

REV. MASSIMO SERRETTI

UNIQUENESS AND UNIVERSALITY OF JESUS CHRIST IN DIALOGUE WITH RELIGIONS

A b s t r a c t. The author shows that in the contemporary crisis of Christianity fits crisis of questioning his “claim to the truth.” Skepticism about the truth that bringing Christianity is supported by the achievements of modern science, which intends to overcome thinking about the existence of man and his relationship to God. To contribute two more factors: critical exegesis and critique of classical metaphysics. In the context of these risks, the Author attempts to read the explanatory signs of the times, pointing to the issue of religious truth through the prism of the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ. The position to be adopted in relation to truth, Author believes for crucial, because it gives rise to this, to talk about the true religion. In this way he desires to make a challenge for Christian thought associated with the current growth and spread of religious movements.

Key words: Jesus Christ; religion; dialogue; human person.

‘At the end of the second Christian millennium, Christianity in Europe, the place from where it spread, finds itself in a deep crisis, a crisis based on its claim to truth.’ Thus said Joseph Ratzinger in a lecture at the Sorbonne in Paris in November 1999. He went on to explain that the skepticism about whether a religion can be said to be ‘true’ is further supported, ‘by the doubts that modern science has raised about the origins and content of Christianity,’; in particular, the theory of evolution, ‘seems to have overcome the doctrine of creation, and knowledge concerning the origin of man seems to have overcome the doctrine of original sin.’

MASSIMO SERRETTI – professor and lecturer at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome. He is a theologian, philosopher and author of books on personalism, as well as a priest of the Diocese of Rome; address for correspondence: e-mail: massimo_serretti@tim.it

To these concurrent causes, he adds another two: ‘Critical exegesis which relativizes the figure of Jesus and questions his consciousness of being the Son [of God], and doubts about the origin of the Church, and so forth.’ With this critical exegesis he associates, ‘the modern historical methods’ and adds another important factor, ‘the end of metaphysics which has made problematic the philosophical foundation of Christianity.’

Taking up this interpretative reading of the signs of the times, we would like to examine briefly the issue of truth; then that of religion and religions; and, thirdly, to consider the current questioning of the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ; and finally, to formulate the challenge that the current rise and spreading of religious movements poses to the Christian faith. This paper is then divided into four parts.

I

The position which is assumed in respect to truth and the true is decisive. It is crucial because if one does not admit that there is a truth, then it makes no sense to speak of a ‘true religion’; and whoever would speak of this would be accused of presumption. One speaks therefore with regard to Christianity’s ‘claim to truth.’¹

But even if one were to admit that there is a truth, and that it is not knowable, it would remain relative, almost a cognitive relativism, which would then be the foundation of a religious and a moral relativism.

We argue that there is truth, and that it is knowable; in fact, precisely because it is knowable then it is possible to have that spiritual phenomenon which we call knowledge.

How is it for man to reach the *verum*, the truth?

There is a close relationship between human genealogy and genealogy of the *verum* (of true).

1. The general premise is that the human person, when he is born and grows, finds himself in relationship with others. The child who is deprived of this presence, (the so-called ‘feral children’), never comes to know himself/herself, the world or other people.

¹ Marcello BORDONI, “Christology and Truth,” in: Massimo SERRETTI (ed.), *The Uniqueness and Universality of Jesus Christ. In Dialogue with the Religions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2004), 39-74.

It is as if the presence of the other is evidence before it can develop the perception of all other evidence.

2. If one looks a little more closely at the beginnings of human knowledge and if one studies the origins of human language, one realizes that if one does not admit a more original relationship that constitutes the inner life of the human person, one cannot explain the basic phenomenon of entering into relationship with another person. The question that would arise and which one would not be able to answer is: Who enters into a relationship? In fact, two things are clear: first, that personal identity is not constituted by the relationship with the other, and secondly, that without identity one cannot speak of relationship, not being present to at least one of these.

