

Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith Today

by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger

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In the '80s, the theology of liberation in its radical forms seemed to be the most urgent challenge for the faith of the church. It was a challenge that required both a response and a clarification because it proposed a new, plausible and at the same time practical response to the fundamental question of Christianity: namely, the problem of redemption.

The very word "liberation" wanted to explain in a different and more understandable way that which in the traditional language of the church was called "redemption". In fact, in the background there is always the same observation: We experience a world that does not correspond to a good God. Poverty, oppression, all kinds of unjust domination, the suffering of the just and the innocent constitute the signs of the times and of all times. And we all suffer: No one can readily say to this world and to his or her own life, "Stay as you are, you are so beautiful."

From this the theology of liberation deduced that the situation, which must not continue, could only be overcome through a radical change in the structures of this world which are structures of sin and evil. If sin exerts its power over the structures and impoverishment is programmed beforehand by them, then its overthrow cannot come about through individual conversions, but through the struggle against the structures of injustice. It was said, however, that this struggle ought to be political because the structures are consolidated and preserved through politics.

Redemption thus became a political process for which the Marxist philosophy provided the essential guidelines. It was transformed into a task which people themselves could and even had to take into their own hands, and at the same time it became a totally practical hope: Faith, in theory, became praxis, concrete redeeming action, in the process of liberation.

The fall of the European governmental systems based on Marxism turned out to be a kind of twilight of the gods for that theology of redeeming political praxis. Precisely in those places where the Marxist liberating ideology had been applied consistently, a radical lack of freedom had been produced, the horror of which now appeared out in the open before the eyes of world public opinion. The fact is that when politics want to bring redemption, they promise too much. When they presume to do God's work, they do not become divine but diabolical.

For this reason, the political events of 1989 have also changed the theological scenario. Until then, Marxism had been the last attempt to provide a universally valid formula for the right configuration of historical action. Marxism believed it knew the structure of world history, and from there it tried to show how history could be led definitively along the right path. The fact that the presumption was based on what was apparently a strictly scientific method that totally substituted faith with science and made science the praxis gave it a strong appeal. All the unfulfilled promises of religions seemed attainable through a scientifically based political praxis.

The nonfulfillment of this hope brought a great disillusionment with it which is still far from being assimilated. Therefore, it seems probable to me that new forms of the Marxist conception of the world will appear in the future. For the moment, we cannot be but perplexed: The failure of the only scientifically based system for solving human problems could only justify nihilism or, in any case, total relativism.

Relativism: The Prevailing Philosophy

Relativism has thus become the central problem for the faith at the present time. No doubt it is not presented only with its aspects of resignation before the immensity of the truth. It is also presented as a position defined positively by the concepts of tolerance and knowledge through dialogue and freedom, concepts which would be limited if the existence of one valid truth for all were affirmed.

In turn, relativism appears to be the philosophical foundation of democracy. Democracy in fact is supposedly built on the basis that no one can presume to know the true way, and it is enriched by the fact that all roads are mutually recognized as fragments of the effort toward that which is better. Therefore, all roads seek something common in dialogue, and they also compete regarding knowledge that cannot be compatible in one common form. A system of freedom ought to be essentially a system of positions that are connected with one another because they are relative as well as being dependent on historical situations open to new developments. Therefore, a liberal society would be a relativist society: Only with that condition could it continue to be free and open to the future.

In the area of politics, this concept is considerably right. There is no one correct political opinion. What is relative-the building up of liberally ordained coexistence between people -cannot be something absolute. Thinking in this way was precisely the error of Marxism and the political theologies.

However, with total relativism, everything in the political area cannot be achieved either. There are injustices that will never turn into just things (such as, for example, killing an innocent person, denying an individual or groups the right to their dignity or to life corresponding to that dignity) while, on the other hand, there are just things that can never be unjust. Therefore, although a certain right to relativism in the social and political area should not be denied, the problem is raised at the moment of setting its limits. There has also been the desire to apply this method in a totally conscious way in the area of religion and ethics. I will now try to briefly outline the developments that define the theological dialogue today on this point.

