SPREADING OUT THE TENT OF CONTEMPLATION

Michael Fuss

MADLENKA, A LITTLE GIRL who lives on the southern part of Manhattan Island, has a loose tooth that wiggles. She simply must tell everyone in the whole wide world all about it. As she walks around the block, she meets a French baker, an Indian news-vendor, an Italian ice-cream man, a Latin American greengrocer, and a Far Eastern shopkeeper. She goes round the world, and learns about the astonishingly similar ways in which various cultures set about consoling a little girl.

This lovely story by Peter Sís[1] turns on a paradox: everyday urban life, which can appear grey and monolithic, turns out to be an mandala enclosing a multicultural universe. When she comes home at the end of her exciting day, Madlenka has contemplated the surprising variety of new worlds to be found in her immediate neighbourhood. By looking outside, she has found consolation within.

Madlenka can serve as a parable for what is now happening in the world of religion and contemplation, as Christians encounter different religious traditions. Contemplation is now more than an intimate, two-way relationship between the human person and God. Now it must be enriched by a sense of the different ways in which the family of religions apprehends the Divine. What Aloysius Pieris has called the 'core to core dialogue' is more than a theological discussion about different ways of salvation. The question now is how we can integrate the inner experience of our neighbours into a contemplation which on the one hand remains Christian, yet on the other remains decisively shaped by the centrality of Jesus Christ. What we used to think of as a question about how the Old and New Testaments open us up to the presence of God must now be recast: how can we recognise the mysterious presence of God in the wisdom of all religions?

There is a delicate, paradoxical balance to be struck here: other religious traditions are not simply rivals, nor do they lead Christians

[1] P. Sís, *Madlenka* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2000).

away from their central concerns. Other religions exercise a pedagogical function. They bring home to Christians that their encounter with other cultures and religions is a dynamic interaction of spiritual discernment, in which both parts have essential roles to play:

> Other religions constitute a positive challenge for the Church: they stimulate her both to discover and acknowledge the signs of Christ's presence and of the working of the Spirit, as well as to examine more deeply her own identity and to bear witness to the fullness of Revelation which she has received for the good of all.[2]

An alternative way of saying all this begins with the standard Jesuit formula, 'contemplation in action', but then insists that the action in question is now one of mission and outreach. And when we speak of 'contemplation in mission', we are referring not to traditional activities of evangelization, but rather expressing how contemplation must now by shaped by a dynamic, outgoing awareness. We are no longer so much concerned with the tension between prayer and activity, but rather with how contemplation—be it in monastic cells or on the streets—leads to an enriched sense of God's incarnate presence. No longer do we focus simply on Jesus' saying, 'The Father and I are one' (John 10:30); we let this unitive prayer broaden into a responsiveness to Jesus' mission as the love of the Father incarnate, and hence to his saving presence in all realities of this world. While standard 'contemplation in action' takes its inspiration from 'I was hungry and you gave me food' (Matthew 25:35), from a vision of Jesus as present in the least of his sisters and brothers, 'contemplation in outreach' is inspired by a sense of how the range of Jesus' brothers and sisters must be constantly expanding: 'If you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?' (Matthew 5:47) The sense of God as ever greater, of *Deus semper maior*, the focus of standard mystical theology, is now complemented by the *religio semper maior*, by a sense of the inexhaustible richness of religious traditions—a richness which is more than a matter of dispassionate, comparative study, a richness which can only be contemplated out of one's own faith-experience.

Vatican II saw as part of Christian salvation the 'rays of truth' and the 'seeds of the Word' mysteriously active in other religious realities. It

[2] John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio* (1990), n. 56.

thereby opened up new possibilities for a contemporary Christian spirituality. It is not just that Christian contemplation and action need to be shaped by a sense of God's presence in the world of religions; rather, the very idea of 'contemplation' has been transformed. 'Contemplation' comes from the Latin roots *cum* (with) and *templum* (temple). It evoked the Psalmist's desire to 'dwell in the courts of the Lord' (Psalm 84:3); Origen spoke of 'Christ filling the hearing, sight, touch, taste and every sense'. Now, however, we need a broader vision of where the Holy of Holies is to be found: 'The Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands' (Acts 7:48). The sanctuary sought out by contemplatives is no longer a narrow room into which they withdraw, but the expansive space of the marvels of God's presence. The wide dome of the religions glows above the temple; the joy of divine service is nourished both by the splendour of the divine name and by the many-coloured wisdom of God.

