic Theology of Religions at a Crossroads,' *Christianity Among World Religions, Concilium 183*, Hans Kung and Jurgen Moltmann, ed., (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), pp. 99-107, where he presents four evolutionary models of Catholic theology of religions: Christ Against the Religions, Christ Within Religions, Christ Above Religions, and Christ Together With Religions. Much of his argument is rhetorical. In the past, Knitter has espoused a theocentrism where Christ is not normative for salvation, see *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985). Now he moves beyond theocentrism: 'The evolution [in] Catholic theology of religions . . . must therefore move beyond theocentrism to *Soteriocentrism*' p. 105.

15. See Hans Kung, 'Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Religions: Some Theses for Clarification,' *Christianity Among World Religions*, p. 119-125. My problem with Kung is the lowness of his agent Christology. He is quite clear, however, that, contrary to Knitter, 'this normativity and finality of Christ (is) the central declaration of the Scriptures.' Hence he is critical of a soteriocentric theology of religions.

16. Lucien Richard, *What Are They Saying About Christ and World Religions* (New York: Paulist, 1981). This work, while analyzing many theologians, is an extended

kkar,¹⁷ Paul Knitter, and many lesser lights calling for a new theological model for dialogue with the religions. This is not the place to consider these new starts extensively. In general, their notion of religion is generic and abstract.¹⁸ Contemporary dialogue with partners able to converse in western languages is their implicit goal in the hope that collaborative action for the betterment of humankind may result. Avoidance of differences in favour of what is common leads to sophisticated versions of the man-on-the-street truism that all religions are basically the same.¹⁹ A dialogue based on a minimalist christology where the Christian partners have nothing to proclaim or to teach is one where they have nothing to learn.²⁰

Twenty-five years after *Nostra Aetate*, *Lumen Gentium*, and *Ad Gentes* there is all too little actual study of the religions themselves. I am faulting both those who cautiously follow the theology of Vatican II for not con-

argument against 'exclusive Christologies': 'To be a Christian is to affirm one way of life rather than another; but the actual final court of appeal for determining what is the best way, the historical realm, has no ground for exclusivity and absoluteness' p. 73.

17. Raimundo Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (New York: Orbis, 1973): 'When I call this link between the finite and the infinite by the name Christ I am not presupposing its identification with Jesus of Nazareth,' p. 53. Yet on the other hand, he says: 'We cannot limit Christ to an historical figure . . . his person is the divine person, who assumes in himself all history, but who is not "exhausted" in time. The Christian conception of the incarnation is essentially linked with the Trinity' in 'Christians and So-Called "Non-Christians,"' *Cross Currents*, 22 (1972), p. 295.
18. See Daniel P. Sheridan, 'Discerning Difference: A Taxonomy of Culture, Spirituality, and Religion,' *The Journal of Religion*, 66 (January 1986), pp. 37-45.
19. See Harvey Cox, 'The Battle of the Gods? A Concluding Unsystematic Postscript' in Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Other Side of God: A Polarity in World Religions* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), p. 288: ' . . . the countless armchair comparativists I meet on trains and planes who . . . always assure me good-naturedly - usually without having smelled the Ganges or wrestled with a *Koan* - that "underneath it all, every religion really teaches the same thing" . . . it always turns out to be belief in some power "beyond ourselves" and making some effort to do good to our neighbours.'
20. See Kung, 'Toward an Ecumenical Theology of Religions,' p. 123: 'Anyone who renounces the normativity of his or her own tradition . . . requires Christians themselves to demote Jesus Christ to the status of a provisional messiah and to give up the conviction of faith . . . in favour of a levelling down of Jesus Christ to other bearers of revelation and bringers of salvation . . . But the dialogue between the religions is not advanced by a few Western (or Eastern) intellectuals agreeing together. There is scarcely a need to engage in discussion if there is in the end nothing normative and definitive in any religion.'

