

Jesus Christ as 'vere Deus' as a challenge for interreligious dialogue

The article explores a line of Christological argumentation which sets out the notion of Christ's divinity in a way which does not end up with an exclusivist attitude towards other religions. I regard the Chalcedonian 'vere Deus' not as an ontological attribute but as the denotation of a profound relationship with God. 'Relationship' means unity and difference in one. That unity-in-difference between Christ and God is mirrored by the unity-in-difference between the divine content of the Christ-revelation and the historical Christ-event. God's universal unconditional love which Jesus preached and presented cannot be restricted to the particular historical event in which it was presented. If it were, then the reference to that specific event would become a condition for the participation in that love—which ends up in a contradiction.

In order to avoid that consequence, Christ can and should be seen as 'representative of God'. The term 'representation' appears to be the apt conceptual model for conveying Christ's theological relevance in a non-exclusive way, for it allows us to distinguish between: the 'content' which is represented; the 'event' of representation; and the 'medium' of the representation. That distinction opens up the possibility of acknowledging representations of God's salvific power which are not mediated by Jesus of Nazareth.

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? (Hick 1977: 180.)

With these words John Hick poses the question as to whether Christianity's insistence on the absolute uniqueness of the revelation of divine salvation through and in Jesus Christ leads inescapably and necessarily to soteriological exclusivism—an exclusivism whereby any effective salvational significance of other religions is denied. If Christ is 'the only' or 'the only begotten' (*monogenaes*) Son of God (John 1:14, 3:16, 18); if the *Logos* becomes flesh in him alone; if the title *vere Deus* ('true God') 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 then that the religion which bears his name and reveals and mediates this unique relationship between the Divine and the human is the only true religion. Does not such an unequivocal truth-claim inevitably result in a downgrading of the truth-claims put forth by other faith-traditions?

In this paper, I want to explore the possibility of Christological approaches and conceptions which do not inevitably lead to such a devaluation.

In the New Testament as well as in Christianity's theological history and devotional records, we find Christological and/or soteriological declarations which have indeed been taken as justifications of exclusivism. The most prominent example is John 14:6, where Christ says: 'I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.' Or the words spoken by Cyprian of Carthage: 'There is no salvation outside the church.' How are we to approach these? Can one faithfully adhere to and embrace these statements *without* necessarily and implicitly affirming an exclusivist devaluation of other religions? Some theologians have attempted to do just this, by taking a linguistic-analytical approach to such statements—Paul Knitter, for example, who attempts to deactivate the exclusivism latent in these statements by comparing them to the enthusiastic

language of lovers, which also employs superlative and 'exclusivistic' figures of speech (Knitter 1985: 182–6). This is *not* what I will be proposing. Nor will I advocate a 'contextual' interpretation of these speech forms, whereby they could be understood as reactions to a hostile and threatening environment in which early Christianity found itself. Rather, I will discuss this question from a systematic-theological perspective, and explore ways of professing one's faith in the divinity of Jesus—ways which are *not* driven by internal necessity into a religious-theological exclusivism.

In practical terms then, I will not be working here on the plane of interreligious dialogue, nor will I take up the issues of theology of religions. Rather, I will be moving within the field of Christian dogmatics. The orientational markers set in place there will determine whether and how other religions can be viewed and evaluated *theologically*. Besides all the other—sociological, philosophical, political, ethical a.s.f.—reflections on the issues related with interreligious dialogue, for adherents of the Christian faith *theological* clarifications are necessary. It needs to be shown that a dialogic attitude towards other religions does not relativize the commitment to one's own faith. In trying to do that I would like to work out the *theological* condition for the possibility of interreligious dialogue.

Interpreting Christ's twofold nature

The crucial issue in the debate on the theology of religions is the concept of Jesus Christ—his person and his relevance. Considerations concerning the *person* of Christ have traditionally focussed on the doctrine of Christ's twofold nature, as defined at the Council of Chalcedon 451 AD. If the dogma is to be understood as the proclamation of the essential divinity of Jesus Christ, then he must be regarded as the one and only mediator between God and humanity.

But the doctrine of the two natures must not be interpreted as if it refers to an ontological co-existence of two incompatible substances: human and divine; respectively two forms of being: the being of God on the one hand and the being of the human on the other. Given the categories and framework of modern thought, such an interpretation could hardly be plausible. (Indeed, even in earlier ages this interpretation had ended in aporia, time after time.)

