CHAPTER XI

THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD:
DISJUNCTIONS AND CONJUNCTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of our seminar is to consider the disjunction between Catholic culture and the secular world, a lack of connection intensified in many minds, since the awareness of the sexual abuse cases have come to light. My own task is to consider how this relates to “the disjunction between, on the one hand, a single spirituality, and, on the other hand, one that is enriched by the plural spiritualities of the major global religions, and in its own way by that of the present secular mind set as well.”

In order to be clear about what is at issue here, I shall begin by canvassing some working definitions of the central concepts of “single spirituality” and “plural spiritualities” that I will employ in this paper. By “plural spiritualities” is meant the faith of those who are in a critical solidarity (“agonistic respect”) with people of other faiths and none and who may be said to live their faith in a dialogical space exemplified by the “pilgrim-convert” figures or typology.¹ These “pilgrim-converts” seek an authentic encounter with God and not one simply handed on to them by an already formed tradition, which seems to have ready-made answers to all possible questions. By “singular spirituality” is meant the faith of those who consider the ecumenical and interreligious dialogue as an “optional extra,” often exotic and sometimes even a betrayal of the truth as mediated by the Roman Catholic tradition that has been handed down throughout the ages. These people occupy a monological space of likeminded believers who consider themselves to reside in a fixed tradition.

With these definitions in mind, I will draw a distinction that I think characterises these two “ideal types” of believers, namely, between those who consider the Gospel as a gift and those who consider it as a possession. This, I believe, is a way to highlight some of the elements that have helped to constitute an ecclesiastical culture which is often closed in on itself, self-preoccupied, and hostile to those outside of its

¹ Danièle Hervieu-Léger, Le Pèlerin et le Converti. La Religion en Mouvement (Flammarion, 1999).
social imaginary. I would, however, like to make it clear from the start of this paper that these tendencies often combine in all believers and that no one is ever justified in simplistic and often arrogant assertions against people in authority who themselves can be very aware of the problems facing the church today. Nevertheless, the current crisis requires that we look honestly at ourselves. If an understanding of the damage done to the credibility of the church and its witness is to illuminate our path forwards a necessary purgation will be required if the Gospel message is again to be heard with credibility from the church.

An important caveat here is that as disjunctions go the issue of singular and plural spiritualities is not the worst in the Catholic Church. In fact, I would hazard to say that in the adventure of interreligious dialogue in the twentieth century and in the call to dialogue with atheism, the Catholic Church has in many ways led the way in fostering a fruitful encounter between plural forms of spirituality. Whilst this has been pioneered by extraordinary charismatic individuals these deeply personal experiences have also been translated into pastoral orientations for the whole church through the various constitutions of the Second Vatican Council and also the many letters and statements of bishops’ conferences around the world that have sought to find ways of fostering dialogue between peoples.

One also needs to proceed with caution in using the concept of a “disjunction” to presume that the split “between secular and ecclesiastical cultures or social imaginaries” is unambiguously a bad thing. Clearly, nobody should doubt that what has happened in the sexual abuse scandals is thoroughly wicked and counter to the meaning of the Gospel. That is unambiguous! However, the wider question of the disjunction between ecclesiastical and secular social imaginaries has a number of ambiguous elements to it. For example, many people beyond the Catholic Church have pointed to pathological developments within the modern globalised social imaginary that abuse poorer countries, destroy the planet, and trivialise human cultures. These anti-globalisation movements represent an enormous diversity of viewpoints and political and religious positions. They have in common, however, a counter-cultural voice which wishes to resist a certain narrative of the inevitability of the march of late modern capitalism. The disjunction here between secular modern capitalist culture and manifold counter-cultural voices including the Catholic Church is one which many of us hope that the church will not lose in an attempt to simply fit in with the world. My point here is that, as Richard Niebuhr put it in his Christ and Culture, a constituent element of the Gospel message is a counter-cultural voice. It is, for Niebuhr, the “Christ against culture” type embodied, for example, in The First Letter of John, the writings of the second century Christian author Tertullian, and the Russian nineteenth
century writer Leo Tolstoy, which expresses the Christian truth that “if anyone loves the world, love for the father is not in him” (1 John 2: 15).

