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Jesus Christ as a Stumbling Block in Interreligious Dialogue?

“Dialogue in Christianity” – the title of this section of the present volume – is somewhat ambiguous. It can mean “*interreligious* dialogue as practiced by Christians”. But it also can mean: “*intra-Christian* dialogue on interreligious encounter”. Such an understanding leads us towards what is called the ‘theology of religions’.

‘Theology of religions’ is an intra-Christian endeavour addressing theoretical conditions required for the possibility of interreligious dialogue. It explores the Christian self-understanding vis-à-vis other religious traditions and reflects on the transformations of that self-understanding as a result of the encounter. Thus it goes hand in hand with the practice of interreligious dialogue and is as controversial within Christianity as the project of interreligious dialogue itself.

Interreligious encounters are not exclusively and probably not even primarily regulated by the *theological* mind-set of the Christian dialogue-partner. *Psychological, social* and *cultural* conditions are at least equally important factors which shape the motivations and expectations, the view of one’s own and of the other’s religiosity and the style of communication. But the way the dialogue-partners approach and understand the contents and the truth-claims of their faith-traditions also influences their attitudes towards the religious other.

In the following considerations on Christology and on the understanding of ‘truth’ in the Christian faith, I will suggest interpretations which, while intended to be fully in accordance with main strands of the theological tradition, lay the foundations for a sincere encounter with adherents of other faith-traditions.

1. Christology and Interreligious Dialogue

At the theological level it matters a lot if – for example – the Christian understands Jesus Christ primarily as the universal Logos of God, which “was in the beginning with God” (John 1:1) and which “was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John 1:9) or if he/she focusses on Paul’s proclamation of the “word of the cross and the resurrection” as decisive for the justification of the believers. A Christology which derives from a Johannine universalism will likely pave the way for interreligious dialogue more effectively than a Christology which proceeds from the Pauline ‘staurocentrism’ (centrality of the cross). That may explain why Protestants with their emphasis on the theology of the apostle of Paul tend to be more hesitant to dispose their faith in mutual openness to believers of other faith-traditions.

To be prepared for such a dialogical openness not only requires openheartedness at a psychological level, but also a theological mind-set which supports

(or at least does not suppress) such an attitude. In most cases that mind-set is not brought into conscious awareness in terms of an elaborated theological system. It functions more implicitly than explicitly. Nevertheless it shapes a persons' attitude towards adherents of other religious traditions.

That applies to both branches of Christology: the interpretation of the *person* of Jesus Christ ("who was/is he?") and the determination of his *soteriological relevance* ("what did he do in favour of humankind?"). The first question traditionally was answered by the doctrine of the 'two natures' of Jesus Christ, the second question by the doctrine of his 'three offices'.

The doctrine of the 'three offices' can be illustrated by referring to different christological-soteriological approaches: When the Enlightenment writer Gotthold Ephraim Lessing understands Jesus as a teacher of humanism, his 'Jesulogy' is focused on the proclamation of Jesus as it is reported in the Gospels, which means on the '*prophetic* office'. When secondly the theologians of a 'Protestant orthodoxy' – following the biblical Epistle to the Hebrews – stress the significance of Jesus' self-sacrifice on the cross for the redemption of humanity, they claim the '*priestly* office' to be central. And when, thirdly, Eastern ('Orthodox') and Indian Christians worship Christ as the ruler over the whole cosmos – drawing on the 'cosmic Christology' of the biblical Epistles to the Colossians and the Ephesians – they emphasise the '*kingly* office'.

The three 'offices' must never be entirely separated, but every interpretation of the soteriological relevance of Jesus Christ tends to approach one vertex of the triangle and be at greater distance from the others. This way of 'locating' soteriology can have an impact of the believer's attitude towards non-Christians. Each preference nurtures a specific disposition towards interreligious encounter. Stressing the *proclamation* of Jesus which is centred on the reign of God as a reign of justice and grace tends to lead into a dialogue with other theistic and even non-theistic religions on ethical questions. Stressing the salvific *sacrifice* of Jesus as vicarious atonement, on the other hand, may prepare for a dialogue on the question of redemption, but will produce a more mission-oriented communication intending to proclaim the good news of the salvation in Jesus Christ alone. Stressing the cosmic *rule* of the exalted Christ can lead to a dialogue on eschatological issues and inviting adherents of other faiths to be partners on the pilgrimage to that (common?) end of history.