A similar spiritual shift occurred when the early Christians abandoned temples as traditional place of worship, and instead adopted the profane environment of basilicas (public halls) for their liturgy. Their new self-understanding made Christians adopt the theatre of public life for their liturgical assemblies. They integrated the symbolism of profane ideologies into how they conceived and expressed the universal Lordship of one whom they saw as King in a spiritual sense.

There is a lively account of early Christian spirituality in the midst of a pagan society preserved in the anonymous *Epistle to Diognetus* from the late second century. On the one hand, the text brings out what Christians share in common with all citizens; on the other, it stresses their distinctive awareness that God's call is universal—anticipating what Ignatius Loyola would call 'finding God in all things'. The text tells us that the trees both of knowledge (*gnosis*)—the symbol of natural religion—and of life are planted within the human soul. Both are equally necessary for eternal salvation: 'life cannot exist without knowledge, nor is knowledge safe without life. For this reason the two were planted close to each other'. Both are good and God-given: death has come into the world only as a result of our disobedience. Those early Christians lived not only out of the Gospel, but also out of their natural religious practices and their native cultures. Their 'double

belonging' was a response to Christ, who had come 'to save, to persuade and not to coerce . . . for coercion is incompatible with God'.[3]

At the outset of his pontificate, John Paul II made a remarkable statement in his programmatic encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, drawing on Vatican II and Paul VI to bring out the complex, interactive nature of the Church's spiritual awareness. The Church is essentially a dialogical community, to be defined from the outside rather than from the inside:

> This awareness—or rather self-awareness—of the Church is formed 'in dialogue'; and before this dialogue becomes a conversation, attention must be directed to 'the other', that is to say: the person with whom we wish to speak.[4]

A radical paradigm shift in Christian identity—and hence in Christian contemplation—is taking place.

A Personal Itinerary

The vision I have just been sketching out reflects my own personal journey towards a discovery of the 'Romanness', the *romanità*, of Catholic spirituality. It may seem a contradiction that I am stressing *romanità* in the same breath as a spirituality transcending borders. But 'doing as Rome does' is a wise practice, rooted in centuries of experience of integrating different cultures into a whole. It goes back to the Roman empire, and can serve the Church well as it seeks to answer the challenge of religious pluralism. A sense of the whole family; a respect for individualism provided it integrates into the overall context; an openness for dialogue—these characteristics of Rome at its best are all useful resources as we try to become receptive to cultures that are not Christian. There is plenty in Church tradition that helps us with our new task.

One symbol that, I suspect, has had a profound effect on my spiritual development is the golden shrine in Cologne Cathedral, with what are alleged to be the relics of the three Magi, the venerable representatives of non-Christian cultures drawn by divine grace to adore the new-born Christ. Among the rich popular rituals to be found in my part of

[3] 'The Epistle to Diognetus', in *Ancient Christian Writers*, vol. 6 (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1948), translated by James A. Kleist, nn. 12:4, 7:4.

[4] John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis* (1979), n. 11.

Germany is that of the *Sternsinger*—the blessing of homes during the Christmas season by children dressed up as the Magi following the star. This moving ceremony somehow instilled in me a sense that it was not just the monumental Gothic cathedral that symbolized salvation history: that symbol had to be complemented with these three saints from the depths of Asia. After all, our Christian families were being blessed by non-Christian seekers. Every year as a child I used to take part in this mysterious pilgrimage evoking the human quest for the true light. This fostered in me the conviction that the Magi had treasures of another kind besides their precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matthew 2:1-12), traditionally taken as pointers to the roles of Christ as eternal king, as God, and as crucified saviour. Prior to any of this, the gifts also symbolized the Magi's own religious attitudes: renunciation of wealth, adoration, and service. There was a kind of harmony of faith, loving care, and adoration centred on the Incarnate Son of God—a harmony involving both those close to him in the flesh, and those who had been attracted from afar by his mystery.

