



JNANADEEPA: Pune Journal of Religious Studies

PJRS P-ISSN 0972-3331

23/2 Jul-Dec 2019: 19-33

DOI:10.5281/zenodo.4060568

Stable URL: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4060568>

Ways of Salvation and the Way of Salvation

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Abstract: Every religion offers salvation or liberation. Since the time of Cyprian of Carthage, the Catholic Church held the exclusive Christian claim that there is no salvation outside the Church (*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*). However, at the Vatican II there was a re-visioning and a renewed understanding of salvation that went beyond absolute exclusivism to a recognition of the role of other religions in the economy of salvation. Based on the teachings of Vatican II, the author shows that in Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God's Communion within the Trinity as well as God's communion with humans and their world all authentic ways of salvation find their uniqueness and legitimate space distinct but not separate from Christ, the Way! *Extra communionis nulla salus* – Outside Communion no salvation!

Keywords: Salvation, Church, Communion, Religions, Vatican II.

Every religion claims to offer the certainty of salvation or liberation to its adherents if they follow the way shown by it faithfully, consistently and perseveringly till the end of one's life. Some religions claim that the way shown by them is the only way to be followed to attain salvation or liberation. There are others who would do not deny the possibility of salvation in and through the following beliefs and practices of religions other than their own but would claim at least a certain kind of superiority over other religions. Since the time of Cyprian of Carthage the Catholic Church held the exclusive Christian claim that there is no salvation outside the Church (*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*). However, at the Vatican II there was a re-visioning and a renewed understanding of salvation that went beyond absolute exclusivism to a recognition of the role of other religions in the economy of salvation.

Immediately after the Vat II Council it was Kurien Kunnumpuram entered into an engaging dialogue with the teachings of Vatican II on the salvation of those who are not the members of the Church. It was his concern that the multi-religious context of India with many religions which claim to be ways of salvation challenges Christian faith about the claim of salvation exclusively through Christ and his Church. It is the concern of every Christian believer in India to understand the meaning of his or her salvation through Christ and his Church in the face of Hinduism and other religions of India which claim to be ways of salvation. In the foreword to his book *Ways of Salvation*¹, which was a revised version of his doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Innsbruck in 1967, he articulated the problem of religious pluralism that confronts every Christian believer in India. He observes that for a long time the Catholic Church showed little interest in entering into dialogue with other religions "leaving the Indian Christian a frustrated and marginal figure, ill-equipped for his mission in this pluralistic society". The Second Vatican Council opened

1 Kurien Kunnumpuram, *Ways of Salvation*, Pune: Pontifical Athanaeum, 1970

the Church to the outside world and encouraged dialogue with other religions. Kunnumpuram contributed to the understanding of the theological significance of other religions in God's plan of salvation according to the teachings and insights of the Vatican II and highlighted the importance of entering into dialogue with other religions as an imperative to the self-understanding of Church which is essentially missionary by its nature. At the end of his research on the approach of Vatican II to world religions Kunnumpuram affirmed that the approach of the Church was positive as the Council recognized the place and function of world religions in the divine economy of salvation. It discovered and acknowledged the presence of the seeds of the Word and the fruits of the Spirit in them. Therefore, the need for a theology of Non-Christian religions and developing a theology of Christian Missions were seen that time, immediately after the Council, as the task ahead for the Church, especially, the Indian Church.

The recognition of the place and function of non-Christian religions in the divine economy of salvation and the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the people of other religions call for a deeper reflection on the nature of the Church itself and its place in the world. Kunnumpuram says, "We need a clearer grasp of its [Church's] place in God's plan for the world. We must learn to regard the Church as the home of all peoples and religions. Thus we realize that is our Christian duty to recognize and appreciate the positive values in all religions, in a spirit of faith in God who has scattered his graces and insight among the nations of the earth. Genuine faith is always ready to acknowledge him wherever it encounters him."² During the fifty years after Kunnumpuram had made his study on the teachings of Vatican II on Church's understanding of the place and role of other religions in the divine plan of salvation there have been important papal encyclicals³ and other magisterial teachings, hundreds of theological books and articles on dialogue with other

2 *Ways of Salvation*, p. 95

3 Eg. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, *Christifidele Laici*, *Redemptoris Missio*, *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Inter-*

religions and on the need and the relevance of Christian missions. However, it is difficult to find in them a definitive statement with regard to recognizing other religions as ways of salvation that gives other religions their legitimate place in divine plan without a paternalistic or condescending attitude of the Church.