The prophetic and righteous anger against the world of this counter-cultural voice of the Gospel needs, of course, to be set within the Catholic tradition of a sacramental affirmation of the world and of our action within it. Prior to the Second Vatican Council a great theological renewal of the church was already under way in the manner in which one should understand Revelation and the nature and grace relationship. This blossomed in the Second Vatican Council’s shift from understanding this relationship in an ‘extrinsic way’ to one in which grace becomes ‘intrinsic’ and ‘constitutive’ of human nature. This relationship is conceived by the Council Fathers as operating within a Christological context, following the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon, in which a theological anthropology orchestrates the relational, existential, and historical indwelling of grace within nature that refuses the oppositional logic of modernity. This sacramental vision of reality reconnects faith and reason, the sacred and the secular, grace and nature in a Christological humanism in which human freedom is not opposed to God, as in so many nineteenth-century-forged “subtraction theories,” but rather grounded in the salvific event of the Incarnation. It is just such a theological vision which would inspire Pope Paul VI in 1975 to comment in Evangelii Nuntiandi 2, 20, that “The split between the Gospel and culture is without doubt the great drama of our time”. The resulting program of what one might call an “integral evangelisation” shaped his vision and understanding of evangelisation in the modern era and has characterised Catholic involvement in a wide variety of social, political, and cultural ventures ever since.

**GOSPEL AS A GIFT OR AS A POSSESSION**

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(Table of Four Disjunctions)
Using the categories of gift and possession to speak of different attitudes to the spiritual heritage of the Gospel a number of interesting features arise. Firstly, when the Gospel is viewed as a gift, a grace freely given by the Lord and totally unearned one is eager to find this gift, a little like children at Christmas! When one understands this as gift then the freely given assent is our gratitude at having received something we know is so precious. This reception is never simply passive but always involves us in a complex exchange in a particular time and place which means that the gift is always to be received anew. The advent of the gift characterises life this side of the eschaton. And, as a gift one realises that one does not own the Gospel but little by little discovers that the Lord has given this gift to many and that they have received it in diverse and fascinating ways. Not being a possession, an object that one can retain, one realises that it is literally infinite and makes us aware that it is only the poor in spirit who are blessed because they know that they have nothing, that all is gift. Only the poor can receive this gift because only they have empty hands and hearts. Those who already possess in the spirit have no room left. This is why spiritual poverty lies at the heart of the beatitudes and the monastic championing of the virtue of humility against the lures of the tempter. The attitude of seeking the Kingdom of God wherever it is to be found characterises those who view the Gospel as a gift because they know that the giving of this gift is not separate from our actions and desires. These prepare us to receive the grace which enters an open heart and mind. When one has the attitude of already residing in a fixed tradition then the tendency is more to become passive, to receive what is on offer and not to go looking for oneself. Moreover, when the boundaries of this tradition are clearly fixed then one is very aware of those who are insiders and those who are outsiders. One can remain stuck on the formalities of the language used (Lord, Lord...) and fail to see that the inner metanoia called for destabilises our fixed sense of boundaries and always unsettles us to reach out beyond them to encounter the other, those who see things differently, those who follow another spiritual path, or perhaps those who reside in no fixed tradition but simply seek to do good.

