Interreligious Dialogue Beyond Absolutism, Relativism and Particularism

A Catholic Approach to Religious Diversity

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It is common for a catholic approach to interreligious dialogue to start one's analysis with the presentation and the evaluation of three traditional models to understand religious diversity: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism[1]. One of the theses of this chapter will be that this typology concerning 'non-Christian religions' became itself a stumbling block to come to an authentic encounter and dialogue with the real religious other. After the critical analysis of this typological approach, and the crisis it provokes, we try to develop new perspectives on the interreligious encounter beyond theological absolutism (usually attributed to exclusivism and inclusivism), relativism (usually attributed to pluralism) and the declaration of the impossibility of the dialogue (usually attributed to particularism).

The first model of religious diversity is traditionally called 'exclusivism'. Exclusivists are convinced that believers of other religions or non-believers can only be saved when they convert to the only true religion, namely the religion they confess themselves. For Christian exclusivists, this means that people can only be saved when they convert to Christianity and accept explicitly Jesus as Christ and Redeemer. This Christian exclusivism is mostly not only Christological in nature, but also ecclesiological: "*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*" ["no salvation outside the Church"][2]. Because the religious truth is revealed only through Christ and the Church, Christians have the obligation to proclaim the Christian message to everyone (mission).

Today, exclusivism is no longer the position of the official catholic church, but it can still be found in several other Christian churches, especially evangelical churches[3] and in

branches of several other non-Christian religious traditions. The central idea is that God has revealed himself in an unique mediator or medium and that only through the explicit recognition of this mediator or medium, one can find liberation or salvation. In the course of history, however, it was especially the Christian tradition that developed an exclusivistic theology - accompanied by powerful institutional structures - that sometimes ended up in (even violent) religious colonialism.

In contrast to exclusivism, inclusivism does not deny in advance the value of so called 'non-Christian religions'. The central idea of Christian (catholic) inclusivism is that salvation outside Christianity is possible, but only thanks to the salvific work of God through Jesus Christ. Inclusivism accepts the idea that God wanted salvation for all people of all times and places and that His salvific will can take many forms. For this reason, one can not in advance reject all other religions. What is not needed is *explicit* knowledge of Christ in order for one to be saved. This approach was initially developed before and during the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) by the catholic theologian Karl Rahner: "But if it is true that a person who becomes the object of the church's missionary efforts is or may be already someone on the way towards salvation - and if it is at the same time true that this salvation is Christ's salvation, since there is no other salvation - then it must be possible to be (…) an anonymous Christian"[4].

Since the Second Vatican Council, this inclusivistic position can be identified as the official position of the catholic church. In the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* of 1964, we read that "those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or

His Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them by the dictates of their conscience" (nr. 16)[5].

Inclusivism opens much more room for religious freedom and interreligious dialogue. For pope John Paul II, interreligious dialogue - based on the inclusivistic paradigm – is an instrument of peace. In his famous speech on the world day for peace in Assisi (Italy, October 26, 1986), John Paul II asked for "respect for one's personal conscience, rejecting all forms of coercion or discrimination with regard to faith, freedom to practice one's own religion and give witness to it, as well as appreciation and esteem for all genuine traditions"[6]. For John Paul II, this engagement in interreligious dialogue is not in conflict with the proclamation of Christ.

Inclusivism has been criticized because it would be a position that is not really open to the reality of the other, or because it would restrict its openness only to what is compatible in the other with my own religious identity. As Hick notes, "inclusivism still rests upon the claim to Christianity's unique finality as the locus of the only divine revelation, and the only adequate saving event. Non-Christians can be saved because, unknown to them, Christ is secretly 'in a way united' with them"[7]. Knitter argues that "when one has already the fullness of truth, there can't be too much to learn [in interreligious encounters]"[8]. The central critique against inclusivism is that it does not take into account adequately the religious self-understanding of the other as other. Burggraeve therefore criticizes exclusivism and inclusivism in the same line confronting these paradigms with the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas: "dialogue starts by resisting the inclination to exclude the other ('exclusivism') or by reducing the other to ourselves ('inclusivism')"[9]. Coming from a Muslim perspective,

Bulent Senay argues that inclusivism is often seen as a form of Christian imperialism. "On this understanding", Senay writes, "it is not Buddhism that saves, but Christ in Buddhism, and Hindus are not saved by their beliefs, but in spite of them"[10]. Indeed, also for Christians, it would be very difficult to accept that they are called in the dialogue 'anonymous Buddhists'.