A theology of religion that sees other religions only as preparation for the gospel or ways that are to be fulfilled in Christ and in his Church may satisfy a Christian believer who experiences Jesus Christ as the fullness of revelation. Such an understanding of other religions satisfies one who is confronted by the nagging question about the salvation of millions of people who are not the members of the Church or not even heard of Jesus Christ or even they have heard of the gospel and Christ yet do not accept it as a better way of salvation than what they believe in. Why and how should, then, the Church fulfill its missionary mandate to proclaim Christ and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (cfr. Mt 28:18) if all religions are ways of salvation? Would not the understanding that all religions as ways of salvation sap the energy and enthusiasm of thousands of missionaries all over the world who toil day and night risking even their own lives for proclaiming Christ and work for the implanting of the Church? The legendary missionary zeal was for the salvation of the souls living outside the bark of Peter?

By going beyond the clear statement expressing the traditional belief of the Church that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* or outside the Church there is no salvation in the Second Vatican Council, the Church made itself very vulnerable. It is certain that a negative approach to other religions and the exclusive claim of salvation in and through the Church engender missionary zeal and enthusiasm as it was seen in the Church before Vatican II. In spite of the positive approach to other religions and acknowledging their place in the economy of salvation some missionaries continue to

religious Dialogue and The Proclamation Of The Gospel f Jesus Christ, etc.

hold the pre-Vatican II negative attitude towards other religions in their missionary approach to other religions. In this context, how do we reconcile the self-understanding of the Church and its commitment to follow the missionary mandate entrusted to it and still adhere to the positive approach to other religions and their offer of ways of salvation to humans? How can Church remain a home for all peoples and religions in the light of the teachings of Vatican II as envisioned by Kunnumpuram? In this paper an attempt is made to reconcile the apparent contradiction between the Ways of Salvation and the Way of Salvation. Do the Ways of Salvation reduce the importance and uniqueness of the Way of Salvation? How are the Ways of Salvation related to the Way of Salvation? Is the proclamation of Christ and his Kingdom to those who follow other Ways of Salvation still relevant?

Vatican II on the Salvific Meaning of Other Religions

No other ecumenical council in the history of the Church took seriously the plurality religions and their salvific meaning as the Second Vatican Council. It attempted to discover its own identity in relation to other religions and its mission to the people of other religions from its new insight into the meaning of revelation. The Dogmatic Constitution Divine Revelation viewed revelation in relation to the events of salvation history. The salvific interventions of God in history culminated in Christ and he is the perfection of revelation. From this new understanding of revelation which is summed up and climaxed in Christ was a departure from the “neo-scholastic intellectualism for which revelation chiefly meant a store of mysterious supernatural teachings”⁴. It opened the possibility of discovering the presence and action of God in all that is good in other religions. The teaching of Vatican II on other religions evolves from this new understanding of revelation.

4 Kurien Kunnumpuram, *Ways of Salvation*, Pune: Pontifical Athanaeum, 1970, p. 80; J.Ratzinger, “Revelation Itself”, in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed., Vorgrimler, London, 1969, p. 172.

The important teachings of Vatican II on non-Christian religions are found scattered in various documents of the Council. The Declaration on Church's Relation to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*) affirms that "other religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing "ways," comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all people. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ 'the way, the truth, and the life' (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself"⁵. The Catholic Church does not reject anything true and holy in other religions as well as affirms that they reflect a ray of the Truth that enlightens all people. Indeed, according to the Christian faith Christ is this Truth and the Way! It can be legitimately concluded that the Council recognizes everything holy and true in other religions flow from that Truth whose ray is found in these religions.