The so-called pluralist theology of religion has been developing progressively since the '50s. Nonetheless, only now has it come to the center of the Christian conscience.[1] In some ways this conquest occupies today-with regard to the force of its problematic aspect and its presence in the different areas of culture-the place occupied by the theology of liberation in the preceding decade. Moreover, it joins in many ways with it and tries to give it a new, updated form. Its means and methods are very varied; therefore, it is not possible to synthesize it into one short formula or present its essential characteristics briefly. On the one hand, relativism is a typical offshoot of the Western world and its forms of philosophical thought, while on the other it is connected with the philosophical and religious intuitions of Asia especially, and surprisingly, with those of the Indian subcontinent. Contact between these two worlds gives it a particular impulse at the present historical moment.

Relativism in Theology:

The Attenuation of Christology

The situation can be clearly seen in one of its founders and eminent representatives, the American Presbyterian John Hick. His philosophical departure point is found in the Kantian distinction between phenomenon and noumenon: [noumenon - a ground of phenomena that is unknowable to the senses but is conceivable by reason] We can never grasp ultimate truth in itself, but only its appearance in our way of perceiving through different "lenses." What we grasp is not really and properly reality in itself, but a reflection on our scale.

At first Hick tried to formulate this concept in a Christ-centered context. After a year's stay in India, he transformed it-after what he himself calls a Copernican turn of thought-into a new form of theocentrism. The identification of only one historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, with what is "real," the living God, is now relegated as a relapse into myth. Jesus is consciously relativized as one religious leader among others. The Absolute cannot come into history, but only models and ideal forms that remind us about what can never be grasped as such in history. Therefore, concepts such as the <church, dogma> and <sacraments> must lose their unconditional character. To make an absolute of such limited forms of mediation or, even more, to consider them real encounters with the universally valid truth of God who reveals himself would be the same as elevating oneself to the category of the Absolute, thereby losing the infiniteness of the totally other God.

From this point of view, which is not only present in the works of Hick but also in other authors, affirming that there is a binding and valid truth in history in the figure of Jesus Christ and in the faith of the church is described as fundamentalism. Such fundamentalism, which constitutes the real attack on the spirit of modernity, is presented in different ways as the fundamental threat emerging against the supreme good of modernity: i.e., tolerance and freedom.

On the other hand, the notion of <dialogue> -which has maintained a position of significant importance in the Platonic and Christian tradition-changes meaning and becomes both the quintessence of the relativist creed and the antithesis of conversion and the mission. In the relativist meaning, <to dialogue> means to put one's own position, i.e., one's faith, on the same level as the convictions of others without recognizing in principle more truth in it than that which is attributed to the opinion of the others. Only if I suppose in principle that the other can be as right, or more right than I, can an authentic dialogue take place.

According to this concept, dialogue must be an exchange between positions which have fundamentally the same rank and therefore are mutually relative. Only in this way will the maximum cooperation and integration between the different religions be achieved.[2] The relativist dissolution of Christology, and even more of ecclesiology, thus becomes a central commandment of religion. To return to Hick's thinking, faith in the divinity of one concrete person, as he tell us, leads to fanaticism and particularism, to the dissociation between faith and love, and it is precisely this which must be overcome.[3]

Recourse to Asian Religions

In Hick's thinking, whom we are considering here as an eminent representative of religious relativism, there is a strange closeness between Europe's post-metaphysical philosophy and Asia's negative theology. For the latter, the divine can never enter unveiled into the world of appearances in which we live; it always manifests itself in relative reflections and remains beyond all worlds and notions in an absolute transcendence.[4]

The two philosophies are fundamentally different both for their departure point and for the orientation they imprint on human existence. Nonetheless, they seem to mutually confirm one another in their metaphysical and religious relativism. The areligious and pragmatic relativism of Europe and America can get a kind of religious consecration from India which seems to give its renunciation of dogma the dignity of a greater respect before the mystery of God and of man.