The difference between viewing the Gospel as a gift and as a possession in an ecclesial context may also have similarities to other hereditary systems of privilege. In English we typically say for someone who has been born into wealth, ‘that they were born with a silver spoon in their mouth’, meaning that the privilege that they have received has not been due to their own efforts but rather due to inheritance of family privilege and so on. Perhaps we might look at these contrasting attitudes to the Gospel in this way. When one has not had to struggle for the Christian faith, to confront doubts, to encounter and appreciate plural ways of living which provide alternative lifestyle choices then it is easy
to be like someone ‘born with a silver spoon in their mouth’. One accepts the spiritual heritage that one has almost as by right. One fails to realise just what a gift it is to have received the grace to believe in the Gospel, to know its beauty, its compassion, and its truth. In fact, it may well be that those who officially administer the Gospel in being “professionals of the Gospel” lose the “amateur status” of the children of God that others not bound up with the institution may well have. It is not difficult to find support for this point of view in the Gospels as Jesus confronts the religious authorities of his day with the charge that they have blocked people’s paths to the Kingdom of God by tying heavy burdens on their shoulders (c.f., Matthew 23: 4). In administering the gift one can easily find oneself thinking that one possesses it, that being in charge of it confers property rights on it and indeed the founding of the church on Peter provides some support for the institutional church to view itself as having considerable power in the administration of the Gospel.

On the other side of the table, the “b” side, one notices, not surprisingly, attitudes which do not promote such an openness to encounter other spiritualities. When the Gospel is viewed as a possession why bother seeking? The object has been found and the important thing is to protect this property from intruders who wish to steal it. As it is held by the authorities one simply needs to follow their decrees in order to partake in it. They administer it as official keepers and so one should obey their dictates if one wishes to remain on the right side of the law which they make on their authority. Again having found a “something” what is to change? If the purpose of morality is to model morality on the eternal deposit safely secured then with the goal firmly fixed beliefs and practices can be codified with extraordinary precision to ensure that one hits the target! Why would one bother to look at other clearly “defective” spiritualities?

Of course, there are dangers with such categorisation. Inevitably, we the enlightened ones associate ourselves with the gift side and ‘they’, the cruel institutional despots, on the possession side. Such separation of the good and the bad may well echo that of the wheat and the weeds that we are warned against in the Gospel (Matthew 13: 24-30). Furthermore, the categories separate in ways which serve particular purposes. In this case, there is a clear demarcation of two distinguishable attitudes towards the Gospel, which no doubt require aspects from each domain for successful flourishing. Take the example of institution and charisma. Without some form of regulation charismatic tendencies can become self

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serving, cut off from the main body, and elitist. They may have an orientation to judgmentalism, which reveals an arrogance that has little to do with viewing the Gospel as a gift. Nevertheless, in analysing these two attitudes, my intention is to see them as not necessarily incarnated in one person or group but rather as transversal attitudes which cut through all of us and indicate dangers that anyone concerned about the Gospel should be aware of. Moreover, they are categories which have a particular relevance to our present topic of distinguishing the disjunction of 4a and 4b. In outlining an attitude one moves the focus towards the interior life. This interior disposition or attitude is perhaps the central issue when considering the disjunction between spiritualities, singular and multiple as I have defined them.

In seeing the Gospel as either a gift or as a possession one also raises the question of evangelical poverty. Holding the Gospel as something that one may own confers property rights on the proprietor. These property rights protect the owner from others trying to steal from them. They secure clear demarcation lines that allow the owner to exclude others from making claims to the possession or even of making use of it. The result of ownership is that one begins to feel secure in the possession of something. That one no longer needs to earn it or to seek it. One loses the “beginner’s mind” and acquires the “expert’s mind”. With such an attitude it is hardly surprising that some feel threatened by those of other religious spiritualities and those who seek outside of organised religious traditions.

But this perhaps takes us to the heart of the issue of the clash of cultures between the church and the world. There seem to be some areas where these cultures are diametrically opposed and because of this the meanings of words shared by both cultures can be contradictory. In the secular world poverty, for example, is not generally viewed in an evangelical way as providing freedom to receive the Gospel and God’s grace. It is viewed, rather, as a hindrance to social improvement, a blockage to the freedom which characterises our modern social imaginary. This freedom is meant for all and not simply for the few, and so the motivation of secular humanism is inspired by the democratic belief in the equality of all citizens and the right of each and all to own their property. In the case of the church, however, the culture is not one of a democratic system of rights and responsibilities, of elected representation and the possibility to hold elected representatives to account, but is much closer to that of an hereditary monarchy who is above and beyond the law and precisely because of this is not accountable to its people. The Pope has the privilege of serving the servants of God but this understanding of serving is the way in which the privilege is understood. This hierarchical structure of the church clearly clashes with the democratic popular culture of the secular post-French
of religious experience.