Sternsinger *in Germany today*

The incarnation of the Word cannot be separated from human receptivity; moreover, in mysterious ways, it continues to happen in the present. As I acquired theological learning, I came therefore to put

special emphasis on the existential conditions uniting human persons to any genuine tradition. Human nature is where the drama of salvation takes place; it is not merely a passive destination to which God descends. This conviction, articulated in the teeth of so many docetic tendencies that see Christ as simply a mysterious visitor, present only extraneously to the human, had already profoundly interpreted the Rhineland mystics, the mystics of my homeland. It is not surprising that Eastern philosophers today find them attractive.

A Tri-polar Awareness

The logic of the incarnation leads us to reconceive spirituality in terms of openness to other religions. The openness or refusal that marks human responses to Christ is anchored in experiences common to all human persons. In *Fides et ratio*, John Paul II spoke prophetically of how the Church could serve the religious pilgrimage of humanity as a whole. He coined the phrase, '*diakonia* of the truth'.[5] Besides engaging in its many charitable and philanthropic works, the Church must selflessly respond to the common human search for meaning. The Church's mission to proclamation is not such as to exclude dialogue. The Church must listen to the existential questions people are posing. The '*diakonia* of truth' is concerned with how we move from the 'quest for meaning which has always compelled the human heart'[6] towards the 'fullness of truth which will appear with the final Revelation of God'. In this light, interreligious dialogue is not a watering down of Church commitment, but a genuinely ecclesial activity.

The Church's responsibility for facilitating dialogue extends to encouraging the various traditions to enter into dialogue among themselves. The Church has a 'role as sacrament, that is, a sign and instrument of communion with God and unity among all people';[7] thus it promotes encounters between religious traditions, their collaboration, and their mutual purification. This is not just a diplomatic strategy, but an expression of the Church's fundamental role within a 'dialogue of salvation', initiated by God, that is universal in its scope. Perhaps we need to stop talking about '*theo*logy of religions'—this expression

[5] John Paul II, *Fides et ratio* (1998), n. 2.

[6] *Fides et ratio*, n. 1.

[7] 'Dialogue and Proclamation', n. 80. Available on the Vatican website: www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/index.htm.

already presupposes a great deal about God and the Church. Perhaps we need talk more neutrally simply of dialogue and of '*dia*logy'. Be that as it may, the *diakonia* of truth, rooted in the sacramental nature of the Church, begins with what human beings have in common, not from doctrinal disparities. As such, it follows the lead given by Vatican II's declaration, *Nostra aetate*; in a way that has not often been noticed, this declaration moves towards theological reflection only after first having acknowledged a broad range of common human experiences. A proper theology of religions is thus an informal affair, starting with people's experience rather than dogmatic principle. This has serious implications for how we train people to engage in dialogue and to interpret their relations with neighbours of other faiths in a Christian way.

There is a famous Easter proclamation in Scripture: Jesus is the stone, rejected by the builders, that has now become the cornerstone. The text is linked with a vision of universal salvation in Christ: 'there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved'.[8] The cornerstone has since become one of the most powerful symbols of Christian culture. Many churches highlight their foundation stone; it points to their identity as 'house of God' and 'city on the mountain'; it gives assurance that believers who come to the Church will certainly find the pledge of their salvation.

Make a leap now, and set this alongside another 'cornerstone' in one of the famous rock gardens of a Buddhist temple to be found in Far Eastern Buddhist temples. The amorphous rock irradiates its surroundings with the beauty of its natural majesty. As people sit in meditation on the threshold of the building, facing the garden, they slowly begin to realize that this rock is, mysteriously, the focal point of the whole. Temple and garden are both centred upon the rock—a rock which nevertheless stands *outside* the space protected by the building, openly exposed to the hardships of the climate.