It makes more sense to understand the 'natures' in terms of relations. *Vere Deus* then means the recognition of and attestation to the matchless intensity

which permeated Jesus's relation with God. To speak of the divinity of Jesus would refer then not to a sort of essence of his person, but to the intensity of relationship that binds him with God.

An ontological-*relational* interpretation of the divine 'nature' of Christ also takes into account the *differentness* which marks his position *vis-à-vis* God. Every relationship is characterized by the polarity of union and distinctness—and that also applies to the relationship between Jesus and God. Jesus' own self-differentiation from God is unmistakably apparent in any number of New Testament passages. Jesus is most conscious of his *one-ness* with the heavenly Father—and yet he rejects any attempts to assign a titular ranking to himself which is equivalent to the Father's. Rather, he repeatedly directs attention *away* from himself and *towards* the Father, to whom alone all honour and glory are due (John 8:50). In John 14:28 Christ is reported to say: 'my Father is greater than I'. The contemporary German theologian Medard Kehl noted in this regard:

In contrast to Adam—the model of the sinning human being—Jesus does not give in to the temptation of wanting to be like God. Regardless of how deep his *at-one-ness* is, he never blurs the distinction between himself, the Father, and the Spirit that the Father bestows. In this very same Holy Spirit the Son always remains at the same time the Servant of God. As such, what he does and what he proclaims are simply the fulfillment of the mission which the Father had designated for him (see, e.g., John 7:16–18). (Kehl 2006: 242.)

The oneness with God makes Jesus the (personal) revelation of God. The differentness leads to a distinction between the reality of God (the Revealer) and the God's self-communication (the Revelation). In fully realizing this distinction, in fully acknowledging that the God 'who dwells in unapproachable light' (1 Tim 6:16) remains an unfathomable mystery *even in his Revelation*, it then becomes possible to believe, and to expect, that God has revealed himself in other historical instances and experiences as well. His revelation in Christ is without doubt both authentic and normative for believing Christians; at the same time however it does not exhaust God's being—which is inexhaustible. Christ reveals God's being, his unconditional love, fully (*totus*), but not completely (*non totum*).

If the entirety of God's being—*all* that God is—

had become human, a human being—then we would have to speak of God's *transformation* into Jesus Christ. And precisely *that* was explicitly rejected already by the Chalcedonian formula: 'unchanged, untransformed'. The term *homoousios* expresses a *similarity* of nature or being; it does not express sameness or identicalness in the sense of an identity of *substance*. Jesus Christ can be said to have a fully divine nature inasmuch as he 'reflects' and presents—*represents*—God. In this way, a trustworthy and credible knowledge of God becomes possible in the encounter with Christ. To say that, however, is not to say that *extra Christum* (beyond Christ) there can be no *self-presentation*, no *self-representation* of God.

The idea of the utter inexhaustibility of the mystery of God has been particularly stressed in the theology of the Reformed churches, whereas in Lutheran theology this point has received less emphasis. Reformed theology does not juxtapose God's hiddenness (or mysteriousness) over and against God's revelation. Instead, Reformed theology links revelation and hiddenness—God's knowability and his unknowability, the 'Known' of God and the 'Unknown' of God—dialectically! In his revelation God does not somehow 'cancel out' his mystery, but rather reveals himself as mystery. Revelation does not eliminate the hiddenness but rather reveals the hiddenness as hidden, and makes the divine inaccessibility in its impenetrable mysteriousness manifest.¹ Revelation does not offer the kind of knowledge which uncovers—as in the sense of the Greek concept of *aletheia*—but offers rather a knowledge which discovers—it offers the discovery of unfathomable, impenetrable being, in its everlasting concealment. 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. The Logos represented in Jesus is not God *an sich*—God in Godself—but rather, it is God's self-communication. And even where the Logos *ensarkos* enters history, he remains nevertheless the Logos *asarkos*. This enduring difference, grasped in the so-called extra-Calvinisticum, had already been perceived 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' (STh III, 10, 1, ad. 2).

1 Cf. Norbert Bolz's lapidary statement following Blaise Pascal: 'Christ is the appearance of God's hiddenness' (Bolz 1986: 33). See also Jüngel 2001.

In acknowledging that the being of God is inexhaustible and thus transcends any and all revelations, we come face to face with the hypothesis (*sic*), 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 is brought forth. Indeed, it may well turn out that *precisely* from 'over there'—from 'foreign religious territories', as it were—God's call will be heard.