Obviously it is not possible or useful to correlate a dialogical attitude unilaterally to specific christological-soteriological concepts while assuming that others lead into apologetic or missionary patterns of communication. However, those concepts can display tendencies towards one or the other direction. They can influence the agenda of an interreligious encounter inasmuch as they determine the thinking and the behaviour of the Christian partner.

I will now turn to the interpretation of the *person* of Jesus Christ and its consequences for interreligious encounters. In this part of my contribution, I will discuss the question whether claiming Jesus Christ to be 'vere Deus' – as the doctrine of the 'two natures' of Jesus Christ teaches – will make an inter-

religious encounter impossible or turn it into a one-way communication aimed at proclaiming this divine truth and converting the dialogue partner. Does the designation of Jesus Christ as “true God” necessarily entail an exclusivist attitude toward non-Christian religions?

Through these reflections, I hope to build a bridge for a theological dialogue between the adherents of different religious traditions. As far as I can see there is something like a structural analogy between all religions which refer to a transcendent reality manifesting in the world. They all focus in different ways on the mediation between two levels of reality: divine and human, supernatural and natural, eternal and historical. In the central symbols of mediations, the two ‘natures’ approach closely without mingling.

- According to Islamic understanding, the written Qur'an is a copy of the heavenly Qur'an. Thus the Divine has appeared in history, the revelation used historic means, had historical occasions and requires historical explanation and application. Of course, most Muslims are not inclined to regard the written Qur'an as historic in origin and thus in nature, but it mediates between God and humanity.
- According to Mahayana Buddhism the ‘Nirmana-kaya’ (transformation body) is the manifestation of the ‘Dharma-kaya’ (body of enlightenment). Some scholars of Buddhism take this as an analogy to the concept of ‘incarnation’¹ which expresses the in-historisation of the divine word. I will leave open the question whether it is possible not only to speak of a ‘revelation’ but of an ‘incarnation’ of dharma in Buddhism. This would certainly be an analogical mode of speaking. However, a kind of mediation of the dharma into history is obviously assumed at least in Mahayana Buddhism. Another way of applying the doctrine of the two natures analogously refers to the teaching that the Buddha-nature impersonates itself in humans.

According to Christian theology the ‘logos asarkos’ (the universal divine nature of Christ) is incarnated in human nature as the ‘logos ensarkos’ (the human logos). The question how to understand the relation between the two ‘natures’ is crucial for Christology, for theology in general, and as a consequence also for theology of religions. Even within Protestantism the ways of relating the Divine and the human nature differ. While the Lutheran tradition emphasises that the logos *has become* a human being, the reformed tradition claims that in Jesus Christ the logos performed an “*assumption* of the flesh”. As a consequence, Lutheran theology focused more clearly on Jesus Christ as the one and only self-mediation of God, while reformed theologians like Zwingli were open to thinking that God could have manifested his spirit outside the revelation in Christ, for example in Greek philosophers.

1 Schmidt-Leukel, P. (2009) *Transformation by Integration. How Inter-faith Encounter changes Christianity* London: SCM, 124 ff.

If God's *logos* has become flesh in the person of Jesus Christ alone – if the title “*vere Deus*” can be applied uniquely to him – then there can be no salvific relation to the Divine which is *not* mediated through him. It should follow that the religion which bears his name and mediates this unique relationship between the Divine and the human is the *true* religion. Does not such a truth-claim inevitably devalue the truth-claims put forth by other faith traditions?