In turn, the support of European and American thought to the philosophical and theological vision of India reinforces the relativism of all the religious forms proper to the Indian heritage. In this way it also seems necessary to the Christian theology in India to set aside the image of Christ from its exclusive position-which is considered typically Western-in order to place it on the same level as the Indian saving myths. The historical Jesus-it is now thought-is no more the absolute Logos than any other saving figure of history.[5]

Under the sign of the encounter of cultures, relativism appears to be the real philosophy of humanity. As we pointed out earlier, this fact, both in the East and in the West, visibly gives it a strength before which it seems that there is no room for any resistance.

Anyone who resists, not only opposes democracy and tolerance-i.e., the basic imperatives of the human community-but also persists obstinately in giving priority to one's Western culture and thus rejects the encounter of cultures, which is well known to be the imperative of the present moment. Those who want to stay with the faith of the Bible and the church see themselves pushed from the start to a no man's land on the cultural level and must as a first measure rediscover the "madness of God" (I Cor. 1:18) in order to recognize the true wisdom in it.

Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis

In order to help us in this effort to penetrate the hidden wisdom contained in the madness of the faith, it will be good for us to try to know the relativist theory of Hick's religion better and discover where it leads man. In the end, for Hick, religion means that man goes from "self-centeredness," as the existence of the old Adam, to "reality-centeredness," as existence of the new man, thus extending from oneself to the otherness of one's neighbor.[6] It sounds beautiful, but when it is considered in depth it appears as empty and vacuous as the call to authenticity by Bultmann, who in turn had taken that concept from Heidegger. For this, religion is not necessary.

Aware of these limits, the former Catholic priest Paul Knitter tried to overcome the void of a theory of religion reduced to the categorical imperative by means of a new synthesis between Asia and Europe that should be more concrete and internally enriched.[7] His proposal tends to give religion a new concrete expression by joining the theology of pluralist religion with the theologies of liberation. Interreligious dialogue must be simplified radically and become practically effective by basing it on only one principle: "the primacy of orthopraxis with regard to orthodoxy." [8]

Putting praxis above knowledge in this way is also a clearly Marxist inheritance. However, whereas Marxism makes only what comes logically from renouncing metaphysics concrete --when knowledge is impossible, only action is left--Knitter affirms: The absolute cannot be known, but it can be made. The question is, Why? Where do I find a just action if I cannot know what is just in an absolute way? The failure of the communist regimes is due precisely to the fact that they tried to change the world without knowing what is good and what is not good for the world, without knowing in what direction the world must be changed in order to make it better. Mere praxis is not light.

This is the moment for a critical examination of the notion of orthopraxis. The previous history of religion had shown that the religions of India did not have an orthodoxy in general, but rather an orthopraxis. From there the notion probably entered into modern theology. However, in the description of the religions of India this had a very precise meaning: It meant that those religions did not have a general, compulsory catechism, and belonging to them was not defined by the acceptance of a particular creed. On the other hand, those religions have a system of ritual acts which they consider necessary for salvation and which distinguish a "believer" from a "nonbeliever."

In those religions, a believer is not recognized by certain knowledge but by the scrupulous observance of a ritual which embraces the whole of life. The meaning of <orthopraxis>, i.e. right acting, is determined with great precision: It is a code of rituals. On the other hand, the word <orthodoxy> originally had almost the same meaning in the early church and in the Eastern churches. In the suffix <doxia, doxa> was not understood in the sense of "opinion" (real opinion). From the Greek viewpoint, opinions are always relative; <doxa> was understood rather in its meaning of "glory, glorification." To be <orthodox> thus meant to know and practice the right way in which God wants to be glorified. It refers to the cult and, based on the cult, to life. In this sense here there would be a solid point for a fruitful dialogue between East and West.