fidently following through on its deepest confident genius and those post-Vatican II re-visioners for coming up with barren substitutes. The former fear that any further admission that God is acting, speaking, and revealing outside the history of Israel and of the Christian Church may undermine the Christian proclamation of Christ as the perfect and full Word of the Father incarnate within the history of the human community. The latter fear that a strong affirmation of Christ as the Word of the Father is dis-functional for that openness which is an ostensibly necessary prerequisite for a civil dialogue that gives no offense. I would combine dialectically the truth of the two fears: the Christian claim that Jesus is the integral revelation of the Father to the human community is a necessary prerequisite for an ecumenism that is open to the whole of the Father's revelation in all its diverse parts, for an ecumenism of time and space. The religions of the Iroquois and of the Ashanti, of Confucianism and of Taoism, of the varieties of Hinduism and of Buddhism, of Islam and of Zen, diverse, contrary, and contradictory all speak words from God for those whose faith is rooted in the Word Incarnate.

II

For the deepened kind of theological imagination which I envisage to be developed diversity must be appreciated and given a positive value. There must be a transformation of our imaginations, a rectification of the strength of our analogies, analogies of proportion not of equation.²¹ In his *Treatise on Creation* in the *Summa*, St. Thomas designates diversity as the perfection of the universe. The universe is a whole made of diversely created realities related to each other, to the whole, and to God. The part, in its specificity, is not related simply and directly to the whole, rather each part specifies and completes the whole in its own unique fashion in relation to all the other parts. The whole of the parts is the perfection of the Father's design, but not without each of the diverse parts.

Here I might cite St. Thomas directly (ST I.47.1). The question is 'whether the multitude and distinction of things comes from God.' St. Thomas answers that 'the distinction and multitude of things come from the intention of the first agent, who is God. For He brought things

21. See Eberhard Jungel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1983). In the midst of a brilliant discussion of analogy, Jungel asserts 'now God is to be grasped as a mystery which is communicable in and of itself in language,' p. 260. Such an understanding is needed for a theology of religions.

into being in order that his goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented through them; and because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone. He produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided; and hence the whole universe together participates the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever. And because the divine wisdom is the cause of the distinction of things, therefore Moses said that things are made distinct by the word of God, which is the concept of his wisdom; and this is what is said in Genesis (1.3.4): "God said: Be light made . . . And he divided the light from the darkness."²²

A transformation of the analogical imaginations and of the splendors that Christian faith may perceive follows from this law of diversity that 'things are made distinct by the word of God.'

Let us extend this divine rule of diversity beyond St. Thomas' spatial and static understanding of the universe. Nothing in the Greek and Hebrew sources of St. Thomas prepared him to deal adequately with developmental time and history in its twentieth century conception. I do not fault St. Thomas for not being Teilhard or Aurobindo. By transforming our imaginations and extending the kinds of analogies which have the power to influence our understanding, however, let us extend the law of diversity, reflective of the Father's wisdom, to the history of the universe, to the course of human evolution from the plant and animal kingdoms, to the unfolding of the spiritual and religious life of human beings, to revelation, to beliefs, to spiritual and ascetical paths, and to ritual forms. If there is a history of the universe, it will be diverse, reflective of divine wisdom. If

22. Unde dicendum est quod distinctio rerum et multitudo est ex intentione primi agentis, quod est Deus. Produxit enim res in esse propter suam bonitatem communicandam creaturis, et per eas repraesentandam. Et quia per unam creaturam sufficienter repraesentari non potest, produxit multas creaturas et diversas, ut quod deest uni ad repraesentandam divinam bonitatem suppleatur ex alia; nam bonitas, quae in Deo est simpliciter et uniformiter, in creaturis est multipliciter et divisum. Unde perfectius participat divinam bonitatem et repraesentat eam totum universum quam alia quaecumque creatura.

