

# The Word of God and World Religions and Cultures

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It is difficult in view of such a vast subject to say something pertinent that at the same time aims at a certain universality and reaches the listener of the Word of God in a particular situation, in his or her historic or cultural condition. Thus, I feel the need to leave the level of such generalities and to specify immediately that the Word of God designates the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ who has died and risen from the dead. By religions, we mean not only the major existing religions other than Christianity but also the diverse religious currents and movements that enjoy increasing success especially in the First World countries. With regard to cultures, the very subject of our meeting requires that we take into account the credibility of the Biblical language not only for those civilisations and cultures which remain far removed from the dominant historical figure of Christianity but also for those new sub-cultures which are emerging in the heart of what we call Western culture. To help you understand the sense of the theological reflection which I propose for a subject impossible to treat within the time of a conference, I should like to share with you straight away several basic convictions:



1. The Gospel as the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ addresses every human being. It is properly speaking universal, in other words trans-cultural.
2. This universal Word of God can only be heard in and through the mediation of a particular culture and this is true from the very beginning of the Christian message, from the constitutive moment of what we call Revelation.
3. No culture is incompatible with Christian Revelation insofar as it does not withdraw into itself and to the extent that it is committed to a surplus of being within the realm of the authentically human.
4. The encounter between Christianity and a particular culture normally coincides with the mutual enrichment of both. Nevertheless, it is always an encounter between two cultures. Christianity is already the fruit of a process of inculturation; likewise, most of the world cultures are indissociable from one of the great religious traditions .

After having formulated these premises, I propose now to progress in the exploration of our subject in three stages. I shall begin by briefly calling to mind the newness of the historical experience of the Church at the beginning of the 21st century. Then I should like to demystify what we call abstractly the "Word of God". This Word always makes use of the medium of human language, whether it is the Biblical language or the diverse languages of the Church's faith which are situated at the point of encounter between the foundational Scriptures and the diverse cultural languages which have followed one another throughout history. Finally, we must reflect upon the presence of the Word of God today, its actualisation or better its translation into the different cultures, mentalities and persons. Which interpretation is necessary in order that the Word of God become contemporary; in other words, which interpretation allows the Word of God to coincide with the experience of salvation for men and women of the Third Millennium?

## **The New Historical Experience of the Church**

The notion of historical experience refers us to the idea of living memory. It is only possible to experience the strength of the present if it is taken to be the point of encounter between the experience of the past and the projection towards the future. The memory of the Church is stretched between, on the one hand, a space of experience composed of all doctrinal, ethical and cultural traditions which still affect us today and, on the other hand, a horizon of expectancy or a utopia for the future which helps us to endure the shock of the present . The Church partakes necessarily in the historical experience, in the fears and hopes of humanity come of age on a planetary level. If we are willing to risk an analysis of the newness of its historical experience, then I shall limit my remarks to three challenges that affect the conscience of the Church in a particular way: the challenge of globalisation, that of a nearly insurmountable religious pluralism and what I would call the challenge of uncertainty.

### ***Opportunities and risks of globalisation***

Globalisation understood as the extension to the global level of the economic, political and cultural stakes of human life coincides with that which certain people do not hesitate to call a fourth age of humanity, its planetary age . As such, it represents an incontestable opportunity to the extent that it accentuates the unity of the human spirit and

reinforces the common consciousness of belonging to a single family in this planetary village called "earth". It favours in particular the emergence of a global ethics which goes beyond ethnic and cultural particularism. And for the Church, the new communications network that accompanies globalisation represents a considerable advantage for the spreading of the Gospel message to the ends of the earth. The Bible has already been translated into innumerable languages and it continues to be a world best-seller. Thanks to the computer revolution, its distribution on the planetary level will pass into a new era.

It is impossible to speak of the stakes of globalisation for the life of the Church without calling to mind that for the very first time the Church is experiencing an historic rupture with the dominant culture with which it has been closely associated for centuries, that of the Western culture. The Second Vatican Council represents the passage from a Euro-centrism to a cultural poly-centrism within the Church. However, we must observe that at the same time as the Church frees itself from the ambiguities of the colonial period, we witness the globalisation of technological civilisation under the auspices of Western rationality which tends to assert itself everywhere. This means that at the same time as the Church seeks dialogue with the major non-Western civilisations and their religious traditions, it must also meet the shock of scientific and technological modernism head on. This modernism crosses all cultures and profoundly modifies the practices and mentalities of the populations of our planet.