One who enters into a relationship is a person, has the dignity and ontological status of a person, and these are given by the relationship that God established with the person.²

This fact is a necessary precondition if one is to speak of 'truth' and 'access to the truth'.

3. These first two lines of relation make possible the activation of the power of intellect and reason, which traditionally are presented as that which opens up access to the true and the truth. The cognitive faculties of human beings are formed in an interpersonal relationship, and since the human person is not at the origin of the human person, they will not be at the beginning of the chain of truth. There must be, and there is, a Communion of Persons who is Truth.

This requires that the cognitive faculties of the human person should never be treated as though they were themselves the personal subjectivity of the person, but rather as a faculty of personality already genetically set up by God and implemented and activated by the presence of other created human persons. Communion precedes and is the foundation for reason, intellect, and knowledge.

4. Another essential condition of truth is the relationship of the intellect with itself. It too is rooted genetically in relationships with others and with God, which also in this case sets up a spiritual interiority. Many authors over the centuries have noted the internal dialogical nature of the human spirit and in the Christian era its origin has been found in the ecstatic relation of persons. Nicholas of Cusa explained the self-knowledge that the human person possesses as a participation in the gaze and the knowledge that God has of

² Eric De MOULINS-BEAUFORT, *Anthropologie et mystique selon Henri de Lubac: l'esprit de l'homme ou la présence de Dieu en l'homme* (Paris: Cerf, 2003), 83-241.

the person himself,³ but Thomas Aquinas had already presented *reditio* as a specific trait of spiritual creatures. Significantly he connected it with the ontological nearness to the divine reality so that the more a creature is near to God, the more it is capable of a full *reditio*.⁴

5. This third condition suggests that all human subjectivity is involved when it comes to the true and this is so, in this passage, not so much in the sense of the implication and adherence to freedom, as the ontology of subjectivity itself.

6. The last relational line which we want to mention is that which sees human beings and their intellect in relation to reality and the world. With respect to this relationship, we are also talking about truth. The human person always touches on the truth of objects and of situations that arise in the everyday world. Here his knowledge proceeds step by step, adapting and progressing. This should not be interpreted only negatively, as structural failure, as some epistemologists of science love to do, but rather as an unveiling that opens analogically to the greatest mystery of creation, which is the Creator. This way of truth should not be taken as the paradigm for all areas of knowing as was the case for centuries in many currents of European thought, violating the correct order of the different properties of knowledge and of exchanging the breadth of consensus reached at this level with true universality, which certainly cannot be set up from a lower realm intellectually recognized by all.

From the foregoing, one can see that that the genealogy of the 'I' and that of 'the true' correspond and are co-essential, so that, the evidence of the true and the self-evidence of the I stand or fall together. The phrase that sums up everything is this: If this is not true, then I am not me, in other words, I am not even myself. The truth therefore before it involves the person at the level of will that adheres to it more or less; it implies a personal level, it implies the person as such.

II

We come now to the phenomenon of religion and of religions. Neither Judaism nor Christianity calls themselves, in the strict sense, 'religions'. However, beginning with the Judeo-Christian revelation a clear expla-

³ NICOLAUS VON CUSA, *De visione Dei, Opera omnia*, vol. VI (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 2000).

⁴ THOMAS AQUINAS, *De veritate*, q. 1 a. 9 co.

nation has emerged of the religious phenomenon which has its explicative fulcrum in the mystery of creation.

From this point of view, the Old Testament is a whole education to stay away from religions, cults, and practices related to them. The Lord God of Israel appears strongly anti-religious and 'works' for centuries in order to separate the Chosen People from the religions of the pagans. The pagan religion in the Old Testament is always, by definition, idolatry, and, as such, its practices are considered 'an abomination' in God's eyes. Often they are linked to the worship of evil spirits. The split with other religions is clear. However, this does not exclude that among the Gentiles there may be the righteous people, but these are not such in virtue of religion, but because they follow the law that is written in the heart.