It is important to note that the inclusivistic theology of religions is characterized by many variants and considerable recent developments. We refer here (among others) to Jacques Dupuis and his (catholic) 'inclusivistic pluralism'[11], Mark Heim and his (protestant) trinitarian theology[12] and Paul Griffiths and his (catholic) 'open inclusivism'[13]. Especially the logo-centric approach of the Belgian theologian Jacques Dupuis can be seen as one of the newest developments of the inclusivistic position. "The transcendent, illuminating power of the divine *Logos*, operative throughout human history accounts for the salvation of human beings even before the manifestation of the *Logos* in flesh [Jesus Christ]. (…) The divine *Logos* continues even today, to sow his seeds among peoples"[14]. At the same time, we see here how 'open inclusivism' reaches its limits. The *Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith* in Rome promulgated a notification that was published in the book of Jacques Dupuis as a warning: "It must (…) be firmly believed that Jesus of Nazareth, Son of Mary and only Saviour of the world, is the Son and Word of the Father. For the unity of the divine plan of salvation centred in Jesus Christ, it must also be held that the salvific action of the Word is accomplished in and through Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of the Father, as mediator of salvation for all humanity. It is therefore contrary to the Catholic faith not only to posit a separation between the Word and Jesus, or between the Word's salvific activity and that of Jesus, but also to maintain that there is a salvific activity of the

Word as such in his divinity, independent of the humanity of the Incarnate Word"[15].

Both the developments in the inclusivistic theology and the critiques against these developments should be seen in the light of the discussion with a third paradigm: pluralism. Pluralists sometimes claim silently that their approach is the *only* approach that makes real dialogue possible. The central idea of pluralistic theology is the equality of all religions. All religions are all partial expressions of the Ultimate Reality. All these religions are parallel ways to salvation as far as they can transform human beings from egoism to an orientation towards the Ultimate Reality.

Also this pluralist paradigm has been the object of very severe criticism. D'Costa has argued that agnosticism is the inevitable outcome of pluralism because pluralism flees away from all religious particularity: "first from the particularity of the incarnation, then from the particularity of a theistic God, and then from the particularity of any religious claim, be it Christian or non-Christian"[16]. Pluralism risks to become again exclusivistic for all those who do not accept the pluralistic presuppositions to come to authentic dialogue. Paradoxically, it are often the most convinced believers within a particular religious tradition who have problems with the relativistic understanding of their religion by pluralism and who are therefore considered by pluralists to be unfit for dialogue. In this way, the questions raises if the pluralistic position is really able to tolerate and to dialogue with radical otherness. In this sense, pluralism is in essence not very different from inclusivism and even exclusivism. It also is based on an idea of a common ground. John Cobb warns against this idea as the foundation for interreligious dialogue: "(…) real dialogue involves listening to genuine strange ideas, whereas the assumption of common

ground limits the strangeness of what can be heard. The listener who is convinced of common ground will not be able to hear the full novelty of what is said"[17].

It is remarkable to note that most of the discussion on the nature of interreligious dialogue, especially in Christian circles, situates itself between inclusivists and pluralists. It seems as if the dialogue is imprisoned in the traditional typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. The traditional typology is created by Christian scholars to reflect on Christian questions, especially questions related to the possibility of salvation for the non-Christian believer. But this soteriological question is a Christian question. Lindbeck speaks about the "soteriological fixation" of the traditional typology as another expression of the idea of Christian superiority[18]. The orientation of e.g. Judaism or Buddhism can hardly be described as an orientation towards salvation as it is understood in the Christian framework. So the critique concerning the respect for the self-understanding of the other should not only be addressed towards inclusivism but towards the whole enterprise of the trilogical theology of 'non-Christian' religions itself.

The critique on the trilogical enterprise itself gave birth to another approach to the interreligious dialogue which centres around the particularity of religious systems. This position can not be identified with the traditional distinction between exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, "rather it attempts to change the terms of the debate"[19] itself. The goal of the particularist in interreligious dialogue is no longer to reduce the difference to a common denominator or common ground, but to discover, to tolerate and to accept as such the differences among the partners in dialogue. The post-liberal theology of George

Lindbeck can be considered as the most eminent expression of this position. Religions are not just different frameworks to express human experiences of the divine, but on the contrary, religions are different frameworks that constitute radical different religious experiences. Religion is an external word (*verbum externum*) that shapes the self[20]. Lindbeck compares religions with linguistic systems which are also always particular: believers of religions are people who have learned to speak a particular religious language and there is no general religious language. Moreover, what is typical for Lindbeck's position, is that religious languages are untranslatable, in contrast with natural languages, because for him, religious languages are intra-semiotic, intra-textual and all-encompassing. He stresses that "nothing can be translated out of this [i.c. biblical] idiom into some supposedly independent communicative system without perversion, diminution or incoherence of meaning"[21].