Ideally, globalisation is certainly an opportunity for the future of humanity. If it is presently the object of general questioning, then that is because it is subject to the laws of the global market and of the highest profit. In fact, the world free market system engenders increasing poverty for three-quarters of the human race. And in addition to the perverse effects of globalisation in economic spheres, we have also to be aware of its dangers in cultural and anthropological areas. Thanks to an ever-improving communications network, globalisation contributes to the spreading of a human model that is increasingly uniform in which human beings are defined as potential consumers. Thus globalisation is marked by a double flaw: it risks sacrificing the most precious cultural and religious identities and it risks provoking a reaction of fragmentation which may lead to ethnic and religious tensions concerned with the preservation of regional identities.

### ***The challenge of religious pluralism***

It becomes more and more evident that the major challenge for the mission of the Church at the dawn of the 21st century will be religious pluralism. But we are well advised to distinguish between the plurality of new religious forms and movements which are growing in number especially in the First World (in Europe and in the United States) and the plurality of the great world religions which are often experiencing new vitality. That which is certain is that the new awareness of pluralism is closely linked to the process of globalisation which, like never before, affects all our societies. Thanks to an ever-better performing communications network, we observe the emergence of a religious supermarket that proposes a great diversity of products of the actual religions and of diverse esoteric traditions to its increasingly numerous consumers: myths, beliefs, practices, secrets of initiation, techniques for healing body and soul. This infatuation for the "religious" in all its forms coincides with the loss of credibility which ideologies and utopian models experience. The profound lack of culture of many of our contemporaries favours the concoction of a strange cocktail of beliefs and practices detached from their place of origin. These beliefs are so vague and their contours so poorly defined that they can coexist and even be fused together with no concern at all regarding their heterogeneous origins.

Behind this eclecticism, it is possible to rapidly discover the guiding criterion: it has primarily to do with the authenticity of a subjective experience in search of a certain salvation understood as the increased well-being of the soul, of the spirit and of the body. The syncretistic temptation must be understood as the continuing effort of reinterpreting the most diverse of beliefs in view of personal liberation. The credibility of one belief or another matters little, nor is its link to a religious system of importance. The only criterion is the surplus of being which I am able to obtain with regard to my most intimate potentialities. Christians themselves are not spared from this syncretistic tendency. This temptation does not exist only in the West. We observe more and more in Africa and in Latin America the birth of new Churches or at least of new communities on the fringes of the Catholic Church and of the official Protestant Churches. It is not possible to simply identify these communities as sects; they cumulate without difficulty beliefs and practices coming from extremely diverse religious traditions. One point distinguishes these communities from the religious movements of the West associated with the New Age current: the adepts of these new communities do not enjoy a high economic or cultural status. They are rather poor and marginal persons seeking recognition, physical and spiritual healing and finally a certain amount of happiness shared with others.

This often syncretistic religious quest receives no answer from the official Churches and that poses a serious question as to the credibility of the form of Christianity which is most widespread in the West and on other continents. We have to ask ourselves if a certain Christianity cut from its Biblical roots has not lost its symbolic potential and its dimension of mystery. In any event, it responds poorly to the spiritual aspirations of many of our contemporaries who, in reaction to a world that is more and more secularised and organised, are searching for the "re-enchantment" of the world, of humanity and even of God.

The emergence of new religious movements should not make us forget the continuing challenge for the Christian faith of the great historical religions, such as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, which not only maintain their hold on their own faithful but also recruit new adepts throughout formerly Christian countries. The power of the mass media, the rapidity of communications and the new migration movements have modified the old missionary map of the world. The European countries include 14 million Moslems; a country like France numbers 500,000 Buddhists and North America is in the process of discovering – with great religious fervour – the wisdom of the great oriental religions. In the age of globalisation, our societies will become more multicultural and plurireligious.

We might fear the new universalistic pretension of religions that formerly were more dependent on their ethnic and cultural roots. This however would lead us to misjudge the new opportunity with which interreligious dialogue provides us. This perspective constitutes a veritable revolution in the world's religious history. And the Catholic Church, which has in the past manifested its intransigent religious exclusivism, has played an important pioneering role in this regard. Vatican II represents an unprecedented and historic mutation with regard to its attitude to those who were designated indiscriminately as "pagans". From then on, the Church encourages an attitude of respect and esteem, and, in continuity with the Council's intuitions, the new theology of religions is ready to recognise other religious traditions as possible mediations of salvation. As we shall see, this modifies the forms of the Church's mission and the manner of announcing the Word of God to all those who are members of non-Christian religions.

### ***A culture of uncertainty***

I use this expression to designate the fact that, at least in the First World, the present challenge for an interest in the Word of God is not primarily atheism, religious indifference or anticlericalism. Rather it is a mentality that is characterised by cultural and religious plurality and that has been placed under the sign of uncertainty and a jealous respect of the diversity of religious, ethical, social and political options. We are confronted here with that which might be called the ideology of pluralism, which is perhaps to be distinguished from legitimate plurality. Under the pretext of respecting the authenticity of each person, all opinions are valid and we are tempted to relativise all norms and every hierarchy of values.