Et quia ex divina sapientia est causa distinctionis rerum, ideo Moyses dicit res esse distinctas verbo Dei, quod est conceptio sapientiae. Et hoc est quod dicit *Gen., Dixit Deus, Fiat Lux. Et divisit lucem a tenebris.*

there is an unfolding spiritual and religious life of humankind, it will be diverse, reflective of divine wisdom. If there is revelation, it will be diverse, reflective of divine wisdom. If there are beliefs on which humans stake their existence, they will be diverse, reflective of divine wisdom. If there are spiritual and ascetical paths and ritual forms, they will be diverse, reflective of divine wisdom. These diversities and distinctions will be by God's Word. As Thomas Berry so well puts it, following an earlier Thomas, 'The greater the differentiation, the greater the perfection of the whole since perfection is in the interacting diversity; the extent of the diversity is the measure of the perfection.'²³

For St. Thomas creation is a *hexameron*, in six days division and adornment, with the seventh a day of rest, a mutually empathetic communion of completed forms constituting a whole, while God rests satisfied with the order He has created. The history of salvation stems from a sin committed after the seventh day. That sin is compounded at Babel into the diversity of nations. What was in the order of creation, a sign of perfection, that is, diversity, is in the order of human history, a sign of sin. Great care must be taken now that this paradigm not continue to determine the Christian theology of religions. In an earlier day the paradigm was unavoidable and hence simple analogies were drawn from it. Today it would be untrue to theology's deepest thrust to conclude in any simple way that the diversity of religions is the result of sin, or of error, and is somehow contrary to the divine wisdom. An ecumenism of the religions of humankind should be one of listening to the words of God manifested in a diversity which should be preserved by a faith in the Incarnate Word. This very diversity, beyond its obvious and manifest contrariness and contradiction, is a sign of the greater perfection of the Word and the words spoken by a Father who speaks both in creation and in history. Diversity among the religions is an expression of the divine goodness and a communication of that goodness.

In the twentieth century, a new narrative has emerged to complement and, in many respects to replace the paradigm of the seven day account of creation followed by a history of sin. This new story is the story of the history of the universe, of the human community, and of the modes of human consciousness.²⁴ The new story provides the larger context of

23. Berry, 'The Earth: A New Context for Religious Unity,' p. 31.

24. See Erich Jantsch, *The Self-Organizing Universe: Scientific and Human Implications of the Emerging Paradigm of Evolution* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1980), p. 2: 'The rising consciousness of an indivisible unity with nature - and even of human existence as an integral aspect of nature - has transformed the esoteric notion of an ecosystem into an intensely practical notion.'

interpretation by which the universe itself with its diverse and qualitatively different dimensions of space and time becomes the history of God's words to humankind. Anyone on this planet who has been to a high school where science is correctly taught should know this story of an immense cosmic process of both physical and spiritual proportions evolving into greater variety and differentiation. The universe was born some seventeen billion years ago. The sun and the earth coalesced five to four billion years ago as part of the Milky Way galaxy. On the earth, at the least, life forms have evolved a billion and a half years ago, emerging in the last several hundred thousand years into the human species. A single narrative story may encompass the universe's, the earth's, humankind's, and the religions' history. This narrative is the emergence of diversity and difference, reflective of God's wisdom and providence. Each part, concrete and specific, past and present, of this whole is a word from the Father for those who have the compelling reason to listen which is their faith in Christ. A faith that is Catholic, concerned for the whole, because in the beginning was the Word and through Him was made all that came to be, will attend in faith to each diverse part of the whole as a specific word from God conveying an element of divine wisdom conveyed in no other way than through that precise word. The diversity of these words is a sign of the perfection of the Father's speaking which issues forth as the Word.

This faith's imagination should appreciate that each of the religions, past and present, is a word from God in view of the Word who, at one point in time, was made flesh, crucified and risen, who will return to complete every word which participates in the Word in a way perfectly consonant with the unique diversity of all the words.²⁵ Such is the hope which issues forth from such a faith. *Nostra Aetate*, after we have listened to the cosmic and historical story of the emergence of the religions, should be rewritten in view of the new story. Of course, so too should

25. See Hans Urs von Balthasar's magnificent conclusion: "The *distentio* (diastasis) of time can be overcome only by *extensio secundum intentionem* as Augustine says, remembering Phillipians 3, in *Confessions* XI, 29). This tread of the believer through time toward the risen Christ is the true progress of the world. It alone sets creation as a whole in true movement toward God. It implants into all the vanity of earthly activity an eternal soul. As faith it does not seek to replace sight (2 Cor. 5,7); as hope it does not seek to take possession now, otherwise it would not be hope with patience (Rom 8: 24-25). In this there is certainty, "If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?" (Rom. 8:31-32) in *Theological Anthropology* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), p. 335.

