

RATZINGER ON THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL BASIS FOR MISSION

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SUMMARY: I. *The Church – Sign among the Nations*. II. *Salvation as Applied to the Subject*. III. *Christianity and World Religions*. IV. *Culture and Conscience*.

THE mission of the Church is one of the fundamental themes which characterize Joseph Ratzinger's theology; more precisely, his whole theological endeavour is motivated by his sense of the Church's divinely given mission. His first area of specialization was fundamental theology, which he chose, as he told us himself, so as to help give an answer today to the question of the *ratio spei*, the question of the reason for our hope (1 Pet 3:15). And so at the beginning of his teaching career, he specialized in fundamental theology and took a special interest in the history of religions and comparative religious studies. Ratzinger's early exposure to the world religions would be a tremendous source of inspiration to him, especially during the 1990s and following, when the relationship between Christianity and the world religions became a central topic in theology and beyond. As a peritus at the Second Vatican Council, he had a direct input into *Ad gentes*, the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, but also on other more specifically theological documents issued by the Council, all of which, as he indicated in an article he wrote after the Council, were deeply marked by the missionary idea.¹ Early on in his career as a theologian, he was also confronted by those theologies of hope which in turn mutated into various theologies of liberation and which tended to interpret salvation increasingly in inner worldly, indeed political terms. These, too, are all topics worthy of attention in any attempt to outline Ratzinger's theology of mission but are themselves too rich and complex to be addressed here. I have decided to limit this article to a more modest proposal, namely to outline very briefly the way conscience can be understood as the anthropological basis of the Church's mission. By way of introduction to the main topic, I propose to sketch an early attempt by Ratzinger, written at the time of the Council, to outline his fundamental understanding of the Church's mission from an objective perspective before turning to the subjective perspective, namely the anthropological basis for mission.

¹ Cfr. J. RATZINGER, *Konzilsaussagen über die Mission ausserhalb des Missionsdekrets*, in J. SCHÜTTE (Hrsg.), *Mission nach dem Konzil*, Matthias Grünewald Verlag, Mainz 1967, 39; reprinted in J. RATZINGER, *Gesammelte Schriften* [=JRGs], 7: *Zur Lehre des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils* (ed. by G.L. MÜLLER), Herder, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 2012, 7/2, 941.

I. THE CHURCH – SIGN AMONG THE NATIONS

The Christ event has sealed the fate of the world. It is this fact that gives rise to the Church's responsibility for the whole world. This is the real content of Cyprian's axiom, *Salus extra ecclesiam non est*, correctly understood, namely in terms of the forces that are effective in everyone's salvation inside and outside the visible Church.¹ How this is so, is difficult to say, but Ratzinger makes the following suggestion. Modern scientific research indicates that the entire being of the world is characterized by an ascending history whose highpoint is the breakthrough of spirit. Spirit is essentially openness for the Absolute and so for the world's becoming one [*Einung*] with the Absolute itself. Faith completes man's uncertain grasp of history's direction by showing that the purpose of the world is indeed the actual union of all that is with God, which union God alone can effect. Faith adds that "the decisive, final breakthrough, totally transcending the breakthrough of nature to spirit, happened in Jesus Christ, in the man who was at the same time Son of God, really one with God." The meaning of the rest of history is accordingly: "to enter into the Christ event, in which the goal of history has become reality."² The relationship between the ascending history of the cosmos and the Christ event is such that the former is the precondition of (or preparation for) the latter, while, on the other hand, Christ grants the world what it could never achieve on its own, namely becoming one with God. Since then, history has its meaning in Christ, who influences history through the "representative" or vicarious nature of His sacrificial act. This means that people can find themselves in the preparatory state, even after the Christ event, which state theological tradition calls the "*votum ecclesiae*" (= a desire for the Church, i.e. an implicit desire for baptism). And, of course, such people can fail to move in the direction intended by that preparatory state. How this plays out in practice, as far as individuals are concerned, is known only to God. Ratzinger concludes that the function of the Church in the whole of reality is to make the Christ event present in history and to be that event's increasing fulfilment in penetrating the whole of history.³ This is realized above all in the entire sacramental system centred on the Eucharist understood as cosmic liturgy.⁴ The

¹ Cfr. *Kirche - Zeichen unter den Völkern* [originally published in 1964] in *JRGS*, 8: *Kirche - Zeichen unter den Völkern: Schriften zur Ekklesiologie und Ökumene* (ed. by G.L. MÜLLER), Herder, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 2010, 8/2, 1032. What follows is based primarily on this article (1021-1034).

