

# UNITY AND TRUTH

## Goals and Presuppositions of Dialogue

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**Abstract:** According to biblical-Christian vision there is plurality within God as well as the creatures, as God-willed reflection of his own plurality. Plurality in the world, beginning with our own selves and senses, is to be understood as emerging out of a unity. Dialogue is based on the two poles: unity and plurality. Plurality of human society as well as human cultures and religions is an outcome and reflection of the basic theological truth of Trinity. Without accepting the underlying unity we are unable to launch any project of dialogue or interreligious dialogue. The single economy of salvation is based on the vision of the whole humankind as one family. Whatever God has revealed in the history of salvation has salvific bearing to every human person and even to the whole world. Through dialogue among the religions we seek to find the fuller scope of the salvific truth of God definitively revealed in Jesus Christ. For this each partner of dialogue is demanded and expected to share one's own faith openly and truthfully.

**Keywords:** Dialogue as Prayer, Pentecostal Experience, Plurality, Salvific Truth, Single Divine Economy, Unity.

### 1. Introduction

In this article I intend to highlight that any dialogue and for that matter also interreligious dialogue is based on the epistemological and ontological presupposition that there is a basic unity in this world. This unity is also the basis of the plurality at all levels.

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Pluralism, on the other hand, cannot sustain on principle any dialogue, precisely because it is built on the assumption of multiplicity as separate, mutually unrelated units or entities. Just as God is one and plural (Triune), so, too, is humankind with its plurality. The plurality of cultures and religions is not to be construed as independent and competing factors, but as contributing to help us find the salvific answer of God finally and irrevocably revealed in Jesus Christ, who is God become man. Interreligious dialogue promotes thus in this way on the one hand peace in this world and leads us to understand the message of God from different angles and perspectives. To achieve this goal the partners of dialogue have to primarily be open to God in an attitude of prayer to listen to his voice in the conscience. It also demands of the participants to share their authentic faith without dilution and compromise. The significance of the paper consists in making aware that plurality of religions is in itself not evil or an unfortunate accident, but healthy and God-willed with a purpose, namely, to help us look at the various angles and aspects of human life as well as divine answer and bring us to appreciate God's work of salvation better than otherwise, when everything is viewed only from one single perspective. Although in Jesus Christ we have the final answer of God to human quests, the complexity of human predicament cannot be assessed only from a Christian point of view. The various religions with their experiences have the potential to elucidate the manifold aspects of human aspirations on the one hand and the merits and demerits of each system as human responses to the ineffable mystery of God, which transcends every human grasp.

Interreligious dialogue paves the way for mutual sharing and understanding on the one hand and opens the scope for critical reflection of one's own faith as well as the faith of the others. This interfaith conversation is in itself an exercise of religion, since here we experience the personal relations based on truth and love, which are the basic values of any true religion. In the Christian conception God is love and truth. Therefore, any exercise of truth and love is a religious and divine act. To bring peoples and come into such a forum is in itself an act of prayer, love and humility;

prayer, because we thematise thereby our search for God; love, because each dialogue partner is ready to share his/her experience with the others to help them; humility, because each partner truthfully and humbly admits that the other partners have something salvific and important to say to and share with him/her.

## 2. Dialogue and Plurality

There is a crucial difference between pluralism and plurality, just as there is a difference between dualism and duality. Dualism envisages, for instance, of two *separate* entities united only externally; thus, according to dualism, human being is the composite of “soul” and “body”; salvation is understood in terms of liberation of the spiritual soul from the material body! Dualistic ideologies and philosophies are not based on inner unity. The Aristotelian-Scholastic philosophy of hylemorphism on the other hand conceives of matter and form as two *principles*, whereby the (substantial) form informs the (primary) matter, resulting in an intrinsic unity. Human being is here not an addition of soul and body, but embodied soul, the spiritual soul being the form of the body. Here there is duality, but no dualism! The duality shows itself in the spiritual and bodily dimensions of the human being. Plurality manifests itself in our human existence as persons who realize ourselves through the five senses. Human being is basically one and at the same time plural. The unity of the human self is the basis of the plurality. It is the one human person who manifests himself or herself externally through the bodily senses. In an analogical manner we accept plurality, but not pluralism with regard to religion. Pluralistic theology of religions is quite different from theology of religious plurality; pluralism accepts and advocates all religions as equally valid and parallel ways of salvation. Plurality is a basic theological and anthropological datum according to the Bible. This is echoed in the book of *Genesis* in the following statements: “God said: Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion ... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them”