This culture of uncertainty is the symptom of a general crisis of truth. It explains the disaffection of many Christians with regard to the dogmatic teaching of the Church even though they are willing to harvest the riches of other religious traditions, providing they are instrumental in the realisation of a more enriching spiritual experience. In spite of its positive consequences, we must accept the fact that interreligious dialogue may engender a certain relativism that no longer permits the determination of absolute truth within the religious domain. If we have a better knowledge of the spiritual resources of other religions, how can we pretend that Christianity is the only true religion? Finally, all religions are ways that lead to God, and it is difficult to understand that we still maintain the unique mediation of Christ for salvation.

In addition to this religious indifference that exists under the sign of scepticism, the Church must, at the beginning of this new century, take into consideration another type of indifference. We may call it "responsible indifference" and it comes from a very vivid awareness of the painful gap between the ideals of the great religions and their powerlessness to relieve the misery of millions of men and women, victims of an unjust world system, of natural calamities or of interminable ethnic and religious conflicts. This indifferentism is only the reverse side of a true passion for the future of humanity and for the respect of what is authentically human. The great humanitarian cause, which gives rise to many very generous vocations, especially among young people, is a real challenge for a religion like Christianity that claims its inspiration in the Gospel.

### **The Word of God or the Experience of Salvation in Jesus Christ**

In the preceding, I have attempted to reconstruct the content of the historical experience of the Church by insisting on the most prevalent challenges today that might become an obstacle to the reception of the Word of God. We know that the Word of God is universal and not subservient to any particular culture. But he or she who listens to the Word of God is always particular and is situated in a specific cultural, religious or economic context which conditions his or her possibilities of listening. And rather than imagining the transcendent Word of God as something which hovers over all different cultures and historical contexts, we must begin by relating God's Word to the place of its historical origin. The Christian message is not an abstract ideology. It is the translation of a fundamental experience which a group of human beings had twenty centuries ago: the experience of Jesus Christ as a salvation event coming from God. The necessary inculturation of the Christian message in diverse cultures takes its model from the constitutive phase of Revelation itself. This is the idea that will retain my attention in this next step of my reflection.

### ***The Word of God and Experience***

It would be completely illusory to posit the existence at the beginning of Christianity of a chemically pure message that would have consequently undergone a process of inculturation in the various cultures. We should rather favour the notion of the interpretative experience of an event by the first community of the disciples of Jesus which is translated into Scripture. According to Schillebeeckx' expression, Christianity is not a message to adhere to but "an

experience that has become a message” . During the process of the institution of our foundational Scriptures we witness the subsumption of certain cultural elements of thought and of language that are indissociable from the original Christian message. The starting point of the Christian faith is the fundamental experience of salvation that has come in Jesus Christ. And this faith in Jesus Christ is always a faith with the apostles. Subsequently, it is in continuity with the apostles that we have the opportunity to have the same experience in completely different contexts. The primitive apostolic experience shall, in the light of Easter, give rise to a plurality of interpretative testimonies in function of varying thought patterns and cultural models, without even mentioning the specific interests of the primitive Church. All of this constitutes the corpus of the New Testament. And it is the task of exegetes as well as of historians of Christian origins to discern in the cultural carrier which is the New Testament the role played respectively by Semitic or Greek thought, by Stoicism or by Hellenistic Jewish philosophy following Philo of Alexandria, in the conditioning of one or another model of interpretation.

From all of this, the conclusion is that Christianity has always been, from the very beginning, the result of a process of inculturation. In this way, we can better appreciate the danger of a totally abstract vocabulary that speaks all too willingly of the incarnation of Christianity or of the faith as if there existed somewhere an essence of Christianity which becomes progressively incarnate in diverse cultures . The encounter of Christianity with another culture is always an encounter between two cultures. In this context, we might evoke the cultural eras of Christianity. We should mention in particular the encounter of Christianity with the Greek world that was decisive for the future of Christianity. The subsumption of Greek categories for the designation of the fundamental mysteries of the Trinity and of the Incarnation favoured the universalisation of the Christian message. But at the same time, this process entailed the risk of the identification of the Christian message with an ensemble of dogmatic truths that have no direct link to the symbolic resources of the New Testament language nor with the narrative structure of the kerygma of the early Church. It remains true, nevertheless, that the newness of the proclamation of Jesus Christ, who has died and been raised from the dead, metamorphosed the conceptual resources of Greek thought. This is why we should not denounce the Hellenisation of Christianity too quickly, before accepting the fact that there has also been a Christianisation of Hellenism. As I shall repeat later on, there can be no inculturation of Christianity that is not accompanied at the same time by an opening of Christianity towards the other culture.