² *Ibidem*, 1033.

³ "The Church is thus the publicly erected sign of God's salvific intent with the world, the effective sacrament of the brotherly union of God and humanity" (*ibidem*, 1034).

⁴ "[T]he Blessed Sacrament contains a dynamism which has the goal of transforming mankind and the world into the New Heaven and the New Earth, into the unity of the risen Body." (J. RATZINGER, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2000, 87; cfr. also 68-70; 90). For a full treatment see his *Kommunion - Kommunität - Sendung*, in *JRGS*, 8/1, 308-332 (esp. 322-327); *Eucharistie und Mission*, in *JRGS*, 11: *Theologie der Liturgie: die sakramentale Begründung christlicher Existenz* (ed. by G.L. MÜLLER), Herder, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 2008, 397-423.

essence and meaning of mission, then, does not mean that the salvation of the non-Christian is only possible by visible incorporation into the Church. Rather it means “that Christ’s salvation present in the Church is a forward-thrusting power, which is ordained to draw the whole cosmos into itself; in addition mission pertains essentially to [the nature of the Church as sign], it is the stance [*Gestus*] of openness, of being-for-the other, without which she would cease to be herself.”¹

Christ’s mission was to found the Church not for its own sake but for the sake of the non-Church, the whole of humanity, what the New Testament calls “the many”.² Just as Christ died for the many, the Church, sharing in his mission, exists for the many. “This healing of the whole takes place, according to the will of God, in the dialectical antithesis of the few and the many, in which the few are the starting point from which God seeks to save the many.”³ This, then, admittedly very sketchily and inadequately expressed, is Ratzinger’s basic understanding of the mission of the Church within salvation history.

II. SALVATION AS APPLIED TO THE SUBJECT

But what of the subjective aspect of the question? In other words, how, in the light of the Council’s interpretation of the axiom, *salus extra ecclesiam non est*, is a person saved outside the visible boundaries of the Church?⁴ Ratzinger approaches the question by trying to discover what, according to Scripture, is needed to be Christian. In the first place, the New Testament teaches that “If one has love, one has everything”. But no one truly has love (cf. Rom 3:23: all have sinned and forfeited God’s glory): our love is mired in and deformed by egoism. Because this is the human condition, we are, according to the Law, on that account condemned, were it not for the fact that “Christ defrays with the excess of his vicarious love the deficit in our love. Only one thing is needed: that we open our hands and let ourselves be gifted by his graciousness. This movement of opening ourselves for the gift of the vicarious love of the Lord is termed ‘faith’ by Paul.”⁵ Following Yves Congar, Ratzinger says that this faith in its fullness presupposes the entire fullness of those realities testified by the Bible, but that there is also something like a “faith before faith”, the nature of which is difficult to determine, except to say that it is more than mere good will. More precisely, it is the opposite of what the ancients called “hubris”, self-righteousness; it is what in the Bible is termed “simplicity of heart”,⁶ as expressed in the term “the poor in spirit”, the *Anawim*. The fully developed faith is an extension of that attitude.

¹ RATZINGER, *Kirche - Zeichen unter den Völkern*, 1032.

² Cfr. Rom 5:12-21; Mk 10:45 par.; Mk 14:24 par.

³ J. RATZINGER, *The Meaning of Christian Brotherhood*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1993², 75.

⁴ The following is based on J. RATZINGER, *Kein Heil außerhalb der Kirche?*, in *JRGS* 8/2, 1050-1077.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 1070.

⁶ Cfr. D.V. TWOMEY, *Ratzinger on Theology as a Spiritual Sense*, in J. KEATING (ed.), *Entering into the Mind of Christ. The True Nature of Theology*, IPF Publications, Omaha (NB) 2014, 49.