(Genesis 1: 26-27). According to the *New Testament* there is an inner plurality within the one God (deity or Godhead), for God exists as Triune God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God is a community and communion of divine persons. Plurality and inter-subjectivity is thus divine and human. We speak here of plurality in God but not of pluralism. Pluralism would mean that there are many Gods who are all equal in status. Plurality, on the contrary, means that the single God exists as three persons in mutual dialogue and dedication. The Plurality of cultures, religions and ideologies is an outcome of this basic plurality. Applied to creaturely and human level, the unity of plurality is not ontological, but protological and teleological; protological, in for as the creatures come from the single source God, and teleological, because they are heading towards the one end: God. The awareness of the human plurality is now becoming more and more a felt experience also in the West, as a result of the increasing migration owing to various reasons, so much so that interreligious dialogue has become not merely a chance but also a necessity theologically as well as sociologically.

This was not the case when in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) Pope Paul VI instituted a special department of the Roman Curia for relations with the people of other religions on Pentecost Sunday 1964 under the name the Secretariat for Non-Christians (since 1988 known as the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue). Although there were other attempts of Dialogue of Religions at the national and international levels and also by the World Council of Churches the need for interreligious dialogue for world peace was not felt so urgent until now as the present global scenario shows today. In his project "World-ethic" (*Weltethos*) Hans Küng has expressed it as follows: "No coexistence on our globe without a global ethic! No peace among the nations without peace among the religions! No peace among the religions without dialogue of religions!"<sup>1</sup> The day of its institution, namely, the Feast of the Pentecost seems to have a double biblical allusion: the negative experience of confusion of

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<sup>1</sup>Cited in K. Lehmann, *Auslotungen*, Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2016, 205.

languages at Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) and the positive experience of the wonder of harmony of languages (Acts 2:5-8). Against the background of the Genesis description of creation as God’s victory over chaos (*Tohu wa-bohu*) in Genesis 1:2, the Pentecostal gift of victory over the Babelian confusion suggests that in mutual understanding we have the experience of a new creation. This is reflected in the goal and responsibilities of the Council, namely, the promotion of interreligious dialogue in accordance with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, in particular the declaration *Nostra Aetate*, to promote mutual understanding, respect and collaboration between Catholics and the followers of other religious traditions and to encourage the study of religions. The term mutual understanding is here of primary importance. Only so we can come to respect and collaboration. Language or speaking is hence here very significant. Therefore it is a question of *dialogue!* Dialogue is a two-way communication; it implies speaking and listening, giving and receiving. As opposed to the Babel experience of confusion and misunderstanding, we envisage a Pentecostal experience of the mutual understanding! This is both a gift and a task: gift of the Holy Spirit and task of each and every one of us.

In contrast to plurality, pluralism is based on parallelism that would argue that all religions are independent and self-contained ways of salvation, equally true and valid. In such a conception we do not find any internal principle of Pentecostal unity, but rather the “Babelian” chaos and confusion. Although pluralism speaks of dialogue, there is no epistemological ground for dialogue here, precisely because of the lack of an inner unity, which is the basis of dialogue! Unity is, however, not what we create artificially. Unity is already there based on God, the Creator, the very source and goal of everything. Without this basic unity no truth and no dialogue is possible. Hence all dialogue has to be a dialogue with God.

### **3. Dialogue as Prayer**

Dialogue requires a listening heart, which listens to God and fellow human beings. Dialogue is primarily dialogue with God.

This is reflected in the passage where the term dialogue appears in the New Testament (Luke 1:29) referring to Mary's response after she heard the greeting of the angel Gabriel. She dialogued (*dielogiseto*). It was a pondering over in dialogue with God in the heart; it was a prayer. Dialogue means conversation with God in the form of pondering over in one's heart what the will of God is. King Solomon prayed for an understanding mind, a listening heart (1 Kings 3:9). All dialogues have to start with and fall back on (*syn-ballein*: symbolize) this basic dialogue which is open to the salvific truth of God.