Please note that this is *not* to say that there are a great number of divine revelations equal in value to the revelation in Christ. We cannot take up an epistemological stand- and viewpoint which would allow us to make such a statement. In the Christian faith, the epistemological groundwork is constituted in the biblical texts which theological history and the church-tradition have handed down to us—and these are wholly centered on Christ. Yet 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 sphere of the 'Wirkungsgeschichte' of the gospel of Jesus Christ and will also take on other forms beyond the symbol-system of Christianity.

The Spanish Dominican, Melchior Cano, who lived from 1509 to 1560, is considered the founder of Catholic fundamental theology. With regard to the epistemological foundations of theology, he distinguished between *loci proprii* (such as scripture, tradition, and the Magisterium) and *loci alieni* (for example, philosophy and history).² Peter Hünemann took this up and put it to use in the theology of religions. He thus grouped 'the religions' together with philosophy, the sciences, history, and so forth, under the rubric of *loci alieni* (Hünemann 2003: 224 f.). Now among the religions he highlighted Islam and Judaism as monotheistic forms of divine worship. These two form a bridge, as it were, 'between *loci proprii* and *loci alieni*, between interreligious issues and ecumenical issues' (Hünemann 2003: 236). He then described Judaism 'as *locus theologicus* "semi-pro-

2 For more, see Körner 1994, and also the research project conducted by Elmar Klinger and Thomas Franz: 'Melchior Cano – De locis theologicis. Textkritische Edition des lateinischen Textes und deutsche Übersetzung'. See http://www.theologie.uni-wuerzburg.de/institutelehrstuehle/emeriti/prof_em_dr_elmar_klinger/dfg_projekt_melchior_cano_de_locis_theologicis/.

prius” (p. 237). With respect to Islam, on the other hand, he notes: ‘A clarification of how, and in what way, Islam might serve as a relevant topos for the Christian faith is just beginning’ (Hünemann 2003: 247). And so both Abrahamic religious traditions are declared to be knowledge sources for Christian theology. These considerations bespeak a noteworthy and indeed significant attempt to integrate the idea of the God who speaks from ‘foreign religious territories’ into Christian theology.

The idea of ‘representation’ as Christology’s central concept

As the key concept of a Christology which holds fast to the divinity of Christ while not limiting divine revelation to Christ alone, the idea of *representation* seems to me to be particularly suited. It allows us to understand and speak of Jesus Christ in a personal and relational way, both as the representative of *God* in the midst of human beings, and as the representative of authentically being *human* as well. No claim to exclusivity is ingredient 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 powerful, living *presence* of God, and 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, saturated with God’s Shekina, suffused with the atmosphere of God’s company, of 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 the authentic *human being*: wholly open for and receptive to the God who is the ground of creation. St Paul speaks of an Adam–Christ typology, whereby Jesus is the new human being, through whom it becomes clear what *being human* is, and what *being human* is called to—that is: *communion and community with God*, not only symbolically but also really. Christ is more than God’s messenger, more than the conveyer of the Good News; he is the one who *makes present* the unconditional and all-encompassing love between Creator and Created; he is himself the original ‘sacrament’ of this love.

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 some communication from a God who himself is not present, but on the contrary: representation becomes the mode of and vehicle of his presence, of his effective Being-Here.³

With the assistance of the concept of representation, the fundamental point and intention of the doctrine of *two natures* can be recovered *relationally*—which is to say, can be understood in the sense of *two relationships*: the relationship to God, and the relationship to human beings (cf. Joest 1987: 233–6). In contrast to the long-standing exegetical tendency to play up the position of the divine while underplaying the position of the human, the *representational* model allows a conception of the personhood of Jesus in which we can recognize the *equality* of both relationships. And whereas the classical ‘dual-nature’ Christology has emphatically and one-sidedly taken the idea of ‘union’ as referring to Jesus Christ’s relation to God, on the one hand, and to humans, on the other, the representational model allows us to set out from a union, or oneness, *into differentness*.

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 model, makes room for the distinction we referred to above—namely, the distinction between *that which* is represented and the ‘event’ of representation—in other words, between the symbolized *content*, on the one hand, and the symbol’s *bearer* and the *act* of symbolization, on the other—we could say: between the *Christ-content* and the *Christ-event*.