The consequence of this position is in fact the impossibility of interreligious dialogue. Lindbeck's conclusion is clear: "Not only do they [the religions] no longer share a common theme such as salvation, but the shared universe of discourse forged to discuss that theme disintegrates. (…) Those for whom conversation is the key to solving interreligious problems are likely to be disappointed"[22]. What is important in this position, is that Lindbeck is clear in drawing the consequences of his own theology for interreligious dialogue. A radical particularism means the end of interreligious dialogue since there is nothing common to talk about en we are even lacking a common language to understand each other. In this position, we see how the dominance of sameness is exchanged for the dominance of otherness.

Of course, it is not because this particularism means the end of the possibility of interreligious dialogue that this is *per se* an argument against this position. Perhaps dialogue is just impossible. But the question is if the presuppositions that Lindbeck uses to understand religion do justice to the essence of the dynamics of religions itself. Are religions closed, untranslatable and all-absorbing linguistic systems creating different worlds that can not dialogue with each other? Several elements in the self-understanding of religions tend to give a negative answer. First of all, from the monotheistic perspective, all human beings are created in the image of God, and are connected with each other. Also in eschatological perspective, the dream of the biblical God is oriented towards the unity of the whole creation. This means that neither the first nor the last word is given to separation or otherness, but to unity and interconnectedness. Linguistic systems are efforts to refer to God, to explain or to express the relation that people experience with something or someone outside themselves. So religious systems are not auto-referential, but refer to a God or a divine reality experienced as outside or beyond the linguistic system. Precisely because of this external reference, different religions can talk to each other about how they experience and express this 'outside' or 'beyond', and even a discussion is possible on the 'truth' in relation to this reference to the 'outside' or 'beyond'. Further, (religious) linguistic systems are not completely separated from each other historically. There are many linguistic, cultural and theological overlaps and mutual influences. The grammar of faith and practice of the different religions did not develop in near-isolation, on the contrary[23]. Finally, religions traditions are not static entities. Precisely because they refer to a living reality outside themselves, and because the context in which reality is

experienced, is changing constantly, religions are flexible systems. Traditions are therefore dynamic realities that can change in response to new challenges and in interaction with other traditions[24]. Lindbeck's approach risks to make of religions 'traditions without God': auto-referential instead of hetero-referential systems that can become either violent or indifferent for all that is different and that can not be absorbed in one's own system.

In *Sur la traduction* [*On Translation*] (2004), the French protestant philosopher Paul Ricoeur analyses the problem of the (un)translatable character of languages. He is well aware of both the opportunities and the risks of translation[25]. He formulates the paradox as follows: "Or the diversity of languages expresses a radical heterogeneity – and thus translation is theoretically impossible: the languages are *a priori* untranslatable the one in the other. Or translation – taken as a fact – is explained on the basis of a common ground that makes the fact of translation possible; but then one has or to find this common ground, this is the route of the original language, or one has to reconstruct it logically, this is the route of the universal language: this original or universal absolute language must be provable"[26]. Ricoeur formulates here the paradox between particularism and pluralism.

Ricoeur is both realistic and hopeful concerning the possibility of translation from one linguistic system to another. There is no translation possible without the risk and the reality of losing meaning, changing meaning, perverting meaning *vis-à-vis* the original text. Ricoeur recognizes that the perfect translation is not possible and that one has to give up the dream of the perfect translation. But he warns that this may not end in the affirmation of the unbridgeable difference between the proper identity and the stranger[27]. The activity

of translation does not only end up in the loss of meaning, but also in the discovery of new meanings, also in relation to the original text. Even more, in the effort of translating in confrontation with the other, new meanings can appear that were not clear or revealed until now, even not to those who speak the original language. Ricoeur speaks about an "enlargement of the horizon of one's proper language"[28] and of "linguistic hospitality", of receiving the other in one's own religious understanding of reality[29].

In this line, one should be aware that also every interreligious translation is a dangerous enterprise because in the translation, one runs the risk of losing or perverting religious meanings and become untruthful *vis-à-vis* one's tradition[30]. Since experience and language can never be disconnected completely, every speaking about one's own religion and about the religion of the other will in some way start from and always remain colored by one's own original language. In this way, for religious believers, 'inclusivism' in some way, is always inescapable. If e.g. the christocentric reference is 'translated away' in the dialogue, Christians would have betrayed their own religion, since the activity of the logos in Christ for the salvation of all men belongs to the essence of Christianity. But the fact that the perfect translation does not exist can never be an excuse not to enter into the hermeneutical process of translation and just to stay in one's own closed linguistic or religious system. A religion that refuses in principle to translate itself time and again destroys its fundamental dynamics born out of the dialectics between sameness and otherness.

