

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In the thesis, especially in Chapter two, we surveyed O'Collins' theology of the symbol, according to which the symbol is a part of human life. It is an indispensable means for the human person to express himself or herself, to communicate, as well as to relate to others, including to God, and thereby to take part in any divine and human relationship. The symbol is distinguished, but also inseparable, from what it symbolizes. It is real and historical. It carries God's self-communication or revelation, and has the power to transform us, as well as to invoke our vital response to God and to others. The distinction between the symbol and what it symbolizes can help us to avoid idolatry and also ecclesiolatry, whereas their being inseparable can help us to avoid a kind of iconoclasm or the radical separation of religion from church.

Along with symbol, we also explored O'Collins' understanding of the polyvalent character of experience. O'Collins' approach to both symbol and experience is one of "both/and" - openness to the varied aspects of each. In both symbol and experience, there is always "more." As I said, "we can never exhaustively 'get' the reality (including God) of what we encounter" (in the conclusion to Chapter two).

In O'Collins' study of each of these - symbol (symbolic language) and (religious) experience – we are able to invalidate the claim of any religion to possess the absolute truth about God or to constitute the absolute way to salvation or revelation, and this opens the door to a great reverence for all religions, as well as invalidates the claim that all religions are equal. O'Collins, thus, provides us with a basis for interreligious dialogue in which one can affirm the role of his or her own religious tradition as well as the validity of other religious traditions.

In Chapter three of the Thesis, we moved to O'Collins' understanding of revelation, the basis for which had been set by our consideration of his contributions to a theology of symbol and of experience, grounded in his "both/and" approach to each. This "both/and" approach also applies with respect to revelation: God's saving revelation is both interpersonal

(who is revealed) and propositional (what is revealed). It is cognitive or informative, but also effective, in creating communities and transforming lives.

In O'Collins' view, as we have seen, revelation in general, takes place within human experience, and not necessarily extraordinary experiences. According to him, however, Christian revelation in particular, is linked to specific events and people. It takes place primarily in history, through a variety of mediators, among whom Jesus Christ remains the unsurpassable one.

Revelation continues to take place; and even that which was experienced in the past continues to be re-actualized and re-interpreted. What happened "then," in the apostolic generation, however, was *foundational*, whereas later revelatory experience is *dependent*.

God's revelation is not to be identified with the Scriptures, but is rather an interpersonal event. Nevertheless the Scriptures remain the word of God. And while Tradition cannot be identified with divine revelation, it also has a special role in our experience of God's saving work, the appropriation to which involves both faith and reason. The Scriptures, as well as Tradition, are the primary means through which divine revelation was expressed and received.

O'Collins' theology of divine revelation comprises academic, practical and contemplative dimensions, balancing faith and reason, interpersonal and propositional aspects, past and present, and is attentive to normativity as well as to plurality.

In Chapter four of the Thesis, we came to the heart of the matter: how O'Collins' understanding of symbols, experience, and revelation provides a basis for a theology of religions that is pertinent (although not intended as such) to the theology of Jacques Dupuis, whose theology of religions was a kind of "theocentric Christocentrism," attempting to reconcile the claims of both exclusivism and pluralism.

We will not summarize again Dupuis' own theology in this regard, as we did at the close of Chapter four. Let us simply say that Dupuis takes seriously both the exclusivist concern for the necessary mediation of Jesus Christ and the pluralist emphasis on the universal will of God for human salvation, hence escaping both relativism and

fundamentalism with respect to faith. My point in the dissertation was to assert that O'Collins' well-grounded fundamental theology provides a solid basis for Dupuis' thought.

O'Collins' theological emphases come to the aid of those of Dupuis: revelation both inside and outside the Bible, the priority-but-non-identity of revelation with the Judeo-Christian tradition, the distinction between the general history of salvation and a special one, the foundational-but-non-absolute character of the revelation in Jesus Christ, O'Collins' distinction between the symbol and what it symbolizes, the relationship between God's revelation and human experience and thus the legitimacy of the world's religions, the relationship between Christian symbols and rites and those of other religious traditions. In other words, as I concluded Chapter four:

O'Collins' account of symbols, experience and revelation gives us a sound basis for explaining Dupuis' theology of religions. O'Collins' understanding of symbols, experience and revelation, and Dupuis' theology of religions standing together can serve as a comprehensive and systematic Christian-self-understanding in relation to the world religions, tackling and reconciling all the essential aspects of the Christian faith - specifically, Soteriological, Trinitarian, Christological, Pneumatological, Ecclesiological, experiential, contextual and ethical aspects - in trying to straddle two essential convictions, namely, the primacy and uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the legitimate role of the world religions in the order of salvation and revelation.