Now what is it, which is ‘represented’ in Jesus Christ? As I understand the New Testament texts, this ‘what’ is God’s all-embracing and unconditional love 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’ (Pfüller 2001: 208); Hans Kessler understands the *Christ-content* as ‘true *human being*—human being entirely in accord with God’s being’ (Kessler 1995: 392 ff.).

Now how is the relationship between ‘Christ-con-

3 On the concept of *representation* see Schaede 2004: 171–238.

tent' and 'Christ-event' to be understood? In twentieth-century theological history, there are Christological proposals primarily focusing on the *event* of Christ, and there are others which place the *Christ-content* in the foreground. I shall here choose Karl Barth and Paul Tillich as examples of the two opposing tendencies. Barth emphasizes that the revelation attested to in the New Testament texts has the character of an *event* in history. According to Barth, there arises 'no further question as to what to the content would be. . . for in no other event could this content be as well revealed as it is already in this event' (Barth 1932: 323, my translation). 'The "content" of the New Testament is in the name *Jesus Christ* alone' (Barth 1938: 16, my translation, italics in the original). In other words, given this *name*, all Christological characterizations or explanations are merely secondary.

For Tillich, on the other hand, Christ is the 'bearer' of the 'new being', and as such is the 'saviour'. 'He is the one who "represents" God to human beings. . . . He represents the image of God, which had been embodied in the human being originally.' (Tillich 1958: 103, my translation.) At the heart of Christianity lies the 'message that God's salvation-bringing participation in the human situation has become revealed through a personal life' (Tillich 1958: 105, my translation). Jesus acts as the Christ through the power of that which is made manifest in him—which is at the same time not to be distinguished from him: this is the reality of the 'God-human-being union', 'God's eternal relation to human being', that 'true being of the human', 'the new aeon'.⁴ According to Tillich event and content, although not identical, are also not to be separated; the 'content' must happen, must take place in order to become active and efficacious.⁵

The Council of Chalcedon seems to offer a fruitful formulation of the relationship between *event* and *content* in the divine revelation: *Unmixed* and *Undivided*. The content becomes real in the event but is not restricted to the event; rather, it exists already before the event, drawing it in, and it extends beyond it. The event is the symbolic but real actualization of the content—which transcends the happening of the

event. The event 'represents' the *community* between God and the human being which God has initiated and is hereby making available. In this covenant God's *will* for salvation, God's will for communion, receives expression. And in and through this will, God's very *being* is revealed: Being which can only be defined as love.

This *being*, this *will*, and the divine-human *relationship* which is their consequence, become manifest in Jesus Christ—but they are not *exhausted* in that manifestation. God's will for salvation is universal—and for that very reason it cannot be tied to a historical event in a way which would imply that it is *constituted* by the event, or that it *totally* consists of that event, or that the event exhausts its reality, and thus *only* in this event is its reality made manifest.

The Christ-content is universal and extends beyond the Christ-event. Now this event, like every event, is unique. But this uniqueness, this singularity, cannot be tied *exclusively* to the Christ-event—in other words, it cannot be applied as a criterion for exclusion, for we would then end up with a contradiction between the Christ-content—the universal, all-encompassing, unconditional love of God—on the one hand, and the determination of specific conditions for the actual realization of the Christ-content—that the Christ-content has been mediated through *one* event alone and can be grasped only in faithful acknowledgement of *this* event—on the other.

That is just the problem which John Hick alluded to in the quotation we began with: Is it conceivable that the *Christ-content*—the promise of God's unconditional acceptance—is fulfilled exclusively in *one* particular historical occurrence, such that a relationship to this event becomes the condition for being able to participate in it? If so, then the very *content* of the message of Christ would be limited, perhaps even negated. However much the truth about God is revealed in—and even *consists* in—the person and working of Jesus and in him has been made historically manifest, so little can this truth be equated with it one-to-one.

If the content of *representation* inheres in God's will for the salvation of all human beings (as 1 Tim. 2:4 indicates) then the statement 'there is no salvation outside of the Christian faith' cannot refer primarily to the one who *bears* the message underlying the representation. No, first and foremost it is referring to *what* is being represented (the *repraesentandum*); and ultimately it is referring to the *one who is represented* in the representation (the *repraesentatus*).

4 These terms can be found in Tillich 1958: 104–6. See also pp. 132–7: 'the manifestation of the *new being* in Jesus as the Christ.'