#### 4. Truth and Unity

It is on the basis of the conviction that we are all one that we can also seek to be one, when and where this unity is disrupted. Conversely, if one is of the conviction that we are all basically different and nothing unites us, there is no sense in seeking a dialogue, for there is nothing to talk about that would be of concern and interest to the partners. This is also true of the reality of truth. If truth is perceived purely as subjective and relative, there is no meaning in seeking the truth through dialogue! The Church is convinced of the basic human unity and the existence of objective truth. It is in this perspective that Pope John Paul II "underlined the fundamental unity of the human race, in its origin and its destiny, and the role of the Church as an effective sign of this unity."<sup>2</sup> Unity implies universality. In the context of religious plurality, it is also pointed out that dialogue means "all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment" "in obedience to truth and

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<sup>2</sup>Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, 5. This is the Joint Document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for Evangelization of Peoples, Rome, 19 May 1991; *Osservatore Romano*, 21 June, 1991; it refers to *Insegnamenti* 1986, IX/2, 1249-1273; 2019-2029.

respect for freedom.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the very epistemological principle of dialogue is based on the question of truth on the one hand and unity and universality on the other. If someone denies one of them, there is no possibility of dialogue, since dialogue implies speech (*logos*) with or across (*dia*). How can people talk without a basic ‘language’ that unites? This unity provides the needed universality so that any speech is understood by the other(s). If each and every one has a one’s own unique language and symbols, dialogue is impossible!

The unity of humankind is rooted in the fact that we all have the same Creator, same Saviour and same goal. The Second Vatican Council hence points out:

One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth (Acts 17.26). One also is their final goal, God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extend to all men, (Wisdom 8.1; Acts 14.17; Romans 2.6-7; I Timothy 2.42) until that time when the elect will be united in the Holy City, the city ablaze with the glory of God, where the nations will walk in His light (Revelation 21.23).<sup>4</sup>

So we can speak of the one human family and its unity.

The unity among the religions is in varying degrees. Among the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) there is a special kind of unity than among the other religions. Regionally and historically they have a common bond. Abraham is venerated in all the three traditions as the father of faith. Christianity has accepted the Jewish tradition as the first part of its Bible. Islam holds on to the tradition of the patriarchs and prophets and recognizes Jesus as a prophet. All the three religions confess the faith in one God (monotheism), who is the Creator, Redeemer and Judge. Christianity and Judaism are, however, basically related in a different way than with Islam. The God of Jesus is the same God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Catholic Church is convinced that the covenant of God with the people of Israel is not abrogated

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<sup>3</sup>Pontifical Council, “Dialogue and Proclamation,” 9.

<sup>4</sup>*Nostra Aetate*, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, Vatican Council II, Oct. 28, 1965, 1.

by the new covenant in Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup> While the Church is united with Judaism with an inseparable bond and is constitutively rooted in it, the relation between Christianity and Islam is never constitutive.<sup>6</sup>

Alongside the unity there are also differences among these Abrahamic religions.<sup>7</sup> The differences manifest themselves regarding the theological interpretation of Abraham. In the Jewish perspective the thought of wandering and promise are predominant about Abraham (cf. Genesis 12:1-5). Religion is open to a history, to changing places and times: Abraham is called by God to leave his homeland. God wants to be near to him on his way to an open future. In Islam God has already fully revealed the true religion to Adam, the first human being. Something materially new, a new form or new quality of encounter with God is thereby fully excluded. History is characterized by the recurring deviation from monotheistic faith and the repeated call of God to go back to the original contract. The figure and function of Abraham is interpreted in the Koran in this sense. According to Christian faith with the Christ-event the people of Israel that traces back to Abraham has ceased to be the exclusive bearer of divine revelation. With the rejection of Jesus through the majority of the Jews the promise of blessing given to Abraham goes over to the church from all nations and languages, although the covenant with Israel is not abrogated.