The New Testament thus gives us two answers that are apparently contradictory but in fact form a unified whole: on the one hand, "Love alone suffices", and on the other, "Only faith suffices". As Ratzinger puts it: "Both together express an attitude of going beyond oneself, in which the human person begins to let go of his egoism and reaches out towards the other person. For this reason, the brother, the fellowman is the place where this attitude is tested; in his 'Thou', the 'Thou' of God comes incognito toward the person."¹ But in addition, one can choose some other incognito under various guises, such as those many realities in one's own respective religious and profane world, which can be a summons and a help to a person in the saving exodus of going beyond himself. But it is also clear that there are things which can never be capable of being an incognito of God, such as hate, hedonistic egoism or pride, and those he cannot choose.²

This leads to a detailed discussion of a widely held, but false, understanding of conscience understood as simply following one's convictions. If conscience were to be equated with one's personal convictions, then one would have to see "in the heroism of the SS man, the cruel exactness of his perverted obedience" a kind of *votum ecclesiae* (= an implicit desire for the Church). Such an extreme case illustrates what is at stake. Insofar as the call of conscience is equated with those convictions that have achieved a certain social, cultural and historical status in one's environment, then it simply amounts to the claim that one can be saved by being true to whatever system one happens to find oneself in. Though, Ratzinger comments, it may seem generous and progressive today to expect a Muslim to become a better Muslim, a Hindu to become a better Hindu etc., this view is seen to be absurd when taken to its logical conclusion, i.e. that a cannibal must become a better cannibal, an SS man a better SS man, etc.

What is wrong here is the idolization of the system, the institution. But what saves man is not the system but something that transcends any system: love and the faith that puts an end to egoism and the self-destructive hubris. "The religions are a help towards salvation to the extent that they induce a person to such an attitude; they are a hindrance to salvation to the extent that they are an obstacle to this attitude."³ Further, if the existing religions and ideological systems could save people, then humanity would be closed into various separate cultural identities. This would mean, in principle, that communication with others outside our cultural sphere would a priori be excluded. "By way of contrast, faith in Christ means the conviction, that there is a call to go beyond these separate identities and that only in this way, in moving towards the unity of the spirit, does history come to its fulfilment."⁴

But, Ratzinger points out, there is another aspect to be considered. If by conscience is meant loyal adherence to the system one happens to find oneself in,

¹ RATZINGER, *Kein Heil außerhalb der Kirche?*, 1070-1071.

² Cfr. *ibidem*, 1071 (quoting Y. Congar).

³ *Ibidem*, 1072.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

then that is not conscience understood as it should be, as that “call of God which is common to all”; it is rather a mere social reflex, the superego of a particular group. Should one preserve this superego, he asks rhetorically, or rather should one try to unravel it because it stands in the way of the true call of man? In fact, conscience does not tell one person to be a Hindu, another a cannibal, and yet another a Muslim or whatever. For, as Ratzinger contends, “What it says to all of them is that, in the midst of their systems and not infrequently against them, one thing is commanded them, that each one should be human towards his fellow human beings, that one must love. Only in this way has someone made a *votum*’ (the ‘desire for Christ’), when he follows *this* voice.”¹ To live according to one’s conscience means not being a prisoner of one’s so-called convictions but to answer the call that is addressed to each human being; the call to faith and love. If one so lives according to this basic law of Christianity, then perhaps one could use what Ratzinger calls that “questionable” term: “anonymous Christianity.” In another context he wrote more pointedly: “In the theology of the history of religions, Christianity does not simply take the side of the religious person, take the side of the conservative who keeps the rules of play in his inherited institutions; the Christian rejection of the gods signifies much rather a choice to be on the side of the rebel, who for the sake of conscience dares to break from what is accustomed. This revolutionary trait in Christianity has perhaps for too long been hidden beneath various conservative models.”²

III. CHRISTIANITY AND WORLD RELIGIONS

Perhaps the most important of the many documents issued by the CDF when Ratzinger was Prefect was *Dominus Iesus* (2000) right in the middle of the Second Millennium celebrations – and indeed articulating the whole purpose of those celebrations. Three years later he published a collection of articles which, with one exception, he had written during the nineties when debate on the pluralist theology of religions was at its height: *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*.³ Those articles address the same subject from different perspectives, namely “faith in Jesus Christ as the only Saviour and in the indivisibility of Christ and the Church.”⁴ In the preface, he writes that the publication of *Dominus Iesus* had provoked outrage not only in modern society but also from the great non-Christian-cultures such as that of India. It was described as a

¹ *Ibidem*, 1073.