Even Christianity stands on the basis of a clear break from religions. See the paradigmatic discourse of St. Paul at the Areopagus in Athens (*Acts* 17: 16-33).

On the other hand Christianity, because of its welcome of those who came from a wide variety of peoples and on the basis of Revelation and the new experience 'in Christ', while, on the one hand, it defends itself with apology, on the other hand it is able to explain how the religious phenomenon is linked to the desire of God that all people naturally have.

The doctrine of 'natural desire for God' (*desiderium naturale videndi Deum*) is already outlined in the patristic age and further elaborated in the great Scholastics.

In the past century the doctrine of *desiderium naturale Dei* found a strong recovery in the work of Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*.⁵ This doctrine allows for the emancipation of the reality of religions from deterministic dependence on the many and varied historical and cultural matrices (cf. E. Troeltsch) and from the theory of development of human consciousness in progressive forms of self-possession (G.W.F. Hegel) or from increasing alienation (L. Feuerbach, K. Marx), or from the generality of the amorphous concept of 'archetypal religious experience'⁶ (M. Eliade, and differently J. Hick); and so from the consequent affirmation of the human person as *homo religiosus*.

⁵ Henri DE LUBAC, *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (New York: Crossroad P.C., 1998).

⁶ Mircea ELIADE, *Le sacré et le profane* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965); John HICK, *An Interpretation of Religion. Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven, 1992²).

Let us look a little more closely at what is meant by ‘natural desire for God.’ First, it is a desire of nature (*naturae desiderium*) and so it pervades the natural dimension of the person, his whole nature. It is a fundamental desire not to be confused with others or malleable at will. It is a desire determined by its end that is not re-orientatable or pointed in other directions, as if it were a fuzzy and polyvalent energy like psychological impulses.

Another feature of this desire is that it is ineffective: it does not have in itself what is needed to achieve the purpose for which it is preordained (*inefficax et improportionatum*). Not only that, but it is not even knowable in its true nature, outside of Revelation (cf. B. Pascal).⁷ The human person, in fact, outside of Revelation, not only ignores the answer to the question contained in the desire for God, but also ignores the truth of the question. The human person knows that he bears in himself the question, but cannot know by himself what the question is about, until he meets the answer. His end is supernatural.

The doctrine of ‘the desire of God’ allows us to draw a clear dividing line between faith joined to Revelation and religions as natural religions.

All religions are born from the natural ‘natural desire for God’ and therefore start with a question which in itself is good. However, they arise from the inability of the human person to remain too long in the soaring space of a question that is not answered, nor is he able to obtain it for himself. Therefore, religions represent an anticipation of reply and also, necessarily, at least in part, the building up of a response.

As such, natural religions always possess an idolatrous tendency (*eidolon*), even a Promethean tendency, and perhaps especially when they achieve a high degree of development of wisdom, philosophy and ritual.

Natural religions live from the link with the ‘natural desire for God’, but are implanted to a certain extent, as a denial, inasmuch as they are unlikely positive responses, to a question that cannot be kept more completely open.

In addition to this typology of natural religions, which includes almost all the old traditional religions, one must mention a third category, which is that of religions or religious movements that have their origin in revelations, but that do not come from a spirit that is of God. Among these there are some who understand themselves as within Christianity and others that present themselves as openly anti-Christian and, in particular, as anti-Catholic. At this

⁷ Blaise PASCAL, *Pensées*, 438.

moment of history it seems that statistically the majority of humanity fits into this category and not to that of natural religions.

In general one can say that, like the truth, even the desire for God brings into play the whole person.

III

In the face of all this, what shape does the affirmation of uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ take?

This should not be viewed above all in a 'political' sense, in terms of a necessary politic of relationships between religions with a view to universal peace; neither should it be primarily viewed in soteriological terms, that is, with a view to a definition of those who will be saved and those who will not be saved. We will try to look at it from a theological viewpoint, that is, in the light of Revelation of the one God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who is fully manifested in the only begotten Son Jesus Christ.