John Hick has spelled out the problem clearly: “If Jesus was literally God incarnate, and if it is by his death alone that men can be saved, and by their response to him alone that they can appropriate that salvation, then the only doorway to eternal life is the Christian faith. It would follow from this that the large majority of the human race so far have not been saved. But is it credible that the loving God and Father of all men has decreed that only those who have been born within one particular thread of human history shall be saved?”²

I will here seek to explore a way of christological thinking that does not inevitably lead to such a christocentric soteriological exclusivism.

2. Two Natures as Two Relations – Revelation as Representation

My first suggestion is to understand Christ's twofold nature not in an essentialist manner, but as two relations. Thus it is not to be understood as an ontological co-existence of two incompatible forms of being: the being of God on the one hand and the being of the human on the other. It makes more sense to understand ‘*vere Deus*’ as the recognition of the intensity which permeated Jesus' relation with God, the intensity of relationship that binds him with God. A relational interpretation of the ‘*vere Deus*’ allows us to stress not only the unity, but also the difference between the divine and the human nature, between the human being and God. Jesus distinguished himself clearly from God, as is apparent in a number of New Testament passages. He was clearly most conscious of his one-ness with God, but at the same time he rejected any attempts to assign divine titles to him. Rather, he repeatedly directed attention away from himself and towards the Father, to whom alone all honour and glory are due (John 8:50). This polarity between oneness and differentness corresponds to a distinction which is significant for the theology of religions: the distinction between God as the Revealer and the self-communication of God (the revelation).

In fully realizing this distinction, in fully acknowledging that the God “who dwells in unapproachable light” (I Tim 6:16) remains an unfathomable mystery *even in his revelation*, it becomes possible to believe, and to expect, that God has revealed himself in other historical instances and experiences as well. God's revelation in Christ does not exhaust *God's* being – which is inexhaustible. Jesus Christ ‘reflects’ and presents – *represents* – God. In this way, a salvific relation

2 Hick, J. (1977) *The Myth of God Incarnate* Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 180.

to God becomes possible for his adherents in the encounter with Christ, but that does not mean that there can be no *self-presentation*, no *self-representation* of God *extra Christum* (beyond Christ). Just as a *human* being's 'self-revelations' cannot exhaust the mystery of his person, so too *God's* own self-revelation in Christ does not exhaust his *being*. This enduring difference between the revealer and the revelation was already recognised by Thomas Aquinas: "Though the divine nature in the Person of the Son was wholly united with the Son's human nature, nevertheless this could not encompass, could not incorporate, as it were, the entirety of the power of the Divinity."³

Thus my second suggestion is to take the idea of 'representation' as Christology's central concept. In acknowledging that the being of God is inexhaustible and thus transcends any and all revelations, we can assume that God might also engage symbolic appearances of other religions to represent his presence. In acknowledging this, a powerful theological motivation for an open encounter with the followers of other faith-forms emerges. Indeed, it may well turn out that God's call will be heard precisely from 'over there' – from 'foreign parts', as it were.

I dare not say that there are divine revelations equal in value to the revelation in Christ. Like adherents of other faith traditions, Christians cannot take up an epistemological stand- und viewpoint that would allow them to make such a statement. The biblical testimony is wholly centred on Christ. For Christians, phenomena of other religious traditions can be seen as rays of the divine light which – according to the Christian faith – shines in Christ only in the 'Christ-perspective'. But if Christ does indeed embody the universal 'Word', the *logos* of creation and salvation, it then follows that this 'Word', expressing and representing God's mighty presence, extends *beyond* the Christian tradition.

I am hesitant to address the non-Christian religions as 'ways to salvation'. From what perspective could one make such a judgement? This would require adopting the absolutist perspective of an omniscient observer. The same applies for the claim that Christianity alone is the way to salvation. Just as it is an irresponsible, almost ideological, generalisation to describe Christianity as the only true religion, so it is an equally nonsensical prejudice, because it is so utterly abstract, simply to regard all religions side by side as ways to salvation.