But let us return to the meaning of the term <orthopraxis> in modern theology. No one thinks any longer about following a ritual. The word has taken on a new meaning which has nothing to do with the authentic Indian concept. To tell the truth, something does remain from it: If the requirement of orthopraxis has a meaning and does not wish to be the lid over its not being obligatory, then a common praxis must also be given that is recognizable by all, which surpasses the general wordiness of "centering on self" and "reference to another." If the ritual meaning which was given to it in Asia is excluded, then praxis can only be understood as <ethics> or <politics.> In the first case, orthopraxis would imply an <ethos> that is clearly defined with regard to its content. This is no doubt excluded in the relativist, ethical discussion since there is no longer anything good or evil in itself.

However, if orthopraxis is understood in a social and political sense, it again raises the question regarding the nature of correct political action. The theologies of liberation, animated by the conviction that Marxism clearly points out to us what good political praxis is, could use the notion of orthopraxis in its proper sense. In this case it was not a question of being obligatory, but a form set down for everyone of correct practice, or <orthopra> is, that brought the community together and distinguished it from those who rejected the correct way of acting. To this extent, the Marxist theologies of liberation were, in their own way, logical and consistent.

As we can see, however, this kind of orthopraxis rests on a certain orthodoxy-in the modern sense: a framework of obligatory theories regarding the path to freedom. Knitter is close to this principle when he affirms that the criterion for differentiating orthopraxis from pseudopraxis is freedom.[9] Nonetheless, he still has to explain to us in a convincing and practical way what freedom is and the purpose of real human liberation: surely not Marxist orthopraxis, as we have seen. Nonetheless, something is clear: The relativist theories all flow into a state of not being obligatory and thus become superfluous, or else they presume to have an absolute standard which is not found in the praxis, by elevating it to an absolutism that has really no place. Actually, it is a fact that in Asia concepts of the theology of liberation are also proposed today as forms of Christianity which are presumably more suitable to the Asian spirit, and they place the nucleus of religious action in the political sphere. When mystery no longer counts, politics must be converted into religion. And there is no doubt that this is deeply opposed to the original Asian religious vision.

New Age

The relativism of Hick, Knitter and related theories are ultimately based on a rationalism which declares that reason-in the Kantian meaning-is incapable of metaphysical cognition.[10] The new foundation of religion comes about by following a pragmatic path with more ethical or political overtones. However, there is also a consciously anti-rationalist response to the experience of the slogan "Everything is relative," which comes together under the pluriform denomination of <New Age.>[11]

For the supporters of the New Age, the solution to the problem of relativity must not be sought in a new encounter of the self with another or others, but by overcoming the subject in an ecstatic return to the cosmic dance. Like the old gnosis, this way pretends to be totally attuned to all the results of science and to be based on all kinds of scientific knowledge (biology, psychology, sociology, physics). But on the basis of this presupposition it offers at the same time a considerably anti-rationalist model of religion, a modern "mystic": The Absolute is not to be believed, but to be experienced. God is not a person to be distinguished from the world, but a spiritual energy present in the universe. Religion means the harmony of myself with the cosmic whole, the overcoming of all separations.

K.H. Menke characterizes very well this change in history that is taking place, as he states: "The subject that wanted to submit everything to himself now wants to be placed into 'the whole.'"[12] Objective reason closes off the path for us to the mystery of reality; the self isolates us from the richness of cosmic reality, destroys the harmony of the whole and is the real cause of our unredemption. Redemption is found in unbridling the self, immersion in the exuberance of that which is living and in a return to the Whole. Ecstasy is sought, the inebriety of the infinite which can be experienced in inebriating music, rhythm, dance, frenetic lights and dark shadows, and in the human mass.

This is not only renouncing modernity but man himself. The gods return. They have become more believable than God. The primitive rites must be renewed in which the self is initiated into the mystery of the Whole and is liberated from itself.

There are many explanations for the re-editing of pre-Christian religions and cultures which is being attempted frequently today. If there is no common truth in force precisely because it is true, then Christianity is only something imported from outside, a spiritual imperialism which must be thrown off with no less force than political imperialism. If no contact with the living God of all men takes place in the sacraments, then they are empty rituals which tell us nothing nor give us anything. At most, they let us perceive what is numinous, which prevails in all religions.