In any event, it is indisputable that since the birth of Christendom in the 4th century, the dominant culture of the Church has been that of Western Europe. It is a relatively homogenous culture, even though we must distinguish between different forms of Christianity (Oriental, Latin, Slavonic, Anglo-Saxon), and this culture has endured up until Vatican II. I have already mentioned the new opportunity which the end of Europe-centrism and the new post-colonial era of globalisation represent for the task of evangelisation. But since Christianity never exists in a pure, unadulterated form, it would be incorrect to understand the necessary actualisation of the Word of God by imagining that Christianity would take off its Western garment and put on an African or Asian tunic. It would be more realistic to favour a creative encounter between the values of Western Christianity and the specific resources of the non-Western cultures, which are themselves intimately conditioned by long religious traditions. We might rightly hope that the future of Christianity will be characterised by multiple cultural centres that achieve an unedited synthesis between Biblical and European traditions and the cultural and religious traditions of Africa and Asia. It is important to relativise certain secondary elements which the traditional faith has accumulated across the ages. But it would be illusory to attempt to return to an original Christian nucleus that predates later dogmatic developments. In spite of their typically Hellenistic character, these developments belong to the living tradition of the Church under the guidance of the Spirit. We may not reject them out of hand, but we have never finished reinterpreting them in the light of a more critical interpretation of the Scripture and in function of new cultural areas in which the Gospel is to be announced.

### ***The Christian Bible as the Word of God***

Against all form of fundamentalism, it is necessary to recognise a clear distinction between the Bible, the Old and New Testament inseparably, and the Word of God. Christianity is not a religion of the Book, and the Word of God does not exist as such, outside of history and separate from a believing community. The Word of God can only exist, if you allow the expression, in an incarnate or in a shared form. When I say in an incarnate form, I mean that Revelation is history before being word. Here we must mention all the great events in the history of Israel which have been interpreted by the prophetic word and have become Word of God for us. They find their ultimate accomplishment in the event of Jesus Christ who is the Word made flesh. The Word of God exists in its shared form every time the Bible is read and proclaimed within a believing community. The Church is the community that was born through the gift of the Spirit of the Risen Lord at Pentecost. And when it announces the death of Jesus “until he comes again” (1 Cor 11:26), it recognises its Lord every time the Word of God is proclaimed. The Church is therefore the community that is engendered at the same time by the gift and by the reception of the Word of God. And the books of the Christian Bible are the place where the Christian community becomes aware of its profound being.

In the legitimate desire to facilitate dialogue between cultures and religious traditions which have nothing to do with the history of the people of Israel, certain persons tend to heed the message of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount,

while getting along without the long pedagogical process of God's work throughout sacred history. If we need a "preparatory process" leading up to the newness of Christianity, why then should we favour the particular history of Israel and not look rather to other cultural and religious histories of other peoples of the earth? They might constitute just as well the mysterious preparation in view of the plenitude of truth manifested in Jesus Christ.

Guided by its extremely sure instinct, the Church has always resisted the recurrent temptation of Marcion: the tendency to abolish the Word of God to which the Law and the Prophets witness in order to manifest more clearly the newness of the New Covenant which was inaugurated by Christ. Christians receive the totality of the Scriptures as Word of God and they know that there is an admirable commercium between the First Testament and the New Testament. According to St. Augustine's adage, *Novum Testamentum in Vetere latet, Vetus in novo patet* (The New Testament is hidden in the Old, the Old is manifested in the New). As attested in the entire patristic literature, Christian hermeneutics is closely linked to the understanding of the unity of the two Testaments. The event of Jesus Christ is in a hermeneutical relationship with the Law and the Prophets because it interprets them. Before becoming itself the privileged object of the interpretation of the Church, this event plays an interpretative function for the whole Old Testament. The Church Fathers make use of the Pauline tension between the letter and the spirit in order to explain this distance which may be defined like the relationship between promise and accomplishment. Christ brings about a mutation of the signification of the Old Testament: he accomplishes it. We may not consider the Old Testament to be a text belonging to a more or less bygone era or as a written document which functions as a key to the understanding of the New Testament. The Revelation to which the First Testament bears witness maintains a privileged position for it is like the alphabet of the message that the Spirit of God addresses to all human beings and to all peoples of the earth in their own languages. This is so true that the understanding of the Gospel in today's world invites us to reinterpret the texts of the New Testament and in particular its message of liberation in the light of the Old Testament. This is what happens, for example, when the liberation theologians reinterpret New Testament eschatology in the light of the messianic promises of the Old.