By contrast, it seems meaningful and justified to me to suppose that God could find ways to human beings and human beings could find ways to God in each of the great religions, ways which transform and transcend and save their lives. It makes a considerable difference whether we say that the religions are ways to salvation or that there are ways to salvation *in* the religions. The latter statement takes account of the fact that religions also encompass disastrous paths. It also takes the limitations of our perspectives seriously. As an empirical judgement, it holds only "as far as we can see". And thirdly, this judgement is hypothetical. It has to demonstrate its truth in the encounter with concrete

3 STh III, 10, 1, ad. 2.

religious phenomena. The assumption that there can be ways to salvation *in* the religions is not meant to be a theological judgement but a theological proviso which reminds the consciousness of the Christian that God's ways for his creation are ultimately unfathomable. This does not call the unique Christian path to God into question, merely the claim that it is the only way.

Let us now return to the theological interpretation of Jesus Christ. The idea of representation seems to me to be particularly suited as the key concept of a Christology which holds fast to the divinity of Christ while not limiting divine revelation to Christ alone. It allows us to understand and speak of Jesus Christ in a personal and relational mode, both as the representative of God amid human beings and as the representative of authentic humanity. No claim to exclusivity is inherent in this. A Christology which develops out of this concept of representation might indeed bring about the kind of theologically grounded openness which would, in dialogue, open the way for the work of defining and configuring a relationship to other religions.

I am using the term 'representation' in the sense of 'making present': Jesus made present the Presence of God. He embodied this presence so intensely that he was called the 'image of the invisible God' (Col 1:15; cf. II Cor 4:4). Because Jesus was 'inhabited' by God, suffused with God's Spirit, he embodied 'God-presence' and conveyed it to those who became his followers. As a person who lived – utterly and totally – through the relationship with God, he personified authentically human being: wholly open for and receptive to the God who is the ground of Creation.

In this light then, representation means more than serving as the 'delegate' for another, more than acting and speaking in the name of one who is himself absent. No, precisely in representation we find the expression of that which the concept of revelation is meant to express: that is, not a communication from a God who himself is not present, but on the contrary, the mode of and vehicle of his presence, of his effective *Being-Here*.⁴

The concept of representation has a number of advantages:

(a) In contrast to the long-standing tendency to emphasise the divine nature of Christ while underplaying the human nature, the representational model allows a conception of the personhood of Jesus in which we can recognise both relationships equally.

(b) Whereas the classical 'dual-nature' Christology has emphatically stressed the idea of 'union' of the two natures, the representational model allows us to envision a union in differentness.

(c) The model of participation of being, as formulated in Chalcedon, allows virtually no room for anything other than an exclusivist Christology – that is: God's Word, equal in nature to God himself, has in Christ (and only in Christ) become united with human nature. In contrast, the representational

4 On the concept of *representation* see: Schaede, S. (2004) *Stellvertretung: Begriffsgeschichtliche Studien zur Soteriologie* Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 171–238.

model, makes room for the distinction between that which is represented and the “event” of representation – in other words, between the symbolised content and the act of symbolisation, – we could say: between the Christ-content and the Christ-event.

Now what is it that is ‘represented’ in Jesus Christ? As I understand the New Testament testimony, this ‘what’ is God’s all-embracing and unconditional grace and attentiveness. Wolfgang Pfüller defines the Christ-content as “limitless, self-offering love in radically trusting confidence in God and in the coming of God’s kingdom”⁵; Hans Kessler understands the Christ-content as “true human being – human being entirely in accord with God’s being”.⁶ This Christ-content becomes real in the Christ-event, but is not restricted to it; rather, it exists before the event, drawing it onward, and extends beyond it. The event ‘represents’ the communion between God and the human being which God has initiated and thereby makes it available.

The Christ-content is universal and extends beyond the Christ-event. Were it to be linked exclusively to the Christ-event, it would forfeit its universal significance. The historical representation in Jesus points to a reality which precedes the particular representation – while still being genuinely revealed in and by it.