² J. RATZINGER, *The Unity and Diversity of Religions*, in *Truth and Tolerance. Christian Belief and World Religions*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2004, 21-22 (see footnote ref. to his *Die Einheit der Nationen*, 41-57).

³ *Glaube - Wahrheit - Toleranz. Das Christentum und die Weltreligionen*, Herder, Freiburg-Basel-Wien, 2003. Cfr. W.A. AULER, *Die Kirche und die Vielfalt der Religionen. Die ekklesiologische-religionstheologischen Studien von Joseph Ratzinger*, in C. SCHALLER (ed.), *Kirche - Sakrament - Gemeinschaft. Zu Ekklesiologie und Ökumene bei Joseph Ratzinger*, F. Pustet, Regensburg 2011, 365-384.

⁴ RATZINGER, *Truth and Tolerance*, 53.

document marked by intolerance and a religious arrogance at odds with today's world. All the Catholic Church could do in response was, Ratzinger comments, "in all humility, to put the question that Martin Buber once formulated to an atheist: But what if it is true?"¹

And that is the main point.

Basically the various questions raised come down to the question about truth: "Can truth be recognized? Or is the question about truth simply inappropriate in the realm of religion and belief?"² The Church's reply, which Ratzinger tries to articulate in the course of the book, is Yes to the first and a firm No to the second. The Church's firm Yes is based on the fact that God has revealed himself to man and by so doing, revealed man to himself, as Vatican II put it. Christian faith is first and foremost about the truth of God's self-revelation in Christ Jesus. But this in turn implies man's capacity to know the truth – the denial of which in the modern world goes under the guise of relativism, "the most profound difficulty of our age."³

The only chapter of the book that was written before the 1990s was the first. In many ways it anticipates the main themes of his later papers. It was his contribution to a Festschrift in honour of Karl Rahner on the occasion of the latter's 60th birthday. In it Ratzinger dealt with the topic of the place of Christianity in the history of religions.⁴ Rejecting as inadequate any reduction of "religion" to a philosophical generalization (i.e. an abstraction) and questioning the common assumption that treats cultures as static entities, he takes a look at the world religions precisely as historical phenomena in order to discover by way of contrast the unique character of Christianity. In fact, he deals primarily (though not exclusively) with the great religions of Asia.

For example, the monotheistic revolution (in Israel first and then Christianity) differs radically from the Asiatic religions. In the first place, all that matters in Eastern mystic religions is man's experience: God remains entirely passive. On the other hand, in monotheism the prophet's divine calling can be dated and that call constitutes what we call history. As Jean Daniélou stressed, Christianity "is essentially faith in an event".⁵ Secondly, compared to the impressive religious personalities of Asia, the main actors in the history of Salvation (such as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the prophets) "appear practically uncouth".⁶ Man does not rise to God by passing through the various levels of being to behold the divine, "but the opposite happens; God seeks out man in the midst of his worldly and earthly connections and relationships." Of his own will, God

¹ *Ibidem*, 9-10.

² *Ibidem*, 10.

³ *Ibidem*, 72. After the collapse of Marxism in 1989, "relativism has become the central problem for faith in our time" (*ibidem*, 117).

⁴ Written in 1963; Reprinted in his *Truth and Tolerance*, 15-44.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 40 (quoting J. Daniélou's *Vom Geheimnis der Geschichte*).

⁶ *Ibidem*, 41.

enters into relationship with man so that biblical mysticism “is not primarily the discovery of some truth; rather it is the activity of God himself making history. It [biblical mysticism] does not derive its meaning from the divine reality becoming visible to man. Rather it makes the person who receives the revelation into an actor in divine history.”¹ (Here he again quotes Daniélou.) Finally, unlike the mystical religions of the East, Christianity does not recognize a two-tier religion, where the mystic alone has firsthand experience of the divine and the ordinary believer who has to be satisfied with religious symbols, in other words, “second-hand” experience, as it were. In Christianity, “just God alone deals at ‘first hand’. All men without exception are dealing at second hand: servants of the divine call.”² Each one responds directly to God’s call.