Closely related to unity is the notion of universality (being turned into one). God's will and desire is universal. He wants *all* to be saved (1 Timothy 2:3-4). Interestingly, this universality is again based on the unity of humanity and uniqueness of the Saviour! "There is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind" (1 Timothy 2:5). In other words, universality of salvation does not in itself call for parallel mediators or parallel ways. Conversely, unity and uniqueness do not contradict universality. It is rather the other way round: If there is no unity there is the need of multiple ways and multiple

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<sup>5</sup>Lehmann, *Auslotungen*, 209.

<sup>6</sup>Lehmann, *Auslotungen*, 209.

<sup>7</sup>Lehmann, *Auslotungen*, 210f.

mediators. Origin from one family enhances unity more than the origin from different families, and hence also the universal outlook, whereas multiplicity without and basic unity is not able to substantiate and safeguard either unity or universality. It is precisely because of the single history of salvation that the Church advocates the importance of the one mediator Jesus Christ having universal appeal and application. The Vatican Declaration hence speaks in one breath of the “unicity and salvific universality of the mystery of Jesus Christ and the Church”<sup>8</sup> and of “a single divine economy.”<sup>9</sup> In this sense we may speak of God’s covenant with Adam, the whole humanity. This is reflected in the creation accounts, where we find elements of a covenant in terms of stipulation, promise and threat (cf. Genesis 1:28f; 2:15-17). Prophet Hosea speaks of the trans-gression of the covenant with Adam (Hosea 6:7). This covenant can be seen as a general covenant, which has been specially concretised in the Sinaitic covenant, but actually in continuation and in service of the general covenant. In the cleansing of the temple as is referred to in the gospel of Mark we find in Jesus’ words his concern for this universality: he wants that the temple should remain a house of prayer “for all the nations” (Mark 11:17), as was already announced by God through prophet Isaiah: “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isaiah 56:7).

In agreement with what has been said above, the church refers to the one history and universality of salvation when she speaks of inter-religious dialogue.

The Old Testament testifies that from the beginning of creation God made a Covenant with all peoples ... This shows that there is but one history of salvation for the whole of humankind. The Covenant with Noah, the man who ‘walked with God’ (Genesis 6:9), is symbolic of the divine intervention in the history of the nations. Non-Israelite figures of the Old

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<sup>8</sup>Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Dominus Iesus* on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, August 6, 2000 (hereafter: *Dominus Iesus*), 3.

<sup>9</sup>*Dominus Iesus*, 12.

Testament are seen in the New Testament as belonging to this history of salvation.<sup>10</sup>

The document then speaks of the prophets who brought a universal perspective, for God's salvation is understood to extend beyond and through Israel to the nations.

Thus Isaiah foretells that in the final days the nations will stream to the house of the Lord, and they will say: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths' (Isaiah 52:10). In the Wisdom literature also, which bears witness to cultural exchanges between Israel and its neighbours, the action of God in the whole universe is clearly affirmed. It goes beyond the boundaries of the Chosen People to touch both the history of nations and the lives of individuals.<sup>11</sup>

It then goes on to say about Jesus who was "opening up a new horizon, beyond the purely local, to a universality which is both Christological and Pneumatological in character. For the new sanctuary is now the body of the Lord Jesus (cf. John 2:21) whom the Father has raised up in the power of the Spirit."<sup>12</sup>

## 5. Cosmic and Theo-logical Dialogue

Dialogue is not restricted merely to conversation between two persons or parties. There is an on-going cosmic dialogue. When we look at this world with all its various systems we find a constant dialogue going on, unobserved and un-interpreted. The whole universe is, in fact, in continuous dialogue! Those who have ears, hear it. The psalmist prays:

The heavens are telling the glory of God; the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world (Psalm 19:1-4).

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<sup>10</sup>Pontifical Council, "Dialogue," 19.

<sup>11</sup>Pontifical Council, "Dialogue," 20.

<sup>12</sup>Pontifical Council, "Dialogue," 21.

Besides the cosmic dialogue at the level of the creatures, there is an eternal dialogue within the inner Trinitarian life of God. This eternal, immanent (*ad intra*) dialogue within the Godhead is the basis of the salvation-historical, economic (*ad extra*) dialogue of God with the humans as well as the whole creation. God speaks to each one in the heart. “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me” (Revelation 3:20). Even if we may hear the *sound* of the knocking the *voice* of the knocking Lord could be frequently ignored!