It is impossible to correctly understand the difference between the Christian Bible and the Hebrew Bible without adequately evaluating the major category which we call "accomplishment". The new theology of Judaism as elaborated in the post-Vatican II Church helps us to understand the dialectic relationship between the two Testaments. The relationship between Judaism and Christianity comprises both rupture and continuity. One must hold at the same time and without contradiction that the promises of the people of God find their accomplishment in the people of the new Covenant and that nonetheless the Church does not take the place of Israel. This insight invites us precisely to reinterpret the notion of accomplishment in a non-totalitarian sense. Christians consider the New Testament to be the accomplishment of the Old. But this has never meant that the latter is deprived of meaning outside of this accomplishment. Otherwise, we should have to explain the continuing vitality of post-Christian Judaism. And if all the Revelation of the Old Testament can be found in the New, we must ask ourselves why Christians still receive the First Testament as the Word of God. Indeed, the New Testament does not replace the First in the sense that the latter is abolished by the former. Rather, we should understand the newness of the Gospel as a rupture which institutes a new, original significance which does not abolish the irreducible content of the Law and the Prophets. Similarly, the Church accomplishes the promises of the Old Covenant but it does not usurp the place of Israel; contemporary theology avoids speaking of the Church as the new Israel.

Thus, the necessary and reciprocal relation between the two Testaments is not an obstacle to the actualisation of the Word of God among the peoples of the world. We may even postulate that the continuing encounter between Israel and the Church helps us to better understand the originality of Christianity as an alterity which does not abolish but which opens the way to a relationship with the other and thus recognises its legitimacy. It seems then more and more that the relation between the early Church and Judaism has a paradigmatic value with regard to the present-day relation between Christianity and the other religions. In the same way as the Church neither absorbs nor replaces Israel, neither does it absorb or replace the irreducible religious content borne by the other religious traditions.

### ***Narrative as a Medium for Intercultural and Interreligious Exchange***

One might be tempted to think that the best means of assuring the universality of the Christian message beyond the diversity of human peoples and of their particular histories would be to insist upon its ethical significance. Christianity considered to be a religion of love would be just as universal as the doctrine of human rights. It would nonetheless run the risk of being rapidly intermingled with ideology. This is precisely the danger faced by a certain type of Christianity that, under the banner of Western rationality, has lost contact with the Bible and underestimates the value of the narrative dimension of Biblical Revelation.

Theoretically, every culture is universal insofar as it tends toward the humanisation of mankind and attempts to go beyond its immediate interests. But, in fact, historically we observe a relationship of exclusion and violence between cultures. A particular culture becomes violent as soon as it pretends to be universal. This was precisely the tragedy of Western Christianity during its conquest of the New World and its encounter with peoples supposedly without

culture. More radically, this was the destiny of the people of Israel understood as the elected people among all nations. It is precisely Jesus in his death who has broken down the dividing wall which separated Israel from the nations (cf. Eph 2,14). And the death of Jesus has prophetic value in that it reveals the violence hidden in every culture.

In order to underscore the importance of the link between the Gospel and the history of Israel for a better universality of the Word of God in today's world, I should like to show, in the footsteps of Father Beauchamp, that the encounter of the Gospel and the Old Testament is the key to the relation between the Gospel and every culture. He wrote the following in his book *Le Récit, la lettre et le corps*: "In its double relation to the Jewish law, accomplishment and rupture, the Gospel characterises from the very beginning its relation with every possible culture". We might think that the best means of assuring continuity between the history of the people of Israel and other cultures would be to favour within the Biblical literature the wisdom books as having universal significance. But in fact, the reconciliation between the nations and Israel does not take this road. It follows rather the narrative of Israel. And it is even the death of the narrator (in this case Stephen) that is the condition of the reconciliation of two peoples and of two cultures. We authenticate in this way a very important law in relation to the encounter between cultures. It is the narrative of one's personal history – one's personal story – and the confession of the hidden violence inherent to every particularism that constitutes the condition of true dialogue between cultures. The death of Jesus manifests at the same time both the hidden violence within the history of Israel and the hidden violence in every culture. Thus, the Christian kerygma – in fact, the dangerous story of Jesus of Nazareth – has universal significance insofar as its encounter with another culture coincides with the relativisation of the cultural particularism with which the Gospel is associated.

I have already mentioned the continuity and rupture relationship between the First and the New Covenant. Even if Paul has broken with the Mosaic law, he has not broken with the Biblical narrative nor with the memory of Israel. For our task of evangelisation, it is important that we remember that the early Church's relative abandonment of the Jewish culture and his passage to the Greeks is exemplary for the relation between the Gospel and all cultures. The death of Jesus, which has given its seal to the newness of the Gospel narrative, has brought about the passage between Israel and the nations, between the elect and the universal, between the unique and the totality of that which exists. But we have to remember as well the exemplary character of the Jews' refusal of the Gospel. The death of Jesus constitutes the dramatic expression of this refusal. The Gospel intervenes as judgement (krisis) with regard to the limits of every human culture. The example of Israel shows us that it is not only sin, particularism and violence which constitute an obstacle to the Gospel. It is precisely that which constitutes the religious and spiritual greatness of a particular culture and thus its pretension to be universal that can become an obstacle to the newness of the Gospel.