In doing so we take up again the essential points of the Declaration *Dominus Iesus* (6 August 2000) which, although a document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, was published with the confirmation and ratification of the apostolic authority of the Successor of Peter, John Paul II.

The first point is that in Jesus Christ 'there is the revelation of the divine fullness' (§ 5). The Second Vatican Council in *Dei Verbum*, said, 'By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation.' (§ 2).

In the Son, the Father has said all he had to express. 'To see Jesus is to see His Father (*John* 14:9). For this reason Jesus perfected revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making Himself present and manifesting Himself: through His words and deeds, His signs and wonders, but especially through His death and glorious resurrection from the dead and final sending of the Spirit of truth. Moreover He confirmed with divine testimony what revelation proclaimed, that God is with us to free us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to life eternal. The Christian dispensation, therefore, as the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away and we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ (see *1 Tim* 6:14 and *Tit* 2:13).'

This fullness of Revelation and participation in it excludes the possibility that in the natural religions, and even less in those raised by unclean spirits, we can or must find a complementarity with the Christian faith.

On the other hand, the uniqueness of divine Revelation and divine participation which is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, institutes a proper and appropriate mode of correspondence which is not to be confused with the simple act of holding as true some content or form of religion. “The distinction must therefore be firmly held between theological faith and belief in other religions. If faith is the acceptance in grace of revealed truth, ‘that can penetrate the mystery, to understand it coherently’, the belief in other religions is that of experience and thought that constitutes the treasures human wisdom and religiosity, that man in his search for truth has conceived and inserted in his relationship to God and the Absolute” (A § 7).

Another reduction which is promoted by some theorists of pluralism of religions and clarified by the declaration quoted above is that which separates the historical Jesus from the eternal Logos. The eternal Logos would be endowed with the full degree of universality but this is denied of its historical and so limited appearance, according to the theorists, in Jesus of Nazareth (cf. theories of Lessing).

This Christological reduction would allow more room for more revealing figures that could usefully be placed alongside that of the historical Jesus. These other figures could also be traced to the eternal Logos.

The contrast and contradiction of this with the entire Christology of New Testament and the faith expressed in the ecumenical councils from Nicea and Chalcedon is clear.

John Paul II in the Encyclical *Redemptoris missio* wrote this, ‘To introduce any sort of separation between the Word and Jesus Christ is contrary to the Christian faith [...] Jesus is the Incarnate Word—a single and indivisible person [...] Christ is none other than Jesus of Nazareth: he is the Word of God made man for the salvation of all [...] In the process of discovering and appreciating the manifold gifts—especially the spiritual treasures—that God has bestowed on every people, we cannot separate those gifts from Jesus Christ, who is at the center of God’s plan of salvation.’ (RM § 6).

There is also another current, which is also mentioned in the Declaration *Dominus Iesus* and which introduces an ‘economy of the Holy Spirit’ as broader than that of the Incarnate Word.

This position is based on a misunderstanding of the nature and work of the Spirit of God.

The promise of the Spirit that Jesus makes is first of all a promise of the Spirit who is the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of the Son. So there is a co-belonging of the Spirit, not only in its being expired ‘from the Father and the Son’ as stated in the Creed, but also in its being sent economically.

Moreover, the Spirit is sent for a full understanding of what the Son has taught and worked; and again, the Spirit makes the Son himself present in the sacraments that make up the Body of Christ, which is the Church. Finally, the Spirit is revealed in the Apocalypse as the one who cries out, along with the bride for the coming of Christ (*Rev 22:17*).

Taken together, the whole work of the Spirit is Christ-centered (there is no trace of pneumatocentrism) and is such in the Father's plan, who wants 'all things to be recapitulated in Christ' (cf. *Eph 2*).

Not only that, but to lead towards or away from Christ, is an indicator of the truth of the Spirit. Only the Spirit who leads to Christ, who explains Christ, who makes Christ present, is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of communion, holiness, and truth.