Other religious traditions and the spiritual experience of living the Christian life are also important sources of inspiration and guidance for Christians. These traditions provide an important context for understanding and interpreting the Bible, the teachings of Jesus, and the practices of the early church. They also offer a rich and diverse range of traditions and customs that are central to the Christian faith.

Likewise, the experiences of Scriptural scholars and theologians, as well as the Christian community itself, offer valuable insights into the meaning of Scripture and the nature of the Christian life. The Christian community is a vital source of inspiration and guidance for Christians, providing a rich and diverse range of traditions and customs that are central to the Christian faith.
BUILDING BRIDGES WITH ATHEISM

The issue of relating to those of an atheist mindset has its own particular history in the Catholic Church. In the late nineteenth century papal pronouncements on unbelief were uncompromising. The 1878 encyclical Inscrutabilis Dei Consilium of Pope Leo XIII shaped the official church’s hostile relation with atheism and unbelief in general up until the Second Vatican Council. It would be the dialogue between French Catholic intellectuals and atheism following the opening of the French communist party to the Catholic Church during the period of the popular front (1934-38) together with the experience of the various Catholic worker movements that helped to change this attitude. Prior to this time there was outright hostility between the two parties, but with this rapprochement a more open dialogue would gradually develop that has significantly shaped the post-Vatican II dialogical attitude with atheism. Recently, for example, the Pontifical Council for Culture has launched a new initiative with atheists and agnostics known as “the courtyard of the gentiles” which began with a series of debates on 24 and 25 March 2011 in Paris entitled, “Religion, Light, and Common Reason.”

However, it is true that the Catholic Church has had more difficulty in relating to atheists than it has to people of other spiritual and religious traditions. This is perhaps not difficult to understand as often the so-called “new atheists” are highly provocative and seem unwilling to enter into dialogue. They seem to fit quite well on the “possession” side of the “gift-possession” table above as their certainty prevents them from seeking other ways of thinking and seeing things. Fundamentalist in style, they seem to mirror religious fundamentalism in their attitudes of exclusivism and intolerance. Yet, it would be too easy to assimilate all forms of modern atheism into the “new atheist” type. There is also a rejection of too positive an account of God in the face of the problem of evil. Indeed, many theologians have attempted to develop a conception of God who suffers and is free from the Greek metaphysical attributes associated with the onto-theological tradition. Moreover, some philosophers have also sought to re-think God after the critiques of atheism. Paul Ricoeur’s post-war essay “Religion, Atheism, and Faith” is a notable example and develops ideas already latent in Dietrich

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Bonhoeffer’s moving prison writings. Here Ricoeur attempts to think God after religion, that is to say, after the image of an idolatrous god which has been used to assuage infantile needs of protection and to provoke fear of the punitive father figure. In liberating our image of God from these idolatrous religious mechanisms, the God of faith emerges for those who like Ricoeur hold God to be beyond all images and human projections.

Such attempts to discover the other side of God, the negative side of apophatic theology are, of course, not new. From the Cappadocian fathers of the church especially Gregory of Nyssa onwards this tradition of negative theology has always sought to problematise too clear cut images of God, the God of possession, and to remind us that God is always greater than we can ever think of or imagine (Ephesians 3: 20-21, and later St. Anselm’s Proslogion). This tradition may well have some overlapping features with forms of contemporary atheism that as Charles Taylor notes, “can no longer simply be dismissed as erroneous, or deficient, or (in the case of contemporary unbelief) be branded as ‘materialist’ or ‘hedonist.’” In some ways, one might look to this form of atheism to purify idolatrous aspects of religious belief that say too much about God. As Hugh of St. Victor reminds us in De scripturis et scriptoribus sacrī the danger is confusing propositional knowledge of God for anagogical insight. The experience of faith is more often than not one of a loving trust which knows more by feeling around in the darkness, whose surety is not simply based on propositional knowledge of states of affairs or the literal meanings of words but on intuition, mystical insight, and deep feeling.