Taking all of these reflections into account, we may conclude that the inculturation of Christianity in the various cultures shall not be achieved by eliminating its basis in the Biblical narrative. In order to assure its universality, the preaching of the Church may not content itself with the preservation of the wisdom dimension of the First Testament and the parables of the Gospel. It must maintain the necessary reference of the Gospel message to the narrative of Israel and to the story of the Galilean, Jesus of Nazareth. It is rather Israel's narrative and that of its offences which will give rise to the narrative of the nations and of their offences. Concretely, the narrative of the Church and thus of its offences will favour, in turn, the narrative of the various world cultures and religions. The Church's act of repentance at this beginning of the 21st century bears historic significance for the future of interreligious dialogue and for that of the Church's mission. When the Church confesses its past violence with regard to other cultures and its intolerance with regard to the non-Christian world, then the self-sufficiency of other cultures and religions is challenged.

### **The Word of God Today**

After having mentioned the historical experience of the Church, we have attempted to demystify an all too abstract conception of the Word of God. Whatever its state of incarnation might be in a particular message or practice, the Word must enter into the conscience of men and women today, beyond the diversity of cultures and religions. A "Word of God" that is not truly contemporary for a person who listens to it today is no longer the Word of God. It is not "spirit and life". In this last stage of my reflection, I should like to show that there can be no appropriation of Revelation without translation and thus interpretation.

#### ***Translation and Interpretation***

We must always return to the fundamental Christian experience, that of salvation which has come through Jesus Christ. The New Testament constituted the act of interpretation of the first Christian community. This text remains normative for the Church's testimony today, but it must be translated in function of a new historical context in such a manner that it makes possible the experience of salvation at the same time as the liberation of humanity and the encounter with God. It is possible to detect an analogy between the New Testament and the function which it played within the early Church and the appearance of a new testimony, in word and in act, and the function which it plays

within the Church and contemporary societies. With the assurance of the Spirit, the Spirit of the Risen Christ, continuity is not to be sought in the mechanical repetition of the same doctrinally identical message but in the analogy between two acts of interpretation. Throughout history, the necessary reinterpretation of the original message has taken place in function of new cultures or new developments of the human spirit, in function also of the needs of the Church. This reinterpretation has been at the origin of new texts that have taken the form of confessions of faith, of dogmatic or theological statements, of catechesis and of catechisms. In this, we encounter the phenomenon of tradition and we know that there can be no living tradition outside of the unceasing dialectic of continuity and innovation. Today, we cannot reconstitute the original truth of Christianity by abandoning this tradition, but this tradition itself needs to be reinterpreted if the Word of God intends to speak in the present.

It is obvious then that there is no living transmission of the faith without reinterpretation. It is illusory to think that it is possible to renew the traditional language of the faith by merely adapting it to new mentalities without touching its contents. This would be a serious misjudgement of the nature of language and of the demands of all translation work. We must learn how to effect the necessary discernment between the content of a message, in technical terms the "signified" (le signifié), and the cultural vehicle of the message, the "signifier" (le signifiant), which is characterised by the relativity of everything which is historical and capable of transporting the permanent object of the message only if it has become aware of its own contingency. This is true just as much for the scriptural language of Revelation as for the dogmatic language of the Church. We observe at the present time a wide gulf between Christian language and everyday language, whether that be the language of the modern world within the Western civilisation or the languages of non-Western cultural areas. How can we translate the Christian language in such a way that it can communicate Revelation? There can be no revelation in the true sense of the word without interior revelation that coincides with a new possibility of existence. A good translation is not a literal transposition of the same content in an understandable language. Sometimes we must be unfaithful with regard to the materiality of the text if we want to be faithful to the meaning which the text wants to communicate. The passion of a real translator is the unrelenting search for equivalencies between the specific genius of the language that must be translated and that of the language into which the translation must be made. To enjoy success in this endeavour, one needs to make use of analogical imagination.

As of the present time, the Bible has been translated into most of the living languages presently in use and that's quite an accomplishment. I am not capable of judging the quality of these translations. And I imagine that when it's not possible to find equivalent expressions the translator must resort to the creation of neologisms. It was the same situation in the beginning when the newness of the Christian message had to be translated into the Greek language available at the time. It might be preferable, rather than maintaining misunderstandings, to keep the words of the Biblical vocabulary or of the dogmatic language themselves, provided they are accompanied by appropriate commentary. A good criterion of a good translation or a good interpretation is that the text takes on an interpretative function for the reader or the listener. Then, we shall be able to speak of the actualisation of the Word of God in all languages and cultures of the World. A comparison with musical interpretation is instructive. Among multiple interpretations, which is the good interpretation? It is not necessarily a servile imitation of the first performance, directed by the composer him or herself. It is rather the interpretation which is most faithful to the revelatory capacity of the beauty inscribed in the work itself. Analogically, this is the same for the language of faith.