There is therefore a single economy and this is of great importance in the meeting of Christians with all religions.

Redemptoris missio further states, 'Men cannot enter into communion with God except through Christ, under the action of the Spirit' (RM § 5).

The final point that we wish to make briefly concerns salvation. The various Christological reductions bring with them soteriological reductions. Reducing the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ necessarily means reducing also 'the universality of the salvific mystery of Jesus Christ' (DI § 13).

All the New Testament clearly and continuously stresses that only in Him is there salvation for all people. He is the only mediator between God and men. 'Although participated forms of mediation of different kinds and degrees are not excluded – says *Redemptoris missio* – they acquire meaning and value only from Christ's own mediation, and they cannot be understood as parallel or complementary to his' (RM § 5).

IV

'Christ, who is the new Adam, revealing the mystery of the Father and his love fully reveals man to himself and shows him his supreme calling' (GS 22). This means that Christianity having 'in Christ' the intelligence of what is human in people, is able to recognize the character of religions, their nature, their noblest aspects and also the most damaging. Not only that, but 'in

Christ' the Church is able to discern also the spirit that animates the various religions and then to make a judgment in terms of knowledge.⁸

The advantage of this judgment makes for plausible and fruitful dialogue and debate, where this is effectively possible. In some cases, indeed opposition is such that it is not possible even to debate. (For example: the currents of the New Era of the Next Age which have as their objective the dismantling of Christianity).

The meeting in Assisi in 1986, convened by Pope John Paul II and the one declared by Benedict XVI on the occasion of the 25th Anniversary, are indicative of the benevolence of the Catholic view regarding the extremely diversified world of religions.

The Catholic Church tends to accept neither the identification of religion as an endemic factor in local and global conflicts, or the reduction of religion to a dimension managed and administered politically from 'above'. It is in the genome of the Anglo-American liberal tradition that we see repeated attempts that seek to build a pantheon of religions (see the World Religion Parliament in Chicago and the corresponding current Californian theory of the pluralism of religions).

The Catholic Church rejects this perversion of the relationships between the religious dimension and political power.

The trip by Benedict XVI to the United Kingdom, the beatification of John Henry Newman and his speech on Thomas More at Westminster Hall have been very eloquent on this issue.

Already the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis humanae* laid the theological and anthropological foundations which highlight the anti-totalitarian strength of Christianity, affirming the supreme duty of the human person is to respond to God. The right not to be bound by any power that tries to prevent it is based on this obligation of conscience. This underscores the right to religious freedom as the cornerstone of each and every other human right.

At the beginning of the third millennium, however, the Church has to face the dual phenomenon of those who, on the basis of the understanding that Christianity has promoted regarding the reality of religions, are forging a re-

⁸ Massimo SERRETTI (ed.), *L'attuale controversia sull'universalità di Gesù Cristo* (Città del Vaticano: Lateran University Press, 2003); Massimo SERRETTI, *Le mediazioni partecipate e l'unica mediazione di Cristo* (Città del Vaticano: Lateran University Press, 2004).

lativistic theory of pluralism of religions, and those who tend to affirm the religious sense of the human person against Christianity.

Let us briefly consider this second aspect. What in Europe today is grossly obvious is that the most radical critique of Christianity, especially Catholicism, is no longer being conducted, as in the classical theories of eighteenth-century atheism, when Christianity was viewed within a general critique of religion. Today Christianity is criticized, implicitly or explicitly, not from the point of view of the denial of religion, but rather from the point of view of its absolute claims. 'Religion' here is largely the same as 'religious experience', as a subjective and irreducible datum sufficiently indefinite and not allowing for any norm, be it moral, cultural, doctrinal, or institutional.⁹ The concept of 'spirituality' is very close to this conception of religion as a original and archetypal subjective experience.

This brings us to the point that the affirmation of religion and spirituality becomes the most powerful spring of the new form of atheism that affects a growing number of Europe's population.