Even in that case it seems more sensible to look for what is originally one's own instead of letting something alien and antiquated be imposed upon oneself. Above all, if the "sober inebriety" of the Christian mystery cannot elevate us to God, then the true inebriety of real ecstasies must be sought whose passion sweeps us away and transforms us-at least for a moment- into gods and lets us perceive for a moment the pleasure of the infinite and forget the misery of the finite. The more manifest the uselessness of political absolutism, the stronger the attraction will be to what is irrational and to the renunciation of the reality of everyday life.[13]

Pragmatism in the Church's Daily Life

Together with these radical solutions and the great pragmatism of the theologies of liberation, there is also the gray pragmatism of the daily life of the church in which everything apparently continues

normally, but in reality the faith is being consumed and falling into meanness. I am thinking of two phenomena which I consider with concern.

First, there is the intention, with different degrees of intensity, to extend the principle of the majority to the faith and customs in order to ultimately "democratize" the church in a decisive way. What does not seem obvious to the majority cannot be obligatory. This is what seems to be. But which majority? Will there be a majority tomorrow like the one today? A faith which we ourselves can decide about is not a faith in absolute. And no minority has any reason to let the faith be imposed on it by a majority.

The faith, together with its praxis, either comes to us from the Lord through his church and the sacramental ministry, or it does not exist in absolute. The abandonment of the faith by many is based on the fact that it seems to them that the faith should be decided by some requests, which would be like a kind of party program: Whoever has power decides what must be part of the faith. Therefore, it is important within the church itself to arrive at power or, on the contrary -which is more logical and obvious-to not believe.

The other point on which I wished to draw your attention refers to the liturgy. The different phases of liturgical reform have let the opinion be introduced that the liturgy can be changed arbitrarily. From being something unchangeable, in any case, it is a question of the words of consecration; all the rest could be changed.

The following thinking is logical: If a central authority can do this, why not a local one? And if the local ones can do this, why not the community itself? Community should be expressed and come together in the liturgy. Following the rationalist and puritanical tendency of the '70s and even the '80s, today there is weariness with the pure, spoken liturgy, and a living liturgy is sought which does not delay in coming closer to the New Age tendencies: What is inebriating and ecstatic is sought and not the <logike latreia>, the <rationalis oblatio> about which Paul speaks and with him the Roman liturgy (cf. Rom. 12:1).

I admit that I am exaggerating. What I am saying does not describe the normal situation of our communities. But the tendencies are there. For this reason, vigilance is required so that a Gospel will not be surreptitiously introduced to us-a stone instead of bread-different from the one that the Lord gave us.

Tasks of Theology

We find ourselves, all told, in a unique situation: The theology of liberation tried to give Christianity, which was tired of dogmas, a new praxis whereby redemption would finally take place. But that praxis has left ruin in its aftermath instead of freedom. Relativism remains and the attempt to conform to it, but what it offers us is so empty that the relativist theories are looking for help from the theology of liberation in order to be able to put it into practice. The New Age says finally: It is better for us to leave the failed experiment of Christianity and return better again to the gods, because we live better in this way.

Many questions come up. Let us take the most practical one: Why has classical theology appeared to be so defenseless in the face of these happenings? Where is its weak point, and why has it lost credibility?

I would like to mention two evident points in the writings of Hick and Knitter. Both authors, for their attenuated faith in Christ, refer to exegesis. They state that exegesis has proven that Jesus did

not consider himself absolutely the Son of God, the incarnate God, but that he was made to be such afterward, in a gradual way, by his disciples.[14] Both Hick, in a clearer way, and Knitter also refer to philosophical evidence. Hick assures us that Kant proved beyond dispute that what is absolute or the Absolute can neither be recognized in history nor can it appear in history as such.[15] Because of the structure of our cognition, what the Christian faith maintains cannot be, according to Kant. Therefore, miracles, mysteries or sacraments are superstitions, as Kant clarifies for us in his work <Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone>.[16]

It seems to me that the questions from exegesis and the limits and possibilities of our reason, i.e. the philosophical premises of the faith, indicate in fact the crucial point of the crisis of contemporary theology whereby the faith-and more and more the faith of simple persons as well-is heading toward crisis.