With his well-known expression, “Jesus is the Christ, but Christ is not (only) Jesus”⁷, Raimon Panikkar wants to distinguish the transhistorical reality of the cosmic Christ from the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth *without* cutting them off from each other.⁸ The ‘Christ-reality’ is to be de-historicised, as it were, no longer tied exclusively to a single historical instance. For Panikkar, this is not to “deny its historical facticity, but simply to no longer make its particular historicity equal to its reality”.⁹ Reality is ‘more’ than a series of events in history, and Christ-reality extends beyond the Christ-event. According to Panikkar, only in distinguishing them can we do justice to the universal dimension of ‘Christ’. The universal dimension must be realised ever anew – in other words, it must become an ‘event’ once more: over and over again, in the most varied cultural and religious contexts, once again releasing its life-transforming

5 Pfüller, W. (2001) *Die Bedeutung Jesu im interreligiösen Horizont: Überlegungen zu einer religiösen Theorie in christlicher Perspektive* [Theologie 41] Münster: Lit, 208.

6 Kessler, H. (1995) Christologie. In: T. Schneider (Ed.) *Handbuch der Dogmatik* Düsseldorf: Patmos, vol. I, 392 ff.

7 Panikkar, R. (1981) *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany* Bangalore.

8 For further discussion of this see also: von Sinner, R. (2003) *Reden vom dreieinigen Gott in Brasilien und Indien. Grundzüge einer ökumenischen Hermeneutik im Dialog mit Leonardo Boff und Raimon Panikkar* Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 302 ff.; Valluvassery, C. (2001) *Christus im Kontext und Kontext in Christus. Chalcedon und indische Christologie bei Raimon Panikkar und Samuel Rayan* Münster et al.: Lit, 142 ff.; Nitsche, B. (2008) *Gott – Welt – Mensch. Raimon Panikkars Gottesdenken – Paradigma für eine Theologie in interreligiöser Perspektive* Zürich: TVZ, 379–483, esp. 401 ff.

9 Panikkar, R. (1993) *Trinität. Über das Zentrum menschlicher Erfahrung* München: Kösel, 13.

power. Historical concreteness and universality by no means exclude each other; rather, they condition one another. The representational Christology which I prefer unites the Christ-reality with the Christ-event, but does not limit the former to the latter. That approach allows us to retain the truth claim inherent in the Christian Creed while not necessarily entailing the automatic rejection of the truth claims made by other religions.

The question of mediating the dimensions of the Divine and of the human could be an interesting topic for interreligious dialogue. Is there an assumed difference between the *content* of revelation and the *event* or historical *medium* in which the Divine is manifested or manifesting not only in the Christian faith, but also in other spiritual traditions? If the Divine is assumed to be wholly and totally present in the religious medium, what does that mean for assessing the truth-claims of other faith traditions for which this medium is not the normative core of the manifestation of the Divine?

3. Truth-Claims of the Christian Faith

The distinction which I propose to make between the *content*, the *event*, and the historical *medium* of revelation has consequences for the understanding of religious truth claims, for claiming the truth of one own religious tenets and for relating it to truth claims of other religious traditions. With the following reflections, we turn from Christology as an issue of material dogmatics to the question of religious truth claims which is located at the more fundamental level of philosophical prolegomena of a theology of religions.

What does 'truth' mean in the Christian faith?

The certainty faith gives is not knowledge about facts of salvation that can be formulated as objective statements or dogma. Rather, it is existential trust in God as mediated by Jesus Christ and empowered by the Spirit of God. Understood that way, the truth of the Christian faith has nothing to do with religious imperialism. It has nothing to do with a sense of superiority which denies the truth of other certainties. It is a certainty, instead, which is existential. And an existential certainty exists in and with the people who live in it. It is not 'ab-solute', which means 'separated' from its bearer. It can never claim to be an *exclusive* expression of the one universal truth.