O'Collins' understanding of symbols, experience and revelation and Jacques Dupuis' theology of religions remind us - Christians in today's world - of our need to have an integrative theology, which upholds our Christian identity or Christian faith, while corresponding to the varying conditions of human existence, human experience, and the social, cultural and religious contexts in which people live. While being grounded in Christology, this theology needs to take into account the Trinitarian, Pneumatological, Ecclesiological, experiential, anthropological, contextual and ethical dimensions of Christian faith or Christian life. While stressing the study of divine revelation - whose climax is in Jesus Christ, with his life, death and resurrection - this theology is a study that relies on tradition and the Scriptures as its primary sources, at the same time being conscious of the conditions necessary for human persons to experience or discern that revelation.

Besides being confessional and faithful to its sources, this theology is also expected to be reflective and rational. It needs to furnish Christians with the ability to articulate and live their faith while opening to a dialogue with other people in their varying existential circumstances. Thus, “the work of the Christian theologian goes beyond any merely ‘private’ study in which the sole test for his conclusions would be the sacred writings of his religion. Theology is a community affair in which the theologian listens to and engages with present and past Christians.”¹ The theologian is an *insider* of the Christian community. In doing theology, he or she shares and responds to the community’s living experience and faith which are formed, recorded, and renewed by the Scriptures and living tradition.

Christian theology in general and Christian fundamental theology in particular, might change its theological “color” from one age to another. This is so not only because of its apologetic characteristic, which requires theologians to pay more attention to the contemporary situation of the world around them, and to those with whom they enter into argument or dialogue, but also because of the need to be open to further developing theological thought regarding fundamental theological issues.² Thus, one may propose that today’s theology should pay more attention to the question of God than to that of special divine revelation, as people nowadays are more concerned with the question, and the very reality, of God. This suggestion is insightful and important. Nevertheless, in order to be more relevant, today’s theology should also include the concern for those questions regarding subjectivity, the finite subject or the self of the human person, and otherness. These questions, which still hold a part of the stage among us, although they have been with us for some time now, cannot be ignored in today’s theological discourse. Likewise, to be more personal and applicable, today’s theology should continue its growing tendency to work less on the proofs and miracles adduced in discussing the question of God’s existence, than on the intrinsic relationship between God and human person, or between divine revelation and the finite subjects who receive that revelation, and who find themselves in relationship with God.³

¹ O’Collins, *Foundations of Theology*, p. 14. See also O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 36-37, O’Collins, *Filosofia e Teologia*, in *Rassegna di Teologia* 20, pp. 155-156 and O’Collins, *Rivelazione: Passato e Presente*, in R. Latourelle (ed.), *Vaticano II: Bilancio e Prospettive* (Assisi: Cittadella, 1987), pp. 125-126.

² See also Dale M. Schlitt, *Fundamental Theology and the Experience of God*, in *Église et Théologie*, 24 (1993), pp. 221-222 and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Foundational Theology*, New York, Crossroad, 1984, p. 265.

³ See also Schlitt, *Fundamental Theology and the Experience of God*, pp. 222-223 and Fiorenza, *Foundational Theology*, p. 265; Henri Bouillard, *La tâche actuelle de la théologie fondamentale*, in Institut

The theology which is needed by Christians in today's world should combine the three prevalent styles of theology; namely, academic theology, practical theology, and contemplative theology. Academic theology responds to the knowing act or knowledge (*confession*) of our faith, and the role of reason in our life. It also responds to our need for taking into account the human and cultural character of the Christian tradition and its Scriptures, as we continuously experience, interpret, discover, or discern God and his authentic revelation, and its truth. Practical theology, on the other hand, responds to the love or *commitment* of our faith, whereas contemplative theology corresponds to the hope or *confidence* in our faith, which manifests mostly in our sacramental life, prayers, and other liturgical or religious activities.⁴

In today's theological discourse, especially in our understanding of God's revelation - the foundation of Christian faith - there should be no room for one-sided or narrow views. Our view of the divine revelation should be a result of taking into account all its aspects (historical, dialectical...) and different approaches (propositional, interpersonal...). Our theology and our Christian faith need to avoid all kinds of reductionism; for instance, intellectualism and propositionalism.