Now I would only like to outline the task before us. First, with regard to exegesis, let it be said from the outset that Hick and Knitter cannot be supported by exegesis in general, as if there were a clear result shared by all. This is impossible in historical research, which does not have this type of certainty, and it is even more impossible with regard to a question that is not purely historical or literary but includes value choices that go beyond a mere verification of the past and a mere interpretation of texts. However, it is certain that an overall glance at modern exegesis can leave an impression that is close to Hick's and Knitter's.

What type of certainty corresponds to this? Let us suppose-which can be doubted-that most exegetes think in this way. Nonetheless, the question still remains, To what point is that majority opinion grounded?

My thesis is the following: The fact that many exegetes think like Hick and Knitter and reconstruct the history of Jesus as they do is because they share their same philosophy. It is not the exegesis that proves the philosophy, but the philosophy that generates the exegesis.[17] If I know a priori (to speak like Kant) that Jesus cannot be God and that miracles, mysteries and sacraments are three forms of superstition, then I cannot discover what cannot be a fact in the sacred books. I can only describe why and how such affirmations were arrived at and how they were gradually formed.

Let us look at this more precisely. The historical-critical method is an excellent instrument for reading historical sources and interpreting texts. But it contains its own philosophy, which in general-for example when I try to study the history of medieval emperors-is hardly important. And this is because in that case I want to know the past and nothing more. But even this cannot be done in a neutral way, and so there are also limits to the method.

But if it is applied to the Bible, two factors come clearly to light which would not be noted otherwise. First, the method wants to find about the past as something past. It wants to grasp with the greatest precision what happened at a past moment, closed in its past situation, at the point where it was found in time. Furthermore, it supposes that history is, in principle, uniform; therefore, man with all his differences and the world with all its distinctions are determined by the same laws and limitations so that I can eliminate whatever is impossible. What cannot happen today in any way could not happen yesterday nor will it happen tomorrow.

If we apply this to the Bible, it means the following: A text, a happening, a person will be strictly fixed in his or her past. There is the desire to verify what the past author said at that time and what he could have said or thought. This is what is "historical" about the "past." Therefore, historical-critical exegesis does not bring the Bible to today, to my current life. This is impossible. On the contrary, it separates it from me and shows it strictly fixed in the past.

This is the point on which Drewermann rightly criticized historical-critical exegesis to the extent that it presumes to be self-sufficient. Such exegesis, by definition, expresses reality, not today's or mine, but yesterday's, another's reality. Therefore, it can never show the Christ of today, tomorrow and always, but only-if it remains faithful to itself-the Christ of yesterday.

To this the second supposition must be added: the homogeneity of the world and history, i.e., what Bultmann calls the modern image of the world. Michael Waldstein has shown through a careful analysis that Bultmann's theory of knowledge was totally influenced by the neo-Kantianism of Marburg.[18] Thanks to him, he knew what could and could not exist. In other exegetes, the philosophical conscience is less pronounced, but the foundation based on the theory of Kantian cognition is always implicitly present as an unquestionable, hermeneutic access to criticism. This being as it is, the authority of the church can no longer impose from without that a Christology of divine filiation should be arrived at. But it can and must invite a critical examination of one's method.

In short, in the revelation of God, he, the living and true One, bursts into our world and also opens the prison of our theories, with whose nets we want to protect ourselves against God's coming into our lives. Thank God, in the midst of the current crisis of philosophy and theology, a new meaning of foundation has been set in motion in exegesis itself and, not in the last term, through knowledge attained from the careful historical interpretation of texts.[19] This helps break the prison of previous philosophical decisions which paralyze interpretation: The amplitude of the word is opening up again.