An essential requirement of dialogue is concern for truth. Truth can be understood in different ways. One way of conceiving it as disclosure, *a-letheia*, implying that truth is veiled, and one comes to it, when it is unveiled. This unveiling can be understood as done by truth itself or by the seeker of truth. In the former sense and case it is self-revelation and in the latter case, discovery. Even in this case truth is not an invention, but discovery. An important Christian understanding of truth is precisely that it is neither invention nor discovery, but revelation, self-revelation. “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (John 1:18). There is a theological paradox here: self-revelation and yet revelation through someone else, but not through someone who is not God! Any revelation of God through a non-divine medium will not be his full revelation. God the Father reveals himself through the Son. “It is God the only Son ... who has made him known”. This Son is “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15). Whoever has seen him has seen the Father (John 14:6).

Therefore the question of truth is not “What is truth?” (John 18:38), but *who* is truth? Jesus said on the one hand that the truth will make us free (John 8:32) and that “if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36), for he is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). It is in this sense that the Pontifical Council states:

In the last analysis truth is not a thing we possess, but a person by whom we must allow ourselves to be possessed. This is an unending process. While keeping their identity intact,

Christians must be prepared to learn and to receive from and through others the positive values of their traditions. Through dialogue they may be moved to give up ingrained prejudices, to revise preconceived ideas, and even sometimes to allow the understanding of their faith to be purified.<sup>13</sup>

The Pontifical Council was reiterating the teaching of Vatican II:

Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.<sup>14</sup>

As the Church identifies truth with God, truth is for her primarily not a proposition or a set of doctrines but a person. In so far as this person has a human face, it is Jesus Christ. Hence the Church lays stress on the proclamation of Christ. She has to do this precisely out of her commitment to truth. In this sense she is duty bound in her self-understanding as commissioned to proclaim Christ. This proclamation is a part of her mission.

Evangelizing mission of the Church is a single but complex reality. The principal elements of this mission are: presence and witness; commitment to social development and human liberation; liturgical life, prayer and contemplation; inter-religious dialogue; and finally, proclamation and catechesis. Proclamation and dialogue are component elements and authentic forms of the one evangelizing mission of the Church. They are both oriented towards the communication of salvific truth.<sup>15</sup>

## 6. Truth as Salvific Truth

An important element in this regard is the qualification *salvific* truth. This makes it at once clear that the Church is not focussing on truth in a neutral sense or in the sense of natural sciences, but rather on salvific or religious truth, truth that has to do with our

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<sup>13</sup>Pontifical Council, "Dialogue," 49.

<sup>14</sup>*Nostra Aetate*, 2.

<sup>15</sup>Pontifical Council, "Dialogue," 2.

salvation. Jesus Christ is the truth in the sense of salvific truth. This also holds good regarding the Holy Scriptures. When the Church holds that the Holy Scriptures teach us the truth, she means salvific truth. The Bible is not thus a resource book (or library) on various scientific truths of nature. The books of Scripture are acknowledged

... as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted to put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation. Therefore ‘all Scripture is divinely inspired and has its use for teaching the truth and refuting error, for reformation of manners and discipline in right living, so that the man who belongs to God may be efficient and equipped for good work of every kind’ (2 Timothy 3:16-17).<sup>16</sup>

Inspiration in the sense of the divine assistance of the Holy Spirit means that the human authors convey the supernatural divine *salvific* truth in their human words.

The idea of salvific truth is referred to also in the words of Paul when he writes that God our Saviour desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:3-4; cf. 2 Timothy 3:7). In the *Letter to the Hebrews* the author speaks of the knowledge of the truth in the sense of baptism (cf. Hebrews 10:26). This indirectly also refers to Christ, since in baptism we “enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus” (Hebrews 10:19) and accept the Son of God who sanctifies us by the blood of his covenant (cf. Hebrews 10:29).