5 'Ordinary existence is overcome only when it is concretely overcome, in all its many aspects. . . . The transforming power is the *image* of the one in whom the *new being* has appeared.' (Tillich 1958: 125, see also p. 163.)

tor)—which here refers back to the saving *God*, the God who is offering us salvation. And then our statement would mean: Wherever a person lives his life *in and through* his relationship to the Ground of Being, with the result that his life becomes salvifically transformed—this person experiences precisely that which is *represented* by and proclaimed in the Christ-event—namely: the salvific presence of God. It is this which holds open the possibility that the salvific relation to God as exemplified in Christ could *also* be *represented* in other events, and can be consummated on other paths. It is not another salvation but rather another occurrence, or another instance, of the event of salvation. The historical representation in Jesus points to a reality which *precedes* the *particular* representation—while still being genuinely revealed in and by it; and even in this very revelation it maintains its freedom, and its sovereignty.

It follows then that the salvational significance of Jesus Christ is not to be understood as *causative* but rather as *representative* of God's salvific presence. In *this* sense we can describe his significance as 'functional': that is to say, Christ is not the *source* or *origin* of salvation—that origin is located in the salvational will of God, and thus in God's being—which is love. Jesus, rather, is the *mediator* of this salvation for those who follow him. In the Gospel of St John we are told that Christ realized this mediating role inasmuch as he mediates the Logos—God's own *self-communication*—to the world. Here, the *Logos* is not a kind of 'message', as something different from the *person bearing the message*; rather, it is God himself in the mode of communicating *his own self*. This 'Word' is nothing other than the *Word of Creation* at the very beginning. Just as it called all beings into being and called the human being to be the caretaker of this Creation in God's name, so too did this Word call the human Jesus into being as its own mediator. The image of the term 'incarnation' conveys the idea that this human being is totally permeated with the power of the *Logos*, of the Word, so that we can say that in him the *Logos* took on 'flesh and blood'.

To be sure, there is a union, oneness between the Source of Light (God) and the Ray of Light (the Logos) and the Enlightened One (Christ)—we could also say: between God's Spirit and the one whom that Spirit has anointed (the Messiah, the Christ). However, despite this union the reality of the *bearer* of the Light and the Spirit can (and *must*) be distinguished from the reality of *God* which has constituted his *person*, and which communicates itself *in* him and *through* him.

The same structure at work in the representation of a reality which precedes the representative of the reality can also be demonstrated in interpreting the declaration: 'Jesus is God's Son'.⁶ The interpretation of this statement is dependent upon what we will define as the subject, and what we will define as the predicate of the sentence: in this formula we are dealing first of all with the attribution of a title of honour, a title of distinction: to the proper name 'Jesus', the Christological title 'Son of God' is added. Significantly, this title formerly had no implications of exclusivity; rather, it was an honorific title bestowed upon the king, and could also be used in reference to God's Chosen People as a whole, or to righteous and just individuals found among this People; it could even be applied to righteous individuals outside of Israel. However in 1 John 2:22 f., and 4:14–16, we can recognize an inversion of the relation between name and predicate into the meaning: 'The Son of God is Jesus'. The intention of the formulation no longer lies now in the attribution of the title of 'Son' but in the determination that the Son of God is none other than Jesus—Jesus, this particular historical individual. 'Son of God' no longer functions as predicate; instead the name 'Jesus' has become the predicate. The question, to which this formulation is the answer, is no longer: 'Who is Jesus?', but 'How does God's eternal Word take on Flesh, become a Human Being, enter into History?' No longer does the attribution of a Christological title constitute the focal point of the statement; instead, at the centre of the statement now stands the claim that God in this specific historical human person has become a human being—exclusively and definitively, once and for all. Thus a claim of exclusivity gets tied into this statement.

In the long run the issue centres on a determination of the relation between the person Jesus of Nazareth on the one hand, and the 'Christ' as God's transhistorical self-communication on the other—we might also say: a determination of the relation of the two natures in the person of Jesus Christ to each other. With his well-known formulation, 'Jesus is the Christ, but Christ is not (only) Jesus' (Panikkar 1990: 23, my translation), 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 one an-

6 For the following discussion see Siller 2001: 173 f.

other.⁷ The ‘Christ-reality’ is to be de-historicized, as it were—no longer tied 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’ (Panikkar 1993: 13, my translation).

Reality is ‘more’ than a series of events in history, and the 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 realized 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 power. Historical concreteness and universality by no means exclude each other; rather, they *condition* one another. However, to restrict the Christ-reality to the historical Christ-event leads to a *particularism* which does not do justice to the *universality* of the resurrected Christ.