The problem of exegesis is connected, as we have seen, with the problem of philosophy. The indigence of philosophy, the indigence to which paralyzed, positivist reason has led itself, has turned into the indigence of our faith. The faith cannot be liberated if reason itself does not open up again. If the door to metaphysical cognition remains closed, if the limits of human knowledge set by Kant are impassable, faith is destined to atrophy: It simply lacks air to breathe.

When a strictly autonomous reason, which does not want to know anything about the faith, tries to get out of the bog of uncertainty "by pulling itself up by its hair," to express it in some way, it will be difficult for this effort to succeed. For human reason is not autonomous in absolute. It is always found in a historical context. The historical context disfigures its vision (as we have seen). Therefore, it also needs historical assistance to help it cross over its historical barriers.[20]

I am of the opinion that neo-Scholastic rationalism failed which, with reason totally independent from the faith, tried to reconstruct the <preambula fidei> with pure rational certainty. The attempts that presume to do the same will have the same result. Yes, Karl Barth was right to reject philosophy as the foundation of the faith independent from the faith. If it were such, our faith would be based from the beginning to the end on the changing philosophical theories.

But Barth was wrong when, for this same reason, he proposed the faith as a pure paradox that can only exist against reason and totally independent from it. It is not the lesser function of the faith to care for reason as such. It does not do violence to it; it is not external to it, rather, it makes it come to itself. The historical instrument of the faith can liberate reason as such again so that by introducing it to the path, it can see by itself once again. We must make efforts toward a new dialogue of this kind between faith and philosophy because both need one another reciprocally. Reason will not be saved without the faith, but the faith without reason will not be human.

Perspective

If we consider the present cultural situation, about which I have tried to give some indications, frankly it must seem to be a miracle that there is still Christian faith despite everything, and not only in the surrogate forms of Hick, Knitter and others, but the complete, serene faith of the New Testament and of the church of all times.

Why, in brief, does the faith still have a chance? I would say the following: because it is in harmony with what man is. Man is something more than what Kant and the various post-Kantian philosophers wanted to see and concede. Kant himself must have recognized this in some way with his postulates.

In man there is an inextinguishable yearning for the infinite. None of the answers attempted are sufficient. Only the God himself who became finite in order to open our finiteness and lead us to the breadth of his infiniteness responds to the question of our being. For this reason, the Christian faith finds man today too. Our task is to serve the faith with a humble spirit and the whole strength of our heart and understanding.

ENDNOTES

1 An overview of the most significant authors of the pluralist theology of religion is offered by P. Schmidt-Leukel, "Des Pluralistische Modell in der Theologie der Religionen. Ein Literaturbericht," in *Theologische Revue* 89 (1993) 353-370. For the discussion cf. M. von Bruck-J. Werbick, <Der einzige Weg zum Heil? Die Herausforderung des christlichen Absolutheitsanspruchs durch pluralistische Religions theologian (QD 143, Freiburg 1993); K.-H. Menke, *Die Einzigheit Jesu Christi im Horizont der Sinnfrage*> (Freiburg 1995), especially pp. 75-176. Menke offers an excellent introduction into the thinking of the two significant representatives of this theology: John Hick and Paul F. Knitter. The following reflections are mainly based on this author. The discussion of the problem in the second part of Menke's book contains many important and relevant elements, but other questions remain open. An interesting systematic attempt to cope with the problem of religions from the Christological point of view is given by B. Stubenrauch, <Dialogisches Dogma. Der christliche Auftrag zur interreligiösen Begegnung> (QD 158, Freiburg 1995). The question will also be treated by a document of the International Theological Commission, which is in preparation.

2 Cf. the very interesting editorial in *Civiltà Cattolica* 1 (Jan. 20, 1996) 107-120: "Il cristianesimo e le altre religioni." The editorial examines most of all the thinking of Hick, Knitter and Raimondo Panikkar.

3 Cf. for example John Hick, <An Interpretation of Religion. Human Responses to Transcendent> (London 1989); Menke, p. 90.

4 Cf. E. Frauwallner, <Geschichte der indischen Philosophie,> two vols. (Salzburg 1953 and 1956); S.N. Dasgupta, <History of Indian Philosophy,> five vols. (Cambridge 1922-1955); K.B. Ramakrishna Rao, <Ontology of Advaita With Special Reference to Maya> (Mulki 1964).