We - today's Christians - should go beyond the contrast between different tendencies in theology, for example, propositional and non-propositional, intellectual and existential. We need to be wary of extreme trends, such as traditionalism and relativism, or fideism and rationalism, understanding that it is often the *via media* that gives a balance of the truths that these extremes contain, but have exaggerated. Such balance and integration must be found or manifested in our understanding of the relationship or interaction between faith and reason, which serve us to access and experience God himself, and his revelation. Likewise, they should work in our understanding of the relationship between God's revelation and the Scriptures, so that we may find where the truth lies between two other extreme tendencies in theology; namely, fundamentalism and liberalism.

Catholique de Paris, *Recherches actuelles II*, Paris 1972, pp. 9-21. Bryan Magee, *The Story of Philosophy: The Essential Guide to the History of Western Philosophy*, New York, DK Publishing, 1998, pp. 132-137; 158-163; William L. Rowe & William J. Wainwright (eds.), *Philosophy of Religion, Selected Reading* (Third Edition), Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998, pp. 104-108 & 184-196 .

⁴ Cf. O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 9-11.

Living in the contemporary world, we should be conscious of the postmodern challenges in thinking or in theologizing. We need also to realize both the divine and human aspects of the Christian tradition. Furthermore, we should be aware that there is a need for a continuous reinterpretation of tradition. Nothing in it is timeless. Tradition is subject to history, which is development if it is anything at all. Tradition is culturally and humanly conditioned.

We need to assert the priority of the Scriptures and tradition, as well as their limits, concerning the source and normativity of God's revelation. While acknowledging the centrality of Jesus Christ's role in the history of revelation and salvation, and his unique role or mediation in that history, we also need to be sensitive to religious and cultural plurality, and avoid "absolute" language. Even though Jesus Christ is the climax of revelation, and his revelatory mediation is unsurpassable, God's revelation has not yet been completed. The absolute fullness of the divine revelation awaits the second coming of Jesus Christ.

God's saving revelation is not confined to Christianity or even to Jesus Christ alone. It happens and it is mediated by all nature, people and religions. Thus, our Christian experience of God and our Christian affirmation of that experience should be also discovered and examined in our dialogue or discussion with those who read their experience of God and his revelation in other religious traditions, in other ways, or even in a non-theistic way.

In order to enter into such dialogue in discovering and experiencing God and his saving revelation, Christians need to seek the mean between two convictions: Jesus' primacy and uniqueness in the divine economy of salvation for humankind, which is at the core of the Christian tradition; and the validity of all religious traditions, which are believed to play some role in the salvific work of the triune God. The main challenge is how to express our faith in Christ and Christianity, on the one hand, and to acknowledge and show our reverence for the manifold works of God in other religions, on the other. The right "formula" to express what we believe will be the fruit of a long journey of search for the truth, which, in fact, requires an openness to dialogue with other religions, or in the words of Donald Goergen: with "those whose truth seems at first to be other than ours, with those who are others, whose beliefs may even appear strange."⁵

⁵ Donald J. Goergen, *Dialogue and Truth*, lecture handout at the Conference of Interreligious Dialogue, Bangkok, February 7-12, 2001.

The Church, which plays a mediating role in God's plan for human salvation, has to be conscious that this happens only through the grace of God, which, however, is not exclusively reserved within her visible boundaries. This initial attitude should encourage us to be cautious in our very approach towards members of other confessions or other religions. To say that the fullness of truth dwells in the Church does not mean that the Church grasps it all; having the Word of God and the sacraments does not make the Church both individually and collectively acknowledge all truths. It is evident that major religions contain a number of practices, and positive or salvific values, which are good and can only be inspired by God.

In fact, there is a reciprocity, especially nowadays, between the theology of religions and interreligious dialogue. Although the theology of religions is not new, it is a developing theology within the Church, and someday it will undoubtedly affect the development of doctrine. On the one hand, it gives interreligious dialogue theological principle, while, on the other hand, it needs to be enriched, even corrected, by the latter. Thus, along with the theology of religions, theologians and the Church should give more attention to the theology of dialogue. This suggestion found its support in Pope John Paul II, especially in his emphasis on the importance and role of dialogue; dialogue between cultures and between religions, and the importance of dialogue in the future of the world community (e.g., his "Dialogue Between Cultures for a Civilization of Love and Peace," on January 1, 2001, for the celebration of the World Day of Peace). Nevertheless, we are new at what dialogue means, and how to carry it out. We have just begun, and interreligious dialogue, in particular, is a new field. Therefore, I would recommend that we pursue further what the nature of dialogue is and how one ought to proceed with it.