This phenomenon begins in Europe, and having sailed from Europe, returns as a wave from the United States in the last hundred years, which has been and still is the major exporter of new religious, spiritual and / or spiritualist movements (cf. Pentecostalism, Mormons, New Age, etc.).

This is not surprising if one considers the historical fact that, while the French and Continental Enlightenment generally turned against Christianity as a religion and then against religion in general, English Enlightenment Deism became a champion of a rational religion and did not deny the religious moment in itself anthropologically or politically.¹⁰ It denied only the Catholic form of it (see the stories of English martyrs from the sixteenth to eighteenth century) and the more naive forms of religion as yet not sufficiently developed and rationalized.

It is now clear that in the history of Europe the transition from faith to religiosity represents a regression. However, this does not lead the Catholic Church to see a contradiction in principle, as did the Reformation, between faith and religion. Religion in itself, as acceptance or denial of the 'natural

⁹ G. GÄDE, "Religiöse Erfahrung als erkenntnistheoretische Grundkategorie," in: ID., *Viele Religionen ein Wort Gottes. Einspruch gegen John Hicks pluralistische Religionstheologie* (Gütersloh: C. Kaiser Gütersloher V., 1998), 33-88.

¹⁰ Peter HARRISON, *Religion and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Peter BYRNE, *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion. The Legacy of Deism* (London: Routledge, 2013).

desire for God', if properly understood and lived, can also open to faith. And faith, for its part, does not erase the natural desire for God; indeed, it reinforces it and makes it grow even further. In the encounter with the only true God, the desire that God himself has placed in the human person grows, as shown by the two millennia-old history of holiness.

But the Church knows with unfailing precision that religiosity and spirituality are not a true and effective response to the 'natural desire of God' that dwells in every person.

Not only that, but the Church warns against those forms of subtle and poisonous pseudo-mystical, pseudo-charismatic, or pseudo-revelations now so widespread, linked to unclean spirits and that are taught and propagated in numerous sects.

As stated by Pope Benedict XVI in his homily at the Mass *pro eligendo pontifice*, the front of the new sectarian religious movements is a warm front at the beginning of this third millennium of the Christian era. Here is indicated one of our current tasks in order to avoid, or not to let reign, the barbarity clothed in religious garb.

The same Pope Francis, on several occasions, described as inappropriate to the true Christian identity the search for new revelations and heavenly messages.

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- THOMAS AQUINAS, *De veritate*, q. 1 a. 9 co.

WYJĄTKOWOŚĆ I UNIWERSALNOŚĆ JEZUSA CHRYSZTUSA W DIALOGU Z RELIGIAMI

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Autor pragnie wykazać, że we współczesny kryzys chrześcijaństwa wpisuje się kryzys związany z kwestionowaniem jego roszczenia do prawdy. Sceptycyzm wobec prawdy, którą niesie chrześcijaństwo, jest wspierany przez osiągnięcia współczesnej nauki, która zamierza przezwyciężyć dotychczasowe myślenie na temat egzystencji człowieka i jego relacji do Boga. Do tego przyczyniają się jeszcze dwa czynniki, jakimi są: krytyczna egzegeza oraz krytyka klasycznej metafizyki. W kontekście wymienionych zagrożeń, Autor podejmuje próbę wyjaśniającego odczytywania znaków czasu, wskazując na kwestię prawdy religijnej przez pryzmat wyjątkowości i powszechności Jezusa Chrystusa. Stanowisko, które przyjmuje Autor w odniesieniu do prawdy, uważa za decydujące, ponieważ daje ono podstawę do tego, aby mówić o prawdziwej religii. W ten sposób pragnie sformułować wyzwanie dla myśli chrześcijańskiej związane z obecnym wzrostem i rozprzestrzenianiem się ruchów religijnych.

Słowa kluczowe: Jezus Chrystus; religia; dialog; osoba ludzka.