As John of the Cross expresses it most beautifully in that haunting poem which adorns the diagram at the beginning of his The Ascent of Mount Carmel, “In order to come to that which you know not, you must pass through where you know not.” This form of faith is attractive because it is experiential and not simply a repeated propositional formula. It expresses the actual ascent to Mount Carmel rather than the plagiarised version sometimes put forward by certain more evangelical traditions of Christianity. It attracts precisely because those who have trodden this path before us know that it is only through being divested of certainties that one comes to “know God” in this more unitive mystical way. This path of purification opens the souls of the saints to oceanic depths of love and compassion that people such as Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Brother Roger of Taizé, Jean Vanier, the

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8 San Juan de la Cruz, *Obras Completas*, a cargo de Maximilliano Herraiz, Second, Segunda edición Salamanca (Sigueme, 1992), p. 117.
founder of the L’Arche Community, and countless others who are the silent and anonymous saints of daily life demonstrate. It is this witness of holiness that is perhaps the greatest of the “positive disjunctions” in the church of today. These disjunctions between the church and the world stand out precisely because they are excessive, superabundant, and destabilising. They are the beating heart of the church that we know and love. They disturb all of us out of a complacent mediocrity of Christian life that proceeds as if we already possess our salvation. As if we already “know God.”

Many of us speak a great deal about God but my sense is that part of the problem is that words about God only carry a normative force when they are bound up with witness. And this witness is not only the individual one of the great saints. It is also, and perhaps primarily, the communal witness of “By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples” (John 13: 35) that impresses people and draws attention to the excess, to the something different that is present within the community of believers. How often this is to be found in worshipping communities is clearly a matter of real concern. As church, as the body of Christ on earth, we are called to incarnate this superabundant love in the charity and compassion that makes our gatherings truly a communitas fraterna. It is this witness which manifests the presence of Christ among us and which breaks down barriers between believers and unbelievers, Christians and those of other faiths. Something so deeply human is touched upon here that unites us all in a common bond. As Meeting God in Friend and Stranger puts it, “The Church’s positive attitude to people and communities belonging to other religions is based on the conviction that the human race is one, one through its origin in the one creative act of God, one in physical descent, one in its predicament caused by sin and need of salvation, and one in God’s saving purposes.”9 It is this oneness which we share with our brothers and sisters of other faiths and none and which fundamentally orients the Catholic Church. Any “inappropriate disjunctions” between people of singular and plural spiritualities, which are present in the church are judged by this criterion and have little to do with the Gospel of Christ and much to do with our common sinfulness.

BEYOND EXCLUSIVISMS

It is interesting to note that in comparing the relation between Catholic spirituality and other religious spiritualities and non-religious spiritualities some significant overlaps emerge. Firstly, according to the official teaching of the church it is difficult to see how exclusivist

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9 Meeting God in Friend and Stranger, p. 31.
attitudes can be condoned. At least since the Second Vatican Council
dialogue has become the normative position of the church. Deviations
from this have clearly arisen but they are not backed and supported by
the official teaching. Secondly, it would seem that dynamics of power
and possession animate attitudes which tend to reject the other as one
from whom nothing can be learnt. This form of closed mindedness is not
unique to Catholics of course.

One finds a similar attitude in certain scientists who propound
various forms of ontological and methodological naturalism. Such
attitudes do not permit dialogue to take place because the fundamental
presuppositions are exclusive of other positions. The mind is already
made up and so dialogue would simply be a waste of time and energy.
Paradoxically scientific naturalists and exclusivist Catholics share the
same attitudinal structures of exclusivism that function to close down
rather than to promote dialogue and debate. Perhaps a certain type of
mind is at play here which can come in various flavours, religious and
non-religious. But one does meet these types in various fields and they
do have some surprising family resemblances. Thirdly, one needs to be
careful of equating openmindedness with the official Catholic attitude.
Whilst, I think it is legitimate to say that the official position of the
church since the Council is of open dialogue with others it would be
overreaching to claim this exclusively for Catholicism.