### ***The Signs of the Times***

Thus, there can be no transmission of the Christian message without creative reinterpretation. We must add immediately that this aims at the real appropriation of the message in human existence in function of what I called earlier our "historical experience". In the midst of this experience, we can discern the "signs of the times" that challenge our traditional reading of Scripture. Beyond the Word of God to which our foundational Scriptures bear witness, God continues to speak to us through the appeals of the human conscience and through the major historical and cultural events of each epoch. Here I shall distinguish between new states of conscience, our revelatory human experiences and certain structures of servitude.

In speaking of states of conscience, I am not speaking about a state of morals, but am referring to the progressive clarification of legitimate aspirations of the human conscience that has found an official translation in the Charter of Human Rights. Let it suffice to note several incontestable acquisitions of our modern society: equality of men and women, the absolute value of human life in this world, regardless of the value of eternal life, respect of the freedom of conscience, the dissociation of sexuality and procreation, the right to well-being and not only to health, secularity and the respective independence of State and religion.

We could give many examples of the reinterpretation of Biblical texts within the context of these new states of conscience. It is incontestable, for example, that the Biblical literature attests a patriarchal and androcentric culture. We must reread the Bible from the perspective of our modern awareness of the equality of men and women. And in spite of the newness of Christianity ("there is no longer male or female"), the texts of the New Testament itself are affected by the patriarchal structure of the Greek cities. We must also reinterpret some of the anti-Jewish texts of the

New Testament while taking into consideration our 20th century experience of the Jewish genocide and the revision of the Christian theology of Judaism which Vatican II brought about. Finally, how can we avoid reinterpreting certain war texts of the Old Testament in the light of our consensus on the fundamental equality of all human beings? The God who reveals himself already in the Old Testament but also in the New is indivisibly a God of justice and of love. God cannot, because of the election of one people and the promise of a Holy Land, sanction the oppression and the ravaging of another people. An old hermeneutical rule remains valid: a particular passage must be interpreted within the totality of the text and in relation to the heart of its message. Sometimes we must preach against a particular text of the canon of the Scriptures in order that the Word of God might be announced as Good News of salvation and liberation. The Word of God in its true sense can only be present if it coincides with the revelation in the human subject of new possibilities of existence. This means that the preaching of the Church must go beyond the revelatory experiences which our contemporaries can have in their daily lives. In general, these occur under the sign of gratuity. They can take the form of an intense experience of love in an unforeseen encounter or the form of a strongly emotional experience of awe before the beauty of the world or artistic creation. They can also be felt in the experience of unsupportable powerlessness when faced with the opaqueness of modern mass society or in the experience of stupor when faced with the spectacle of innocent suffering. Here I refer to fundamental experiences that have marked the populations of the West even though their culture is characterised by religious indifference. It would be an impossible task to take into account the "revelatory experiences" of those men and women who have at their disposal the vast symbolic capital possessed by the non-Western cultures and religious traditions. Whatever we might say about the diversity of cultures and mentalities, I believe firmly in the universality of the fundamentally human. The Word of God can be truly received only if it attains the radically human. In order to accomplish this, the Church's preaching must make more intense use of the never depleted resources of Christian symbolism when. For example, it speaks of the quest for living water, the joy of the gratuitous gift, anguish in the face of death, the need for pardon, the groaning of all of creation, awaiting the coming of the Kingdom or of the new heaven.

The Word of God must be in touch with every fundamental human expectation even when it cannot be clearly defined. In this sense, the Word functions more like an appeal than like a response to the questions concerning the mystery of our existence. In this, we have entered the personal level that might lead to the discovery of God or to an experience of salvation. But the Gospel, as a call to conversion and as the gratuitous gift of liberation, must always be announced within a particular human context. By this I mean that the dynamism of the Gospel must go beyond the alienation for which our personal sin is responsible and be allowed to address what I should call the structures of servitude that oppress millions of human beings every day. Thanks to the possibilities of modern communications, we know almost instantaneously of the passion of millions of men and women who are victims of structures of servitude. These structures are, in fact, "structures of sin" for they are not inevitable results of "the nature of things" but rather the result of a complex network of personal and corporate interests and cupidity. It is easy to perceive the highly topical pertinence of the Gospel when it is at the same time both preached and lived. It has the prophetic power of a counter culture and of protest in the name of the Kingdom of justice and peace that was inaugurated by Christ. Indeed, the salvation to which the mission of the Church bears witness is the salvation of the whole human person; that means not only liberation from sin and the gift of eternal life but also and straight away liberation from the alienations that disfigure human existence.