When it is said that we are all seekers and pilgrims of truth, it does not mean that all are preoccupied with the search for the scientific truth of the origin of the universe or the structure of the atom. But all are concerned with the question of meaning and fulfilment of life, forgiveness of sins, lasting life, joy, justice and peace. This salvific truth is the goal and object of our search. There are people who deny this and hold that there is no meaning for life. Everything is absurd and devoid of any meaning; there is hence no sense in seeking after a truth. The only consistent step

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<sup>16</sup>*Dei Verbum*, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Vatican Council II, November 18, 1965, 11.

they should take should be either keeping absolutely silent or committing suicide. But they do not do it; they live, speak and even try to propagate their nihilistic philosophy, indirectly and inconsistently admitting that there is some sense and meaning in life! There are still others who hope to find it and search for it. The age old prayer of the Indian sages to lead us from untruth to truth, from darkness to light, and from death to immortality<sup>17</sup> reflects this hope. There are yet some who abandon the search and remain in resignation and protest. Christian faith is convinced that in Jesus Christ we have found the salvific truth. He has conquered sin, death and evil powers and brought us unconditional love, forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, joy and eternal life. This good news is what the Church wants to share with others, who are still in their search. Inter-religious dialogue is for the Christian not a further search as if we have not found the truth, but precisely the sharing of this truth on the one hand and the various still undiscovered aspects of it in the light of the experiences of other fellow believers, who are also encompassed by the one Holy Spirit of God. In this sense we can understand the following statements of Vatican II:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men ... The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.<sup>18</sup>

Jesus says that when the "Spirit of truth" comes, he will guide us into all the truth (John 16:13). This implies that we have not yet been led to all the truth and that it is the Spirit of truth who will

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<sup>17</sup>*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 1.3.28.

<sup>18</sup>*Nostra Aetate*, 2.

lead us into all the truth. This does not, however, mean that the Holy Spirit’s work is to lead us into all historical, geographical, astronomical and mathematical truth. He will lead us into all truth concerning the mysteries of the kingdom of God, of the Gospel of Christ, and about our salvation (cf. Acts 20:27). Each believer is led into all the truth necessary to his own state and condition, to enable him to attain salvation. Truth is understood as *salvific* truth and at the same time personal truth, the truth that leads us to freedom (John 8:32.36), to wholeness, holiness and self-realization in God.

## **7. The Distinctively Christian Elements**

As O. H. Pesch rightly observes, in the dialogue with other religions Christianity has the right and duty to point out the characteristically and distinctively Christian elements and ask them certain questions in view of conception of human beings and ethics.<sup>19</sup> The distinctively Christian items are: Christianity is not a general theory about God and the world, but faith in a historical person Jesus of Nazareth as revelation and self-communication of the infinite and ineffable God; in this person God has exposed himself into powerlessness until death on the cross and submitted himself to the enslaving experience of history (Philippians 1:6-11); religion is not accomplishment for and before God, but response to the unconditional grace of God, so that salvation is not dependent on one’s performance, but exclusively on the gratuitous love of God. The questions at the religions would be consequently the following: i) how does a religion answer to the scandal of the Absolute God appearing in the concrete history of a historical being? ii) which religion solves the riddle of suffering better than Christianity, which does not solve the riddle, but lets it be the matter and cause of God himself? iii) which religion liberates us from the overburdening pressure of performance? If a religion answers the above questions in a Christian way, then we may say: it is “not far from the kingdom

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<sup>19</sup>O. H. Pesch, *Katholische Dogmatik aus Ökumenischer Erfahrung*, Band 1: *Die Geschichte der Menschen mit Gott*, Teilband 1/2, Ostfildern: Matthias-Grünewald, 2008, 514f.

of God" (Mark 12:34).<sup>20</sup> Interreligious dialogue can help us find out how and to what extent the other religions answer the above concerns and make this conscious to ourselves and to others.

## 8. Dialogue and Life

Just as our life is a complex reality, so, too, is interreligious dialogue. The dialogue from the part of Christians has to be guided and accompanied by witness of Christian life and faith. Dialogue is hence not limited to theory and verbal discussion; it embraces the width and breadth of human co-existence: the service of love and spirituality. This includes hence the four types of dialogue: dialogue of life (in sharing joy and sorrow), dialogue of action (cooperation for the development, well-being and liberation of the fellow humans), dialogue of theological exchange, and dialogue of religious experience.<sup>21</sup> In the present situation of the religious-fundamentalist tendencies and movements in many parts of the world, (only) this kind of dialogue has a great potential to bring about peace and harmony in the world.