Yet, in providing a spiritual home Catholicism does give a
security, which those without such a communal place of tradition and
support may well lack. Being at home can provide an ease with oneself
that allows for an encounter with the other that does not seek to change
them or to reject them. Being at home in one’s spiritual tradition can
also have the same effect in terms of encountering other spiritual
traditions. One recognises patterns, methods, and dynamics which repeat
in various spiritual octaves for those who are religiously musical. Like
playing an instrument or speaking a foreign language, once one has
mastered one, a second and a third often seem to be less difficult. In the
context of our present subject one should turn this around the other way
and say that once one has been mastered, once one has been overcome
by the beauty of the Lord, further submission is not as threatening as
control has already been relinquished. And if the Lord does indeed come
in many mysterious ways then one should not find it surprising that in
engaging with other spiritual traditions one discovers similar dynamics
of submission, yielding and humility that characteristically point to the
encounter with God.

TOWARDS A CRITIQUE OF DISCONNECTED RELIGION
So far, I have defended the position of the Catholic Church with respect to its attitude to other spiritual traditions and those who reject religion. But is there something more to say? Something more critical than this that no doubt Charles Taylor's disjunction was aiming at? Let me here try to tease out something more of this. Perhaps one of the difficulties within Catholicism of truly encountering other spiritual traditions and those of no religious persuasion is that of the very positive nature of the Christological basis of Catholicism and indeed Christianity in general. At the heart of Catholicism is an understanding of divine revelation in the incarnation of Christ that makes clear the nature of God and our relationship to God. This positivity is no doubt part of the cause of a certain understanding of missionary activity that went hand in hand with a colonial attitude and perhaps even gave birth to it. The Gospel of St. Mark's final injunction "to go out to the whole world; proclaim the Gospel to all creation" (Mark 16: 15-16) is pretty affirmative! There seems little room for dialogue in this model. And in fact in the Bible, one is hard pressed to find many passages which really ground interreligious dialogue (though there are a few to my mind such as Matthew 8: 11-12: "many will come from the east and west and sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob at the feast in the kingdom of Heaven," and Matthew 7: 21-22: "It is not anyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," who will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in Heaven"). In other words, revelation is clear and the problem seems to be that other religions have developed "idolatrous practices" and provided false substitutes for "the real thing." Do these other traditions not clearly need to be enlightened by the true Word of God and so liberated from their religious practices and beliefs? It is in such views that from within religious thought anti-religious views have emerged. In Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics the well known analogy of the sun which falls on one religion and not on another illustrates this short shrift with the human enterprise of religion shared by many contemporary conservative evangelicals. 10 Thinkers such as René Girard and Marcel Gauchet, obviously from very different points of view, point to similar critiques of religion from the point of view of Christianity. Has Christianity made religion redundant? And if so, have such attitudes caused a certain anti-dialogical spirit to inhabit the Catholic world? When religions are equated by Christianity with idolatrous beliefs and practices then clearly dialogue is out and conversion is in.

Up until the Second Vatican Council one should remember that the position of extra ecclesiam nulla salus was the official line and its legacy has no doubt not completely died out with the decrees of the

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10 See Church Dogmatics, Vol 1/2 p. 388.
Council. If salvation is only mediated by Christ then how can other religions provide ways to the Father? Only Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. So called inclusivist positions, such as Karl Rahner’s “Anonymous Christian” position, have clearly grown up to provide accounts of how this may be possible. Other positions sometimes knows as the “pluralist position” have watered down the unique mediation of Christ and led some, such as John Hick, to move towards a “Theocentric position” influenced by process metaphysics in which God is to be found in many religions without anyone having a unique claim to absolute truth.11 Perhaps the central question to raise when one wishes to enter deeply into the disjunction that Charles Taylor is adverting to is whether in the unique mediation of Christ other religions and non-religious positions are necessarily relativised? How is unique mediation possible that neither waters down the uniqueness of Christ’s mediation nor fails to take into account the lived faith of other religious traditions?