### ***The Global Vocation of the Gospel***

The challenge for the Church's preaching at the beginning of the 21st century is not only the permanence and the vitality of the great world religions but also the existence of extremely old cultures, like the Asian culture, the African culture and the Amerindian culture, which have maintained their independence with regard to the dominant Christian culture for the past 20 centuries. Even though we have a greater awareness of the cultural particularity of Christianity, we are more and more convinced of the catholic or global vocation of the Gospel: every man and every woman should be able to receive the Gospel as his or her own. As I have already said, it is true that for centuries the Christian message has been conceived and reformulated under the sign of the tension between two symbolic cities: Jerusalem and Athens. More and more – and we are witnesses of this development – the Church of Pentecost attempts to take into account a tertium quid: the Other, who is not part of the Western culture, neither Jewish nor Greek. In the same way that the Gospel, in virtue of its universal vocation, has surmounted the Jewish-Greek duality, it must now go beyond the Western-non-Western duality. And for the first time, in this age of globalisation, it might just be that inculturation, in the name of the universality of the Gospel, does not simply coincide with the ascendancy of a dominant culture.

Jesus of Nazareth died with regard to his particularism in order to be reborn through the Resurrection as a concrete figure of universality. Analogically, we may think that the Church may only accomplish its universality in accordance with the dynamism of the Spirit by relativising the privileged historical figures with which it has vested itself over the centuries. But in virtue of the indissociable link between culture and religion, we must realise that it will more and more difficult to achieve the inculturation of the Christian message in civilisations other than the Occident without evoking the encounter of a great religious tradition. This is certainly the case of South-East Asia. Thus, it is much too

simplistic to imagine that the task of evangelisation consists in subsuming the positive values of one culture while rejecting its religious elements. Besides, this would be theologically contrary to our positive judgement on the world religions. Certainly, the newness of the Gospel can be in conflict with the elements of a religious tradition which do not favour obedience towards God. But this religious tradition might also be the carrier of an irreducible religious element which must not necessarily be abolished but rather metamorphosed by the Spirit of Christ.

It is thus extremely difficult to establish a rigorous distinction between the cultural elements which may be subsumed and the religious elements which should be rejected. The whole question may be summarised in this way: is it the Gospel itself which is rejected, or is it rather the cultural and religious vehicle that is completely out of touch with those men and women to whom the Gospel is announced? Faced with the challenge of different cultures and religions, the Church can only be faithful to the universality of the Gospel by accepting to undergo a process of conversion itself and by discerning between the fundamental elements of its message and those more contingent elements linked to the culture with which the Gospel has been associated. The fact that for twenty centuries the privileged figure of Christianity has been Western does not say anything about the development of other figures of Christianity in the third millennium. It would be trite to assert that there is no problem in being a Christian and at the same time belonging to a particular culture. A person can be fully Christian and fully Chinese at the same time. The question is now raised for the future: to which extent is it possible to imagine a double religious affiliation in the sense of a real Christian identity which would subsume the positive values of one of the great religious traditions?

The Gospel will manifest its universality when it is effectively a word of salvation for all human beings, regardless of their cultural or religious membership. But the mission of the Church must nonetheless move in the direction of a certain evangelisation of cultures and societies. It does not pretend to propose an alternate model that should make the earth more habitable and the human community more convivial. But, as I have said previously, the Gospel may play the role of a counter-culture with regard to a certain dehumanisation of human beings or the role of a watch-dog with regard to the rank injustice of those societies which function under the banner of profit and sacrifice social justice to economic considerations. The Gospel bears witness to a hope that goes beyond the limits of history, but it also bears an historical responsibility for the face of this world. Concretely, this means that the Church can not justify its pretension to universality unless it espouses the universal causes of contemporary humanity: the fight for justice, the defence and promotion of human rights, the protection of the environment, the respect of life, the preferential option for the underprivileged.

The Church is not only the sacrament of the Kingdom to come. Already in this world, it is a "sacrament, that is, a sign and an instrument of the unity of all mankind" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 1). In this age of globalisation, the Gospel can not be faithful to its global vocation unless the Church provides a model for the unity of the human family. The Church must promote the institution of a type of unity that leaves space for a plurality of cultures and anthropological models. This is the only way of escaping a two-fold danger: on the one hand, that of standardised universality and on the other hand, that of a dispersive explosion worthy of Babel. The Church of Pentecost that proclaims the wonders of God in the diversity of cultures and languages might provide the model for this humanity of tomorrow.

(See also : [\*For a Theology of Difference. Identity, otherness, dialogue\*, by Claude Geffré](#))