Ratzinger ends his early foray into the question of the relationship between Christianity and the world religions by opening up a vision for the future – the eschatological hope of the union of man with God and with one another at the end of time to which all religions and peoples are on their way. In the paper he submitted to the Conciliar sub-commission preparing the final draft of *Ad gentes*, Ratzinger wrote: “The cultural and religious values of the nations are not simply natural values which precede the Gospel and as such are simply added to it. Such an outlook ascribes to such values both too much and too little. In this world of ours, nature and the supernatural are never strictly separated but they penetrate each other. Because of this, all truly human values are marked both by a divine supernatural elevation and by human sin. They can never be simply added to the Gospel, but they serve the Gospel in accord with the law of the cross and resurrection. Pagan religion dies in Christian faith, but in the same faith human religion rises and offers to faith the forms in which faith then in different ways articulates itself.”³

In sum, his understanding of world religions and their cultural expression is dynamic, not static. They are dynamic in so far as their adherents are open to new insights and experiences, and so are capable of self-transcendence. As a result, cultures which are not closed-in on themselves are capable of mutually enriching each other. For Ratzinger, all cultures at their best have an advent quality – they are awaiting that fulfilment which is only possible in Christ. Let us look a bit closer at this.

IV. CULTURE AND CONSCIENCE

Culture, according to Ratzinger, “is the social form of expression, as it has grown up in history, of those experiences and evaluations that have left their mark on a community and have shaped it.”⁴ In other words, culture concerns a

¹ *Ibidem*, 42 [translation changed for the sake of clarity in the present context].

² *Ibidem*, 44.

³ Cfr. J. WICKS, *Six Texts by Prof. Joseph Ratzinger as peritus before and during Vatican Council II*, «Gregorianum» 89 (2008) 289.

⁴ RATZINGER, *Truth and Tolerance*, 60. Cfr. P. CASARELLA, *Culture and Conscience in the Thought of*

society's apprehension of one's place in the world, the values to be upheld, and one's role in the network of relationships that make up society; it is about how to be human. "In any question concerning man and the world, the question of the Divinity is always included as the preliminary and really basic question."¹ Going beyond what is visible opens the door to the Divinity and, as such, it is bound up with the ability of some individual to be able to transcend himself, touch the ground of all things, receive communications from the Divinity, and find mutual support in a greater social agency, "whose perceptions he can, as it were, borrow and then, of course, also carry forward and develop for himself."² Cultures develop in time, encountering new realities and assimilating new perceptions. "The historical character of culture signifies its capacity for progress, and that implies its capacity to be open, to accept being transformed by an encounter."³ This, then, is the Advent quality of cultures, using a phrase coined by Theodore Haecker. Since Christian faith itself can only exist in a particular cultural form, the term "inculturation" is perhaps inadequate and should be replaced the term "interculturality". This is predicated on what Ratzinger calls the potentially universal nature of all cultures, i.e. their inner capacity to be open to others, to truth, and so open to further enrichment.

With regard to the relationship between Christianity and the world religions, three basic theological attitudes have been identified today: one stresses the exclusivity of Christianity (e.g., K. Barth), the other is described in terms of the inclusivism (associated e.g. with K. Rahner), while the third position (which has become the dominant position) is known as the pluralist theology of religions (J. Hick and P. Knitter). Ratzinger criticizes all of them on two grounds. Firstly all three are based on too hasty an identification of religion with the question of salvation. Is it true, he asks rhetorically, that salvation is tied to religion? Surely we must look at the broader picture of human existence as a whole. This point, it seems to me, needs to be stressed; it refers to the whole breath of moral behaviour and not simply on the observance of religious rituals. In the second place, the three positions tend to treat world religions indiscriminately. It hardly needs today be pointed out that religions per se don't all lead men to what is higher and noble; indeed, they themselves exist in a variety of forms, some of which can be (and are) highly destructive.⁴ But the main question posed by the pluralist theologians of religions is an existential one: should one simply make the best of whatever religion one happens to find oneself in, as practised by others around him or her? Ratzinger's response is: "Or must he not, whatever hap-

Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, in J.C. CAVADINI (ed.), *Explorations in the Theology of Benedict XVI*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame (IN) 2012, 63-83. See also D.V. TWOMEY, *Ratzinger on modern culture, truth and conscience*, «Forum Theologiczne» 13 (2012) 155-70.