5 An author belonging clearly to this trend is F. Wilfred, <Beyond Settled Foundations. The Journey of Indian Theology> (Madras 1993), "Some Tentative Reflections on the Language of Christian Uniqueness: An Indian Perspective," in the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue's *Pro Dialogo*, Bulletin 85-86 (1994/1) 40-57.

6 John Hick, <Evil and the God of Love> (Norfolk 1975), pp. 240f; <An Interpretation of Religion> 236-240, cf. Menke, pp. 81f.

7 The main work of Paul Knitter: <No Other Name! A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions> (New York 1985) has been translated in many languages. Cf. Menke, pp. 94-110. A refined critical statement is offered also by A. Kolping in his recension in *Theologische Revue* 87 (1991) 234-240.

8 Cf. Menke, p. 95.

9 Cf. *ibid.* p. 109.

10 Both Knitter and Hick base their refusal of the Absolute in history on Kant; cf. Menke, pp. 78 and 108.

11 In the middle of this century the concept of <New Age> or of the <Time of the Waterman> has been introduced by Raul Le Cour (1937) and Alice Bailey, who in messages received in 1945, spoke about a new order and a new religion of the world. Between 1960 and 1970 the Esalen Institute was established in California. Today Marilyn Ferguson is the best-known representatives of New Age. Michael Fuss ("New Age: <Supermarkt alternativer Spiritualität"> in *Communio* 20, 1991, 148-157) defines New Age as the result of a mixture of Jewish and Christian elements with the process of secularization with Gnosticism and with elements of Oriental religions. The pastoral letter, translated in many languages, of Cardinal G. Danneels, "<Le Christ ou le Verseau>" (1990) offers useful orientations for this problem. Cf. also Menke, pp. 31-36; J. LeBar (ed.), *Cults, Sects and the New Age* (Huntington, Ind.).

12 "<Das Subjekt, das sich alles unterwerfen wollte, will sich nun in 'das Ganze' aufbeben>." Menke, p. 33.

13 Two different expressions of New Age can be distinguished more and more clearly: The first is the Gnostic-religious form that searches for the transcendental and transpersonal being and for the true self; the second one is the ecological-monistic expression that worships matter and Mother Earth and is coupled with feminism in the form of the ecofeminism.

14 See questions in Menke, pp. 90 and 97.

15 Cf. Note 10.

16 B 302.

17 This can be seen very clearly in the confrontation between A. Schlatter and A. von Harnack in the end of the last century, presented carefully by W. Neuer, Adolf Schlatter, <Ein Leben für Theologie und Kirche> (Stuttgart 1996) pp. 301ff. I have tried to show my own view of the problem in the <questio disputata> edited by myself: <Schriftauslegung im Widerstreit> (Freiburg 1989) pp. 15-44. Cf. also the collection of I. de la Poiterie, G. Guardini, J. Ratzinger, G. Colombo, E. Bianchi <L'esegesi cristiana oggi> (Piemme 1991).

18 Michael Waldstein, "The Foundations of Bultmann's Work" in *Communio* (Spring 1987) 115-134.

19 Cf. for example the collection edited by C.E. Braaten and R.W. Jensson: <Reclaiming the Bible for the Church> (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), especially the article of B.S. Childs, "On Reclaiming the Bible for Christian Theology," pp. 1-17.

20 Even though in the thinking of H.J. Verweyen, <Gottes letztes Wort> (Dusseldorf 1991), many important and valid elements can be found, to me its essential philosophical error consists in the fact of attempting to offer a rational foundation of the faith independently of the faith, an attempt that, however, cannot convince in its pure abstract rationality. The thinking of Verweyen is also mentioned by Menke, pp. 111-176. To me the position of J. Pieper (<Schriften zum Philosophiebegriff> Hamburg 1995) has better foundation and is more convincing from the historical and objective point of view.

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