No less important in considering the nature of religion is to radically question whether the actual study of religion is itself part of the problem. The vast literature on this issue today takes its point of departure from the classic statement of the comparative historian of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s The Meaning and End of Religion which problematises the modern essentialist definitions of religion. Cantwell Smith distinguished between four senses of religion: religion as personal piety, religion as an ideal system of beliefs and practices, religion as an empirical phenomenon in history and society with particular adherents, and finally, religion as a generic summation to distinguish it from other general categories (Cantwell Smith, Meaning and End, pp. 48-50). Interestingly, Cantwell Smith himself counsels us to drop the concept of religion and prefers to use the concepts of “faith,” which he locates in “that human quality that has been expressed in, has been elicited, nurtured, shaped by, the religious traditions of the world” (Cantwell Smith, Faith and Belief, p. 6); and defines as “an inner religious experience or involvement of a particular person; the impingement on him of the transcendent, putative and real” and “cumulative tradition” which is “the entire mass of overt objective data that constitute the historical deposit, as it were, of the past religious life of the community in question: temples, scriptures, theological systems, dance patterns, legal and other social institutions, conventions, moral codes, myths, and so on; anything that can be and is transmitted from one person, one generation, to another, and that an historian can observe” (Meaning and End, pp. 156-57). Cantwell Smith thus abandons the concept of religion as too indefinite and replaces it by the subjective category of faith, the objective category of cumulative tradition, and the

shared category of the transcendent which is the ‘object’ of all faiths. This clearly points in the direction of a pluralism which later theologians such as John Hick have developed.

From a Catholic perspective the challenge of interreligious dialogue is holding together the truth of uniqueness of Christ as saviour and Lord of all with a real respect for other religious traditions. The current position, the broadly inclusivist position developed at Vatican II, which sees the “ray of truth” (Nosstra Aetate, 2) that other religions contain as “a preparation for the Gospel (Lumen Gentium, 16), is one which Pope John Paul II developed with his theology of the Spirit that he saw as present and active in “society and history, peoples, cultures and religions” (Redemptoris Missio, 28). Pope Benedict XVI (in his prior role as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) has developed this attitude by both affirming the uniqueness of Christ as universal saviour (Dominus Iesus) and stressing the solidarity of all peoples based on the common origin and common destiny of humanity.12

Insights from philosophers such as Donald Davidson, Jürgen Habermas, and Richard Brandom, who have developed sophisticated understandings of how justification and truth function in language, may help to provide us with ways of distinguishing epistemic respect for different religious positions from the truth claims of religious traditions. Whilst it is justified to accept as reasonable that the lived beliefs of the major world faiths and indeed those of no faith should be respected this does not commit anyone to accepting their truth claims. Interreligious and atheist-religious dialogue can only proceed when the rational justification of beliefs is epistemically respected by all parties in the dialogue. This allows for a certain epistemic pluralism to safeguard the rational conditions of the dialogue, or as Brandom puts it attributes a certain “normative status” to a different position. But attributing a “normative status” to the beliefs and actions of another tradition, in terms of allocating judgments of appropriateness, still allows for a rational disagreement between traditions over their respective truth claims.13

Real dialogue is posited on the basis of both respect and the freedom to say what one wants. In fact, one of the great benefits of dialogue is that those with whom one dialogues can often see things which those within a tradition are unable to see themselves. In entering into real dialogue with both other religious traditions and atheists a real

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openness in the church could allow it to learn things about itself and its current disjunctions that are perhaps somewhat occluded to those of us who are on the inside. It would be a strangely familiar story if it were to be the strangers, the outsiders who reminded the church of the Gospel as a gift.

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