¹ *Ibidem*, 61.

² *Ibidem*, 61.

³ *Ibidem*, 62.

⁴ Cfr. *ibidem*, 53-54. In his discussion with Jürgen Habermas in Munich on 19 January 2004, Cardinal Ratzinger highlighted the pathologies of religion, which are highly dangerous, as well as pathologies of reason. See also Benedict XVI's *Regensburg Address*, 12 September 2006.

pens, be one who strives to purify his conscience and, thus move forward – at the very least – to the purer forms of his own religion? If we cannot assume as given such an inner attitude of moving onward, if we do not have to assume it, then the anthropological basis for mission disappears.”¹

This anthropological basis for mission is illustrated in Scripture. Commenting on the Magi, Pope Benedict XVI writes that they were neither just astronomers nor just “wise”. Rather, “[t]hey represented the inner dynamic of religion toward self-transcendence, which involves a search for truth, a search for the true God and hence ‘philosophy’ in the original sense of the term.”² It is only because the Apostles and the first disciples among the Jews were looking for the “hope of Israel”, that they were able to recognize the Lord. Likewise, it was the “God-fearers” among the Gentiles, those who were unsatisfied with their own traditional religions and were seeking for the truth, who were open to the faith and became the first Christians (cfr. Acts 10:2; 35).³

This, it seems to me, is at the core of Ratzinger theology of mission: namely that primordial conscience which is a given in every human person since he or she is created in the image and likeness of God. It impels one to search for the truth, to search beyond the surface of things, i.e. beyond the claims of commonly accepted customs and mores. Conscience at the ontological level is to be distinguished from the second level of conscience, namely a judgment about a particular action to be done or omitted; such actions belong to the arena of history, they constitute human history.

The first, as it were, ontological level of conscience, then, consists in the fact “that something like a *primal memory (eine Urerinneung) of the good and of the true* (both are identical) is implanted in us; that there is an inner tendency of being in man made in the likeness of God towards that which is in conformity with God [...] This anamnesis of the origin, which results from that constitution of our being which is in conformity with God, is not a conceptual, articulated knowledge, a treasury of recallable contents. It is, as it were, an interior sense, a capacity of re-cognition, so that the person who is thereby addressed and interiorly is not opaque recognizes the echo of it in himself.”⁴ St. Augustine formulated it more simply as the sense for the good that is imprinted in us.

According to Ratzinger: “The possibility for and the right to mission rests on this anamnesis of the Creator, which is identical to the ground of our existence.

¹ *Ibidem*, 54.

² J. RATZINGER, *Jesus of Nazareth. The Infancy Narratives*, Image, New York 2012, 95.

³ From the very start of his academic career, Ratzinger stressed that the early Church, which rejected the world of pagan religions, found allies in the philosophers, i.e., those who were critical of their own inherited cultural and religious values. See his 1959 inaugural lecture in Bonn: *Der Gott des Glaubens und der Gott der Philosophen. Ein Beitrag zum theologia naturalis* (ed. by H. SONNEMANS, Johannes-Verlag, Leutersdorf 2004).

⁴ J. RATZINGER, *Wahrheit, Werte Macht. Prüfsteine der pluralistischen Gesellschaft*, Herder, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 1994², 51-52. See also J. RATZINGER, *On Conscience: Two Essays*, NCBC-Ignatius Press, Philadelphia-San Francisco 2011; for an evaluation, see S. CHALMERS, *Conscience in Context. Historical and Existential Perspectives*, Peter Lang, Bern 2014, 243-261.