How are the religions related to Christ the Truth and his Church so that it possible for those who follow these religions to find salvation? *Lumen Gentium* clearly states, "Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all people life and breath and all things, and as Saviour wills that all humans be saved. Those also can attain to 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 through the dictates of conscience"⁶. If salvation is only through the Way and Truth that Christ is, then the salvation is both offered and received only through him whose Spirit is mysteriously at work in everything good, holy and acceptable to

5 *Nostra Aetate* No. 2

6 *Lumen Gentium* , No.16

God in all these religions. It is through this mysterious action of God they are saved if they remain open to that Truth that enlightens every human. The document on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes* states, “God in ways known to himself can lead those inculpably ignorant of the Gospel to that faith without which it is impossible to please him”.⁷

According to Kunnumpuram, “The Second Vatican Council recognizes that non-Christian religions possess many positive values such as truth and goodness, grace and holiness. It regards these values as a sort of secret presence of God, as the seeds of the Word and the fruits of the Spirit. The Council realizes that these religions cannot be considered merely as natural religions, since they contain supernatural elements, even saving faith. Despite error, sin and human depravity, non-Christian religions are a preparation for the Gospel, as they have an intimate tendency, an inner dynamism towards Christ and his Church. For those who have not yet been existentially confronted with Christianity, non-Christian religions can serve as ways of salvation, in the sense that God saves these human beings in and through the doctrines and practices of these religions”.⁸ Going further from these conclusions the question can be raised about the theological reasons for recognizing the non-Christian religions as Ways of Salvation because they have ‘an intimate tendency, an inner dynamism towards Christ and Church’. What is the source of this inner dynamism towards Christ and Church?

Recent Teaching of the Church on Salvation

All the previous magisterial teachings before Vatican II affirmed the necessity of being a member of the Church for salvation and at the same time categorically stated who cannot obtain salvation. We have seen that with Vatican II there is broadening of the understanding of the possibility of salvation for others who

7 *Ad Gentes* No.2

8 *Ways of Salvation*, p. 91

do not belong to the Catholic Church through mysterious ways known to God alone.⁹

The Letter *Placuit Deo* published on 22 February, 2018, by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith headed by Cardinal Ladaria addressing all the bishops of the Catholic Church on certain aspects of salvation is the first document in the history of the Church which explains at least certain aspects of salvation. Though it is not a comprehensive document on salvation it liberates the notion of salvation from its traditional individualistic, spiritualistic and other-worldly understanding.

The salvation that God offers us is not achieved with our own individual efforts alone, as neo-Pelagianism would contend. Rather, salvation is found in the relationships that are born from the incarnate Son of God and that form the communion of the Church. Because the grace that Christ gives us is not a merely interior salvation, as the neo-Gnostic vision claims, and introduces us into concrete relationships that He himself has lived, the Church is a visible community. In her we touch the flesh of Jesus, especially in our poorest and most suffering brothers and sisters. Hence, the salvific mediation of the Church, “the universal sacrament of salvation”, assures us that salvation does not consist in the self-realization of the isolated individual, nor in an interior fusion of the individual with the divine. Rather, salvation consists in being incorporated into a communion of persons that participates in the communion of the Trinity. Both the individualistic and the merely interior visions of salvation contradict the sacramental economy through which God willed to save the human person.¹⁰

In the context of Pope Francis’ attack on neo-Pelagian individualism and the neo-Gnostic disregard for the body, the document affirms, “In the face of these two trends, the present Letter

9 *Lumen Gentium* , No.16

10 *Placuit Deo* No.12-13

wants to reaffirm that salvation consists in our union with Christ, who, by his Incarnation, death and Resurrection has brought about a new order of relationships with the Father and among human persons, and has introduced us into this order, thanks to the gift of his Spirit, so that we are able to unite ourselves to the Father as sons in the Son, and become one body in the “firstborn among many brothers” (Rom 8:29).¹¹ The document further says, “At no moment in history did God stop offering his salvation to the sons and daughters of Adam (cf. Gen 3:15), establishing his covenant with all of humanity in Noah (cf. Gen 9:9) and, later, with Abraham and his descendants (cf. Gen 15:18). Therefore, divine salvation takes on the creaturely order shared by all humanity and accompanies their concrete journey in history”.¹²