The question whether the Christian believers have to bracket out their faith for the sake of respect of other adherents of faith is thereby answered indirectly. Truth and truthfulness demand one's own religious conviction as well as experience with the dialogue partners. Christian conviction is that in Jesus Christ God has given us the definitive and irrevocable answer to the human quest (cf. Hebrews 1:2). This may lead to the objection that the Christians are arrogant in proposing Jesus Christ as *the* final answer of God. This is a delicate issue that has to be sorted out. If it is demanded and expected of the dialogue partners that they represent their authentic faith without diluting and compromising, the Christian partner is duty bound to share the faith that Jesus is the final and unsurpassable answer of God. In interreligious dialogue it is not a question of one's hypothesis or "theory" to be verified by experiments in the laboratory of

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<sup>20</sup>Pesch, *Katholische Dogmatik aus Ökumenischer Erfahrung*, 515.

<sup>21</sup>H. Bürkle, "Dialogue der Religionen," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, W. Kasper et al, ed., Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2006, 198.

dialogue based on the reception of others! Interreligious dialogue is rather *sharing* and elucidating of religious faiths and experiences. In Christian idiom it is the sharing of the good news of having found the Redeemer. This sharing is intended to help the fellow humans out of love for them and not with the intention of recruiting members to the church. As St Peter puts it, we should be ready to make our defence to anyone who demands from us an accounting for the hope that is in us; “but do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15-16). It is unjust and unfair that we do not share with others the treasure we have found. In sharing it there is no question of arrogance at work. Arrogance comes to the scene only when we impose it on someone or condemn or ridicule the faith of the other. Dialogue helps us to listen, understand and appreciate the faith and spiritual experience of the others and discern what the Spirit tells us through them. He is the Spirit of truth, who will guide us into all the truth (John 16:13).

## **9. Conclusion**

The basis and scope of interreligious dialogue is the underlying unity in humankind and the interest for truth and truthfulness. If every religion is understood as totally separate and parallel way of salvation, it cannot promote dialogue, rather confusion, similar to the confusion of tongues at Babel, for there is no basis on which we have to stand and talk: each one talks his/her language! But according to Christian understanding God has created humanity as a single family and has worked our salvation in a single economy. History of salvation is hence co-extensive with the history of the world and is united in God’s plan of recapitulation in Christ (Ephesians 1:10). The different aspects of Divine salvation and redemption manifest themselves in the plurality of religions, converging into the one salvific truth, namely, Jesus Christ. He is not the monopoly of the Christians, but the common treasure of the whole humanity. The rays of truth, wherever we find them, are the rays of the one and the same Sun and Son!

Pope John Paul II makes it clear that interreligious dialogue includes witness to one’s own faith as well as openness to that of

the other. It is not a betrayal of the mission of the Church, nor is it a new trick for conversion to Christianity:

Inter-religious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission. Understood as a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment, dialogue is not in opposition to the mission *ad gentes*; indeed, it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions. This mission, in fact, is addressed to those who do not know Christ and his Gospel, and who belong for the most part to other religions ... In the light of the economy of salvation, the Church sees no conflict between proclaiming Christ and engaging in interreligious dialogue ... These two elements must maintain both their intimate connection and their distinctiveness; therefore they should not be confused, manipulated or regarded as identical, as though they were interchangeable.<sup>22</sup>

He then states:

Dialogue does not originate from tactical concerns or self-interest, but is an activity with its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity. It is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills. Through dialogue, the Church seeks to uncover the 'seeds of the Word,' a 'ray of that truth which enlightens all men' ... Dialogue is based on hope and love, and will bear fruit in the Spirit. Other religions constitute a positive challenge for the Church: they stimulate her both to discover and acknowledge the signs of Christ's presence and of the working of the Spirit, as well as to examine more deeply her own identity and to bear witness to the fullness of Revelation which she has received for the good of all.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>*Redemptoris Missio*, Encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II on the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate, Dec. 7, 1990, 55.

<sup>23</sup>*Redemptoris Missio*, 56.