Dei Verbum, the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, with its narrow focus on the biblical narrative, be rewritten in view of the new story. One caution here is in order. As Teilhard noted, the meaning of a story is only known at its conclusion. Thus the whole with all its diverse parts is a whole both of space and of time, and time is not concluded. Christ will come again, the mystery of faith proclaims, but not in such a way as to render the meantime meaningless. Any theology of the relationship of the Christian community to the religions of humankind must be final in view of Christ's return but provisional in meaning in view of uncompleted time.

III

Let me now describe some basic outlines of what this theology of the relationship of the Christian faith to the other religions might look like. It is based on listening to the diverse perfection of the words of God, bringing them together and raising them up to the word, the Concrete Absolute, Jesus Christ.

If God speaks, the human person should listen. The human is the one who in the midst of all the universe may listen and hear God's Word. The human may hear God, if God speaks, if there is a God who speaks. As Karl Rahner said, if God did not speak, we would hear the silence of God. He speaks even when he does not speak.²⁶ Those of us who have heard the Word made flesh from the grace of the Father who speaks may now recognize four kinds of words that the Father has spoken that we might hear *the* Word: First, 'God has spoken in the word of the cosmos, heard and studied in cosmology and the sciences.' Second, 'God has spoken in the word of the human heart, heard and studied in psychology, anthropology,' and the human sciences. 'These two words of the cosmos and of the human heart explain the importance of metaphysics which unites in a single understanding' the reality that lies without and within the human. Third, God 'has spoken in the word of the history of humankind and in the history of each human person, heard and studied in history and in autobiography.' Fourth, 'God has spoken in the word of the scriptures of humankind,' remembered in words, 'heard in proclamation,

26. For a further reflection on this theme, see Daniel P. Sheridan, 'The Silence of God in Early Buddhism,' *Studies in Formative Spirituality* 1 & 2 (May 1980), pp. 245-2.

reading, and study.²⁷ These two words, of history and of scriptures, explain the importance of hermeneutics. Metaphysics and hermeneutics, properly correlated and sublated to the Word made flesh, are combined in theology.

The theology of the correlation of these four words sublated in the Word of the Father, which is concretized in Jesus Christ, allows broadly based relationships to the religions which respects their diversity. Each of the religions has diverse and unique cosmological, anthropological, historical, and scriptural dimensions. 'These words are revelatory (both by presence and by absence) to the Christian and challenge the Christian to listen more carefully. That they are God's words demands that they be correlated'²⁸ to God's Word. That they are diverse and asymmetrical, that is different from each other, 'distinct by the Word of God,' and from the Word heard in Christian faith, demands a sublation to that Word made flesh. The diverse words of the religions enhance the perfection of the Word.

Each of these words, these religions and spiritual traditions, is different. Each of the religions has its own unique integrity and genius. In India the Hindu religious traditions developed a splendid and profound ecstatic and enstatic awareness based on the special psychic intensity of yoga, techniques of deliverance from ordinary human consciousness. The Hindu traditions developed on both non-theist and theist paths. In the latter path the personal qualities of God in mythic manifestations shone clear to millions of worshippers. In India the Buddhist spiritual traditions explored the experience of human sorrow in the midst of nothingness and non-selfness. *Nirvana*, a goal unique to this tradition, was seen both as peace and as an extinction. The human predicament, understood apart from the idea of God, was plumbed at a depth unique in human history. In China the attention was both more human and more cosmological. The human along with all under the heaven was seen in harmony with the rhythm of the seasons. Human affectivity as consonant with the reality of the universe was promoted to a degree found nowhere else. In Japan there is an aesthetic appreciation of the natural world as numinous. The Japanese developed spiritual simplicity and spontaneity as nowhere else in the world. Among the

27. Sheridan, 'Grounded in the Trinity: Suggestions for a Theology of Relationship to Other Religions,' pp. 275-276.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 277.

American Indians, the Great Spirit was present in the natural world, among the animals, and in the human heart. A quest for vision evoked the heroic potentials of the human spirit. Among Muslims God is present in a life lived in accord with His guidance embodied in the *Qur'an* and in the example of Muhammad. The recited *Qur'an* repeats God's words with an uncreated directness unparalleled elsewhere.