The mission of the Church is to communicate the experience which begins in the historical existence and is fulfilled in the eschatological communion with the Trinity so that those who are objectively saved through their ontological union with Christ may experience wholeness here and now. The document says: “The awareness of the fullness of life into which Christ the Saviour introduces us propels Christians onward in the mission of announcing to all the joy and light of the Gospel. In this work, Christians must also be prepared to establish a sincere and constructive dialogue with believers of other religions, confident that God can lead “all people of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way” towards salvation in Christ.”¹³

Some have tweeted that ‘Placuit Deo reads like a summary of Dominus Iesus.’ However, those who have really analysed the document Placuit Deo would not miss the opening of a new theological vision of salvation, though it may be sketchy, presented in this document compared to the narrow and exclusive understanding of the Church and salvation through Jesus Christ

11 *Ibid.*, 4

12 *Ibid.*, 8

13 *PlacuitDeo*, No.15.

in Dominus Iesus. Austen Ivereigh, Pope Francis' biographer and supporter in tweet implied that Placuit Deo advances the formula Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus. It must be stated that this document is not a repetition of the traditional axiom that there is no salvation outside the Church. It opens up new avenues for theological reflection on Christian understanding of salvation that salvation or wholeness essentially consists in Communion.

III Communitarian Dimension of Salvation

Both the Second Vatican Council and the recent document on certain aspects of salvation Placuit Deo affirm the communitarian dimension of salvation. Whether within the Church or beyond the Church in other non-Christian religions salvation is through communion and salvation is ultimately communion. Even in the Relatio referring to non-Christian religions in the 1964 schema on Church says, “All grace takes on a communitarian character and tends to the Church”¹⁴ The Constitution on Church, Lumen Gentium affirms this when it says, “At all times and in every race God has given welcome to whosoever fears Him and does what is right. God, however, does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased Him to bring men together as one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness. He therefore chose the race of Israel as a people unto Himself.”¹⁵ Divine purpose is human well-being or wholeness is through communion with God and communion with others.

The source of communion among humans is the Trinitarian communion of the Father, Son and the Spirit. The Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church says: “This decree, however, flows from the “fount - like love” or charity of God the Father

14 *Relatio Super Schema Const. Dogma. De Ecclesia*, 1964.p. 53: “*Omnis autem gratia quondam indolem communitariam induit et ad Ecclesiam respicit*”.

15 *Lumen Gentium* , No.9

who, being the “principle without principle” from whom the Son is begotten and Holy Spirit proceeds through the Son, freely creating us on account of His surpassing and merciful kindness and graciously calling us moreover to share with Him His life and His glory, has generously poured out, and does not cease to pour out still, His divine goodness. Thus He who created all things may at last be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28), bringing about at one and the same time His own glory and our happiness. But it pleased God to call men to share His life, not just singly, apart from any mutual bond, but rather to mold them into a people in which His sons, once scattered abroad might be gathered together (cf. John 11:52).”¹⁶ The divine plan for humans is that they live, move and have their being in communion which begins in their historical existence and fulfilled in the eschatological communion with God, the Absolute Communion.

The essential communitarian dimension of any religion and the social nature of humans have their source in the Trinitarian communion and in the reality of Christ. In the Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*) - Church acknowledges the communitarian dimension of religions and the social nature of humans. “The social nature of man, however, itself requires that he should give external expression to his internal acts of religion: that he should share with others in matters religious; that he should profess his religion in community.”¹⁷

The Christian faith-experience affirms that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God, the Trinity and therefore every human being is Trinitarian or communitarian by nature. It is by their essential communitarian nature humans are persons. The social nature of humans is rooted in as well as the expression of the essential Trinitarian nature of human being. The capacity of humans for transcendence can be considered as their Father-dimension, their transparency or openness

16 *Ad Gentes* 2

17 *Dignitatis Humanae* 3

as the Son-dimension and their immanence or interiority as the Spirit-dimension. Thus communion is the beginning and end or the source and destiny of humans, indeed, it is their communion with the Absolute Communion or the Trinitarian life that brings final fulfillment of humans as humans.