The gospel may, indeed must, be proclaimed to the pagans because they themselves are yearning for it in the hidden recesses of their souls (see Isaiah 42:4). Mission is vindicated, then, when those addressed recognize in the encounter with the word of the gospel that this indeed is what they have been waiting for.”¹ And, of course, we should be aware that the pagans here include what Ratzinger once describes as the “new pagans”, nominal Christians in the West.²

Christian faith, as Ratzinger is acutely aware, knows that there is much that is human in its own particular cultural forms, much that needs purification, and indeed he realizes that one of the positive values of genuine dialogue with the world religions is contributing to that process of self-criticism and so of purification. “But it is also certain that it [Christian faith] is at heart the self-revelation of truth itself and, therefore, redemption. For the real problem of mankind is the darkening of truth. This distorts our action and sets us against one another, because we bear our own evil within ourselves, are alienated from ourselves, cut off from the ground of our being, from God. If truth is offered, this means leading out of alienation and thus out of the state of division; it means the vision of a common standard that does no violence to any culture but that guides each one to its own heart, because each exists ultimately as an expectation of truth.”³ Here Ratzinger articulates one of the primary motives for mission – to bear public witness to the truth, to God’s self-revelation in Christ. It is, as he himself puts it, “the inner obligation to send all peoples to the school of Jesus, because he is the truth in person and, thereby, the way to be human.”⁴ Ratzinger also sums up his own understanding of the cultures of the world as shaped by the world religions: despite huge differences of expression, they share moral values common to all (and summed up in the Golden Rule) but they also exist in expectation of a greater truth: God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

V. CONCLUSION

Any complete attempt to outline Ratzinger’s theology of mission would have to show how his ideas developed from his initial broad, general vision of the Church being the instrument of God in leading humanity towards the final unification, when God would be all in all to a more personal and spiritual theology focused on the person of Christ and the human person. Initially, his interest in the theme of mission was somewhat extrinsic to his main concerns, such as the centrality of Christian “pro-existence” where the Church is seen as the few chosen for the many, or what it means to be a Christian today, if one does not have to be a baptized Christian to be saved. The grand vision of his early theology, which seems to show some influence of the ideas of Teilhard de Chardin, though never abandoned, gives way over time to more concrete concerns

¹ RATZINGER, *On Conscience*, 32-33.

² Cfr. J. RATZINGER, *Die neuen Heiden und die Kirche*, in *JRGS* 8/2, 1143-1158.

³ RATZINGER, *Truth and Tolerance*, 66-67.

⁴ *Ibidem*, 76.

as Ratzinger becomes more and more involved with understanding the threat of relativism and the challenges posed by the pluralist theologies of religion,¹ which tended at best to equate mission with dialogue. In that context, the issue of truth becomes paramount for Ratzinger and with it the rediscovery of conscience, the sensorium of truth, as the anthropological basis for mission. It seems to me that what Karl Rahner proposed as the supernatural existential in man might well be more accurately identified as primordial conscience, an insight which is both philosophically and theologically better founded. For all that, to date I have not found in Ratzinger's writings what might be considered a full-blown articulation of why mission today (in the strict sense of proclaiming the Good News to those who are not baptized or, if baptized, just nominal Christians) is so urgent. The closest he comes to it, as far as I can see, is to be found in his small book on spiritual Christology:

"The Church's real ministry of liberation is to hold aloft the flame of truth in the world [...] The Church's real contribution to liberation, which she can never postpone and which is most urgent today, is to proclaim truth in the world, to affirm that God is, that God knows us, and that, in Jesus Christ, he has given us the path of life. Only then can there be such a thing as conscience, man's receptivity for truth, which gives each person direct access to God and makes him greater than every imaginable world system."²

And perhaps that statement is sufficient.

ABSTRACT

The motivating force behind Ratzinger's theology is his acute awareness of the divine mission of the Church. Conscious of the need to give a reason for the hope that is in us (cfr. 1Pet 3:15), his entire theological oeuvre is marked by this missionary dynamism. After a brief sketch of Ratzinger's understanding of the Church's mission in objective terms within the context of world religions – as the Body of Christ that exists for the salvation of humanity (the "few" for the "many") –, this article attempts to clarify his claim that conscience is the anthropological basis for mission.

¹ Ratzinger also highlights the remarkable common philosophical assumptions shared by both the Asiatic religions and Western relativism.

² J. RATZINGER, *Behold the Pierced One*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1986, 127-128.

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