As we explore these theological questions and topics, the Church needs to implement more efforts to understand what other religions are actually saying and what they believe, and not rely only on previous interpretations, or interpretations unacceptable to that religious tradition itself. In other words, the Church needs to enter openly and honestly into dialogue in order to learn, with the attitude that the Holy Spirit is present there and has something to teach and offer us.

If we pursue interreligious dialogue more deeply at various levels, and pursue the theology of dialogue and the theology of proclamation, the teaching of the Church can

continue to develop so as to more effectively meet the challenges of a world in which a plurality of religions is a reality. It is particularly in this field that Asia has a contribution to make to the missiology and theology of the Church. Thus, it would be beneficial for those who are involved with the theology of religions and interreligious dialogue to take seriously the documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences.

After all, it is clear that the Holy Spirit should be regarded as the initiator of the spreading of the truth. As for the human dimension, the Church has to encourage research and understanding of other major religions in order to facilitate contacts and to stimulate an ever-higher level of dialogue.

In addition, but no less important, since the divisions within Christianity represent a major difficulty for interreligious dialogue, the dialogue with other Christians must be pursued in parallel. The two dialogues, although separate, should work hand in hand. Progress in one is likely to be reflected in the other.

With regard to the responsibility of the Church's authority, we know that the leading authority for dialogue at the Vatican is now divided into four sections, which operate under the authority of, and with the support of, the Holy Father. They are (1) *The Pontifical Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, (2) *The Pontifical Council for Christian Unity*, (3) *The Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue*, (4) *The Pontifical Council for Faith and Culture*.

Although in the Church all major steps are taken with the approval of the Pope, a greater degree of coordination among these Councils and the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* might be beneficial to the Christian mission as a whole and to that of the Roman Church in particular. So far as we can see, each Council has been developing its own priorities and engaging in the dialogue in its own way. Although variety is definitely important, considering how vast the subject is, teaming is also essential.

Moreover, cooperation should not be limited within the Catholic councils, but needs to extend to other Christian organizations also. Among the most important international organizations promoting the dialogue between Christians is the World Council of Churches (WCC).

Another important ongoing and formally-organized dialogue is the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), with different chapters in various countries where questions regarding theology, discipline, canon law etc., are openly discussed. The most important questions being discussed at the moment are, Unity of Faith and Unity of Organization? Are they separable?

Before ending this thesis, it is vital to mention here that the theology of religions and interreligious dialogue does not deny or ignore the necessity of the Church's evangelizing mission. Yes, the Holy Spirit is at work in religious traditions, and salvation can be granted to those who do not explicitly believe in Jesus Christ and who live outside the boundaries of the Church.⁶ However, this is not a reason to give up the Church's mission which, according to Pope John Paul II, is to make all people know Jesus, his love, and the fullness of revelation, as well as to gather them together as one entire people.⁷ Missionary activity, according to Yves Congar, is necessary because it enables men and women to realize the design of God, "which is not only to save men, but to establish mankind as *one* People of God, *one* Body of Christ, one Temple of the Holy Spirit in which they can sing the praise which starts with Our Father. The image of God in which men and women are formed is only complete when all men and women are united."⁸ Still, the question is how the Church should carry out her mission in the context of religious and cultural plurality. Thus, there is a real need for cooperation among those who are involved with missiology, the theology of religions and interreligious dialogue.

It is hoped that this brief study will contribute, even slightly, to a better understanding of the current study of Christianity in relation to the world religions, and of the new orientation of the mission or apostolate of the Church. This mission of the Church is so

⁶ Cf. RM 10.

⁷ Cf. RM 11,55.

⁸ Cf. Yves Congar, *This Church That I Love*, New Jersey, Dimension Books, 1969, pp. 57-59.

eloquently described at the beginning of Chapter five of the Proclamation *Dominus Jesus*: “The mission of the Church is to proclaim and establish among all peoples the Kingdom of Christ and of God, and she is on earth, the seed and the beginning of that kingdom.”⁹

⁹ DI 18.