Every type of human community has its source and model in the Trinitarian communion. Trinity is the source of human community because every human is the image of the Trinity and therefore communitarian and this essential nature is lived existentially in communities. Trinity is the model for communitarian life because in the Trinity there is absolute self-giving among the Persons of the Trinity and therefore, the Trinity is absolute unity or love. The revelation of God as Trinity is also the revelation of the meaning of plurality of everything that exists in the world and all forms of plurality. In the Trinity the Persons are distinct but not separate. The distinction or difference among the Persons of the Trinity is for communion and therefore it justifies all distinctions or differences that lead to communion. The ways of authentic communion among humans too are different and distinct but not separate from the Trinitarian communion historically manifested in Jesus Christ the Way. It is the Christian faith-experience that Jesus Christ, the incarnation of Absolute Communion is indeed the Way of salvation. The Church is the sacrament of Christ, the incarnate communion of God.

In Jesus Christ everything is united as he is the Alpha and the Omega of the entire creation. Everything is created in him and for him. "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities -- all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together"(Colossians 1:15-17). By assuming humanity, Jesus Christ, the Word, includes everyone before him, after him and contemporaneous with him. "He is the head of the body, the

church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent”(Colossians 1:18). In his body, the Church, all are included though their relation to the body may differ. The ontological union of every human being with Christ and the interrelatedness of the entire humanity in Christ through incarnation make objective salvation of humans possible. All those ways of salvation, however, they are perceived, understood and their demands are lived with a sincere heart by those who follow those ways cannot be separated from the Way of Salvation, Jesus Christ and his body the Church! The ways of salvation offered by non-Christian religions are distinct from the explicit way of salvation in Jesus Christ and his body the Church but cannot be separated from Christ or his Church. If so, can we not say that those who are walking on those ways are, in fact, walking with Christ and united with Christ, the Way, though it may not be known to them?

The mission or the proclamation of the good news continues to be an imperative placed on every disciple. It means that Jesus Christ, the incarnation of Absolute Communion, and his Church the Sacrament of Christ need to be offered to all humans to experience wholeness or salvation through communion in a new way hitherto unknown to them. Its newness consists in revealing to humans that the heart of salvific communion is self-emptying love revealed in Jesus Christ and actualized through the Spirit of God .It is also a part of the mission to recognize and affirm that all other ways of authentic communion as the expression of God, the Absolute Communion because outside communion there is no salvation – *extra communionis nulla salus!*

Conclusion

The Second Vatican Council’s recognition of the presence of seeds of Word and the rays of Truth in non-Christian religions was a great relief for Christians who were encountering daily

the reality of a plurality of religions and each of them claiming to be the way of salvation for its adherents. Immediately after the Council it was Kurien Kunnumpuram who recognized that the teachings of Vatican II on non-Christian religions scattered in various documents offered the Church in India the possibility to enter legitimate dialogue with other religions especially Hinduism. In the context of India he envisioned a new self-understanding of the Church that it becomes a home for all religions and all peoples. The task ahead for the Church, according to him, was to develop a new theology of religions and a relevant Missiology that takes into account the new approach of the Church towards other religions which claim to be ways of salvation. The challenge of Kurien Kunnumpuram to develop a relevant ecclesiology and a Missiology can be responded to adequately if the self-understanding of Church as the Sacrament of Christ the incarnation of Absolute Communion lives and relates with all humans as a home of communion and proclaims that outside communion there is no salvation. It can be theologically shown that in Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God's Communion within the Trinity as well as God's communion with humans and their world all authentic ways of salvation find their uniqueness and legitimate space distinct but not separate from Christ, the Way! *Extra communionis nulla salus* – Outside Communion no salvation!

Article Received: Feb 17, 2019

Article Accepted: April 11, 2019

No of Words: 4450