Now the Vatican supports the opposing view, especially in the encyclical *Redemptoris missio*. There we read:

It is a contradiction of the Christian faith when a separation of any kind is introduced between Jesus Christ and the Word. . . Jesus is the Word made flesh, a singular and specific indivisible person. . . Christ is none other than Jesus of Nazareth, and he is the Word of God who became a human being for the salvation of all. . . When we examine the manifold gifts which God has distributed to all peoples and cultures—particularly the richness of their spiritual heritage; when we truly discover and value these gifts, then they cannot be separated from Jesus Christ, who occupies the central place in God’s plan of salvation. (Johannes Paul II 1991: 254 f., my translation.)

This same passage appears again in Section 10 of the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, and then elaborated upon as follows:

. . . Therefore any theory which ascribes the work of salvation to the divinity of the *Logos as such* and would therefore see the salvific work of the *Logos* independently of the Incarnation—

7 For further discussion of this see also Sinner 2003: 302 ff.; Valluvassery 2001: 142 ff.; Nitsche 2008: 379–483, esp. 401 ff.

‘above’ and ‘beyond’ his becoming human—such a theory is irreconcilable with the teaching of the Church. (*Dominus Iesus* 6.8.2000.)

The representational Christology which I prefer brings both concerns together, linking the Christ-reality inseparably to the Christ-event, but not limiting the former to the latter. The Christ-reality—which is to say, the creative and salvific *presence of God*—is realized by Jesus of Nazareth in a most unique way, inasmuch as he lived utterly and completely out of the fullness of the Word and the Spirit of God. Indeed, this relationship constituted his *being as person*. As Luther formulated this for the believing Christian: *Fides facit personam* (WA 39/I, 283: 18 f.). Jesus did not simply proclaim this relationship to God, he perfectly embodied it throughout his life, and enabled those who followed him to participate in it. The relationship with God lies at the very heart of this—and yet it extends beyond his embodiment of it.

Accordingly, Christian reflections upon faith must be open to the possibility that the relationship with the *Ground of Being* could also *come into being* in other forms which are not professedly Christian and which may differ quite considerably from Christian expressions of certainty and Christian forms of practice. Christians will naturally tend to evaluate these other forms according to their ‘adequacy’ to the *Christ-reality* as manifested normatively in Jesus of Nazareth. —Actually, however, a judgment on these matters might also occur *ex negativo*—‘negatively’, as it were. What this means is that relationships with the Transcendent *which do not contradict the Word and the Spirit which filled and fulfilled Jesus*, could be met by Christians with a kind of preliminary acknowledgement.

Christological reflection and interreligious praxis

We have been considering here a conceptual approach to a Christology which points up the truth-claim inherent in the Christian Credo while *not* necessarily entailing the automatic rejection of the truth-claims raised by other religions. These reflections in themselves are not to be understood as an adaption to (or even submission under) the assumed needs for an interreligious dialogue. No, we have merely been pursuing here the question as to what kinds of Christological approaches could possibly be compatible with such an endeavour. Obviously there are forms of Christology which would not permit this—such as, for example, the *substance*-centered

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.

Interreligious relationships characterized by mutual respect and esteem have to find its foundation primarily not in theological motives but in motives reflecting the *pragmatic* interests of coexistence. Afterwards, the work of *theological* reflection is to test whether and to what extent this position is ‘thinkable’—meaning: whether and to what extent this position 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 could ground and justify an attitude of openness in the encounter with followers of other religious traditions.

Theological reflection upon the religions attempts to explore ways of thinking which will adequately take into account changing demands and requirements, on the one hand, and yet will *not* abandon the normative content of the Christian tradition on the other. In order to approach a theological conception of dialogal relationships with 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 asks:

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? (Benedikt XVI 2005: 44, my translation.)

Theology of religions is an undertaking which ‘doesn’t have to make a judgment 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’ (Benedikt XVI 2005: 16, my translation). Theology of religions then does not start from the question of ‘the truth’ in the religions in general, but starts rather with the truth-convictions of the Christian faith.

By taking these certainties of truth as a starting-

point, the 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 also in non-Christian comprehensions of human relationship to God, occurrences of God’s grace are to be found. According to Christian conviction, the grace-bringing occurrence of this relationship is decisively and definitively personified in Jesus, the Christ. Regarding this *Christus-Logos* the Gospel of John (1:9) declares: he enlightens all human beings. ■

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