This (biblical) understanding of truth has enormous implications for the encounter with adherents of other Christian confessions, of other religions, or with people holding a non-religious view of the world. If Christians remain conscious that they do not simply possess the truth of God, but point to it as to a mystery which has been revealed – but revealed as a mystery – they will not restrict this truth to the media of their religion. They are entitled to believe in that truth as an authentic and fully salvific self-representation of God. But they have come to understand and formulate it through the specific route of their tradition and their history, and the sources from which they know this tradition

and history. They cannot therefore claim those media to be the immediate truth of God.

It is precisely this difference between God's truth, which is too high for the believers to ever attain, and their sense of certainty of truth which is a reaching-out towards God's truth, which can open their minds for other religions' perspectives. The certainty of truth to which the believers refer does not have its basis or centre in itself, but points to something beyond and in this sense makes itself relative. This certainty is an expression of a truth which "passeth all understanding" (Php 4:7) and that includes all *religious* understanding. It is higher than any religious consciousness or religious practice. It includes the religious Other. According to Christian understanding, Muslims are also made in the image of God, just as in Islamic understanding, Christians carry a genuine revelation of God.

An understanding of the truth-claims of the Christian faith as personal and existential witnesses to the divine truth which exceeds religious understanding enables Christians to allow space for other certainties of the truth beside theirs. As personal truths about faith, love and hope, they can never be absolute, though for those who confess them they are unconditionally valid. These truths are bound to the persons, or the fellowships, of those who believe, love and hope, and thus even within the same religious tradition can be lived out in more or less different ways. With this consciousness, we can arrive at a fundamental acknowledgement of the different certainties there are in faith. And thus we act not simply out of an Enlightenment requirement to be tolerant. Our attitude grows from the insight formulated here about the nature of religious certainty.

Openness to dialogue requires a calm confidence in the foundations of one's own certainty of the truth, which also acknowledges how religious truth as personal certainty is, in the final analysis, always relative. Only a person who rests calmly in the truth they have understood and experienced can risk emptying themselves in order to understand the persons they are encountering in terms of the ground of the *other's* being. If there is uncertainty in faith, if there is fear of losing one's own grasp of the truth, or if there is a lack of trust in the truth of God which always lies beyond us, then a need to secure one's own religious identity through setting limits on contact can develop. Therefore, strengthening one's own certainty in faith is a prerequisite for openness to adherents of other faiths.

An open encounter between different certainties of religious truth includes the possibility that the certainties one takes into the encounter will be seriously questioned and could indeed be changed and expanded. The tradition held by others may come to appear in a new light, but so may one's own. This experience can be challenging, even perturbing, but it can also give the horizons of one's own faith and one's reflections on it a breadth and depth they did not have before.

I draw some conclusions from this understanding of the truth claims of the Christian faith.

1. The claim to *exclusiveness*, to being the sole truth, holds *within* this faith. It is part of the unconditional certainty about the truth for Christians. But as such, it remains related to faith and the confessional expressions of faith. That means that to say “Christ alone (*solus Christus*) is the way to God”, “no man cometh unto the Father, but by him” (Joh 14:6) is to say something about the Christian’s confession of Christ. It is not to state a universal abstract truth ‘about’, but a personal testimony ‘to’. True as it is that God’s self-event in Jesus Christ holds good not only for Christians, but for all men and women, it is also true that only to Christians does the fullness of the Spirit of God disclose itself solely in Christ. Of course this avenue is potentially open to all men and women, but those who do not take it need not necessarily be on the wrong path.
2. The claims to *universality* and *finality* are not to be related to the reality of Christianity as a religion within history, including the teaching of Jesus Christ. In them, attention is drawn to the eschatological dimension of God’s revelation. They are and remain promise. Referring to Joachim Jeremias, Joseph Ratzinger points out that “in Jesus’ own message universalism is ... pure promise, as in the Old Testament”.¹⁰ Theo Sundermeier points out that in Paul, universalism belongs in the doxologies.¹¹ We are still on the way to a comprehensive realisation of the reality of God; it is provisionally given to us only as a hope, a pledge.

Understood this way, the claim to universality and finality, and even the claim to exclusiveness, can be retained as an expression of the Christian certainty of faith without lapsing into an absolutist attitude. It then contributes to expressing the proprium of the Christian faith without the need to repudiate the particular features of other forms of faith.