These orientations were, in their own time and now in our time still, ultimate toward reality and their values originated deep in the human heart. They are revelatory words to us, both in what they speak and do not speak; and both in what we hear and do not hear. Just as they enabled these diverse peoples to attain sublime religious insight, to endure the sorrows of life, even to exult with joy in the middle of ordinary living, so they may enable us. These are not 'seeds,' or 'elements,' or 'rays,' but for us floods of illumination from God. They are about themselves. They are discrete words. They speak to us too. On the deepest level they speak of the Word which is spoken through the whole in the perfection of the parts.

Each of these traditions developed in a specific geographical and cultural context, yet the humans who followed them considered them 'comprehensive interpretations of the universe and . . . effective guides for individuals and communities'²⁹ to achieve their destiny. They were adequate in themselves, and in no simple way surpassed by Christianity as lived by Christians. Although complete in themselves, they were at the same time traditions open to the truth, hence to interaction with other traditions. Each tradition needed isolation to develop on its own line of integrity. India's enstatic experience of what is beneath the phenomenal could not have developed simultaneously with the biblical idea of God acting in history. China would not have come to the idea of the Tao operating in and through natural forms simultaneously with India's abstract metaphysics. Could the Great Spirit experienced by the American Indians have been manifested in the context of the Buddhist search for *nirvana*? These are not rivals. These religions and spiritual traditions are not symmetrical and parallel. They are viscous, sticky, concrete, and unique. Each is suprem in its own integral order, in its own time and space. Each is a really distinct word of God. Each is needed by all the others, destined by God to be a unique bearer of a word from God. For the Christian there is a word from God unique to each tradition. Nothing could be further from the

29. Berry, 'The Earth: A New Context for Religious Unity,' p. 33.

truth than to say if you have seen one religion, you have seen them all. No tradition does precisely and qualitatively what the others do. This is especially true of the Christian tradition with its Word made flesh.

That Word with its mission in the Incarnation has not been spoken within the other traditions. But likewise those of us who are hearers of the Word made flesh have still to hear the other words of God. When we say, all too easily, that the Holy Spirit is present to all peoples, we ought not to imply that the Spirit is communicating within these traditions the same thing that has been revealed in the biblical and Christian history of salvation in Christ, somehow less clearly or less fully. The issue is not one of quantity. There is a qualitative difference. If the difference is not quantitative, then one cannot say that the difference between one tradition and another is that one is more full or more complete. The ancient Christian paradigm is too simple and should give way to a model more complex and subtle.

When traditions meet that have genuine words from God, the effect is mutual enhancement. Diversity experienced is enrichment since the diverse words of God are gifts from God. The special grace begins when the Christian is able to hear the second word, then a third, and so forth, based on the original Word. The diversity must first be appreciated, then promoted, the differences fostered. The relationship of a Church, whose primary mission is to be a *lumen gentium*, to other religions will be a relationship of mutual fecundation, of a mutual exchange of gifts, of aesthetic appreciation, of vital wrestling with the perfection of truth. No spoilation of the Egyptians here.

The task for the Christian reaching out for the whole is to appreciate the parts, 'distinct by the Word of God.' Each of the religions and spiritual traditions is a theological and revelatory source with its own note, to be appropriated and incorporated by an act of imaginative faith which sees and hears the Word. The spiritual and religious history of humankind is a resource within a global patristics extending to the whole *oikumene*. This history is the bearer of words from God the Father. Through the study of the history of religions, the religions of the past remain alive. Through encounter and dialogue, persons who bear these words are being met with existential force. A rewritten *Nostra Aetate* would include an aesthetics to help us to stand in awe of the diverse splendor of God's words,

a dramatics to encompass the necessary conversions which encounter with God's Word and words mendates, and a logic to help us to understand God's salvific and redemptive working through his creation in time and space.³⁰ This rewritten *Nostra Aetate, In Our Age*, would listen to and hear the nations, the other religions, as words spoken concretely and diversely in the Word of Jesus Christ.

30. See Hans Urs von Balthasar's project for an aesthetic, dramatic, and logic of revelation.