In this way 'religious diversity beyond communality' can become a blessing more then a curse. It is interesting to re-read in this context the traditional story of the tower of Babel

(Gen. 11,1-9). The inhabitants of Babel tried to create meaning by realizing one common project based on one common language: the building of a tower "that reaches to the heavens" (Gen. 11,4). When God saw this idolatry of a world in no need of translation anymore, he confused their languages so that they were no longer able to understand each other. God created otherness. The inhabitants of Babel became strangers for each other and the dream of a common destiny and project was definitively lost. Traditionally, this story is read as a punishment by God, but an alternative reading is possible. In the building of the tower, God saw how humanity was looking for the infinite on the wrong place, namely by reducing the infinite to a common ground at the cost of otherness. God redirected humanity again to the real transcendence, that is only possible through the experience of the stranger. The other represents an invitation to break open my own closed linguistic world time and again, to enter into a 'translational' or 'inter-religious' relation. It is in this translational movement that I can (re)discover God, at the point and the moment that my loyalty is tested to the limit. In exegesis, the story of Pentecost (Acts 2,1-13) was often understood as an undoing of the story of Babel. But Pentecost should rather been read as a confirmation of the decision of God to bring into the world different languages. We think here about the changes of (interreligious) dialogue where everyone can speak his or her own language, but people – thanks to their careful translational activities - can not only start to respect and understand each other but can also learn from each other[31]. As Jacques Dupuis has mentioned rightly, this changes the agenda of the theology of religions in a fundamental way.

[1] This typology was first introduced in Alan RACE, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (London: SCM, 1983).

[2] Cyprianus (205-258), bishop of Carthago.

[3] See e.g. *Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization* (www.lausanne.org).

[4] Karl RAHNER, *Theological Investigations*, vol. I (London: Darton, 1964), p. 75-76.

[5] http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium-_en.html

[6] POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Address at Assisi*, in Francesco GOIA (ed.), *Interreligious Dialogue: the Official Teaching of the Catholic Church (1963-1995)*, (Boston: Pauline Books, 1997), p. 532.

[7] John HICK, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion*, (London: Mcmillan, 1993), p. 84.

[8] Paul F. KNITTER, *Jesus and the Other Names. Christian Mission and Global Responsibility*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), p. 142.

[9] Didier POLLEFEYT (ed.), *Interreligious Learning* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), p. 237.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 220.

[11] Jacques DUPUIS, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997).

[12] Mark HEIM, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995).

[13] Paul GRIFFITHS, *Problems of the Religious Diversity*, (Malden: Blackwell, 2001).

[14] Jacques DUPUIS, *O.c.*, p. 320.

[15] CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Notification on the Book Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Vatican, 2001, nr. I.2.

(http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20010124_dupuis_en.html).

[16] Gavin D'COSTA, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, (Edingburgh: Clark, 2000), p. 28.

[17] John COBB, *Dialogue without Common Ground*, in Imelda ABBT & Alfred JÄGER, *Weltoffenheit des christlichen Glaubens*, (Tübingen: Katzmann, 1987), p. 145-154, p. 148.

[18] George LINDBECK, "The Gospel's Uniqueness: Election and Untranslatability," *Modern Theology* 13 (1997): 423- 450, p. 425.

[19] Paul GRIFFITHS, "The Properly Christian Response to Religious Plurality," *Anglican Theological Review* 79 (1997): 3-26, p. 3.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 23.

[21] George LINDBECK, *A.c.*, p. 429.

[22] *Ibidem.*

[23] Jerome STONE, "Philip Hefner and the Modernist and Postmodernist Divide," *Zygon* 39 (2004): 755-772, p. 767.

[24] John COBB, "Incommensurability: Can Comparative Religious Ethics Help?," in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 16(1996): 41-45, p. 45.

[25] Paul RICOEUR, *Sur la traduction*, (Paris : Bayard, 2004).

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 42.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

[30] This point is strongly and well-argued in Marianne MOYAERT, *Een zekere fragiliteit? Interreligieuze dialoog en de spanning tussen openheid en identiteit* (Louvain, PhD. in Theology: 2007), promotor: D. Pollefeyt.

[31] Didier POLLEFEYT, *Voorbij afschuw en verschoning* (Louvain: PhD. in Theology, 1995), promotor: R. Burggraeve, p. 532 & 584.