The Christian claim to absoluteness has its real place not in dialogue, but in praise of God, in doxology. Believers can and may speak in the superlatives of devotion in praise of the majesty of the Creator, his creative and reconciling presence in the human world and his promise of a new heaven and a new earth. Language must go to its limits – and sometimes even beyond – in order to hint at the ineffable.

However, this terminology must not be confused with the factual language of the intellect which is used to describe or explain reality as it is. This is not the cool prose of reason, but the passionate poetry of the heart. It is not a report, but devotional language, an expression of the absoluteness of God. For that is all that the ‘claim to absoluteness’ can mean: that we do not claim absoluteness

10 Ratzinger, J. (1967) Das Problem der Absolutheit des christlichen Heilsweges. In: W. Böld (Ed.) *Kirche in der außerchristlichen Welt* Regensburg: Pustet, 26 f.

11 Sundermeier, T. (1991) Evangelisation und die “Wahrheit der Religionen”. In: R. Bernhardt (Ed.) *Horizontüberschreitung. Die Pluralistische Theologie der Religionen* Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 184.

for our faith, but rather that the Absolute – God himself – lays claim to us as to his whole creation.

4. Epilogue

The preceding reflections on the understanding of Jesus Christ and on religious truth claims are not to be understood as an adaption (or even submission) to the assumed needs of an interreligious dialogue. I have merely been pursuing the question what kind of Christological approaches and which understanding of the truth of the Christian faith could be compatible with such an endeavour. Obviously, there are forms of Christology and concepts of truth which would not permit this – such as, for example, the substance-centred view of the Incarnation which sees Jesus Christ as literally embodying the hypostatic union of the divine with the human physis. This approach ends in a theological exclusivism; that means in understanding the truth of Christian faith in terms of exclusive epistemological and soteriological truth claims.

Interreligious relationships characterised by mutual respect and esteem find their foundation primarily not in *theological* motives, but in motives reflecting the *pragmatic* interests of coexistence. Afterwards, the task of theological reflection is to test whether and to what extent this position is ‘thinkable’, i.e. whether and to what extent it can be exegetically and systematic-theologically backed up. We then may have an answer to questions which confront the thoughtful believer: questions which arise out of our new situation in which perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations of cultural and interreligious ‘givens’ are undergoing change.

This is a theological reflection upon religious efforts to explore ways of thinking which will adequately take into account changing demands and requirements and yet will not abandon the normative content of the Christian tradition. In order to approach a theological conception of dialogical relationships towards other religions, it is not necessary to develop a speculative ‘bird’s-eye view’ theory. Within the Christian tradition, there is enough potential for creating such a conception. Pope Benedict XVI rightly asked: “Must we really invent a theory as to how God can make salvation available without demolishing the whole edifice of Christ’s uniqueness? Isn’t it perhaps more important to grasp this uniqueness from the *inside*, as it were, so as to become conscious of the breadth and scope of its radiance – without having to define each and every point individually?”¹² Theology of religions is an undertaking which “doesn’t have to make a judgement here and now concerning the eternity-value of the religions – that is a burdensome question which can actually be answered only by the World-Judge”¹³. Theology of religions does, then, not start from the question

12 Benedikt XVI. (2005) *Glaube – Wahrheit – Toleranz* Freiburg/Br. et al.: Herder, 44, translation from German.

13 Ibid., 16.

of “the truth” in the religions in general, but rather with the truth-convictions of the Christian faith.

By taking these certainties of truth as a starting-point, theology of religions would be able to show how a spirit of openness towards adherents of other faiths becomes theologically possible – openness in delineating and clarifying, shaping and developing the relationships among the religions. Specifically, this openness occurs when we truly comprehend the ‘opening’ made by God in the first place: theologically, this opening is called ‘revelation’. It consists in the expectation that occurrences of God’s grace are also to be found in non-Christian understandings of human relationship to God.