The two cornerstones are placed in different contexts, and yet have the same functions both architectural and spiritual. They help us see how we can and must make a radical change of perspective without denying our own faith identity. Contemporary theological reflection has to think in terms of the entire 'habitat of salvation'; within the design of the 'house of God' it must incorporate both the colourful

[8] Acts 4:11-12; see also Psalm 118:22; Matthew 21:42.

garden of religions and the cosmic setting of the entire creation. The shift will affect fundamentally the ways in which we set about doing theology. We used to speak of the 'economy of salvation'. The phrase draws on a rather static analogy, that of the house—*oikos* in Greek. Implicitly, the most it conceded to religions other than Christianity was a marginal place in an enclosed theological edifice. Perhaps today we must replace houses with tents: perhaps we need to talk of a '*skeno*nomy' of salvation.[9] Conventional dogmatic reflections on religious pluralism have their value, but there is a need to move beyond their categories. A contemporary theology of religions must be truly tri-polar, incorporating God, Christianity, and human experience as a whole. The tent metaphor in this context is thoroughly scriptural: 'enlarge the site of your tent', says the Lord in Second Isaiah (Isaiah 54:2); in the heavenly Jerusalem, 'God's tent (*skēnē*) is among mortals; he will pitch his tent (*skēnōsei*) with them as their God' (Revelation 21:3).

The Family of Truth

We need, therefore, not a 'theology *of* religions' nor a 'theology *about* religions', but rather—and only—a 'theology *together with* religions'. This suggests one further step. I have already suggested that a 'theology with religions' needs to be informal, 'lay', in character. Perhaps the idea can be extended: perhaps it is the metaphor of the family that can help us articulate further what this theology involves. After the religious violence of September 11 2001, there is something prophetic in John Paul II's vision of the family as the sanctuary of life:

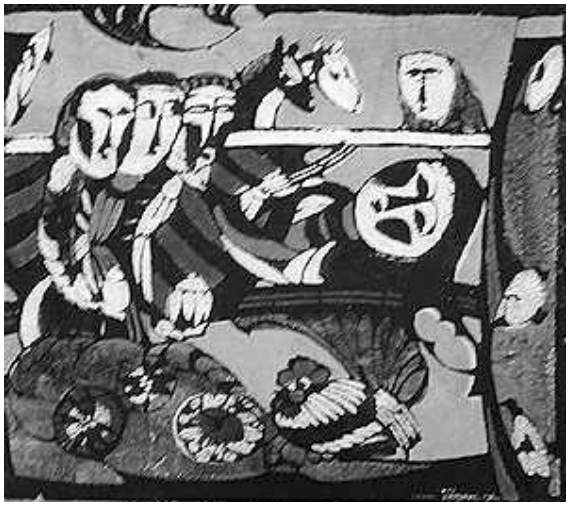
> The family is indeed sacred: it is the place in which life—the gift of God—can be properly welcomed and protected against the many attacks to which it is exposed, and can develop in accordance with what constitutes authentic human growth. In the face of the so-called culture of death, the family is the heart of the culture of life.[10]

Christianity must understand itself as part of a greater, mutually related whole, part of a 'family of truth'. It can find its identity only in

[9] The Greek *skēnē* means 'tent'; and we can remember that the Church is the 'tent of the new covenant'.

[10] John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (1991), n. 39.

interaction with other traditions. The stable in Bethlehem can serve as an icon for what is meant here: Mary and Joseph adore the divine mystery in the company of the Magi. The idea extends Vatican II's teaching about the 'hierarchy of truths', developed in the context of Christian ecumenism.[11] There are basic tenets which are primary; other truths proclaimed and practised by the various Christian Churches in the course of their historical development are more or less closely related to this central core. Thus we can establish connections between people holding conflicting truth claims without ignoring their disagreements. The term 'family of truth' can enable us to extend the principle to interreligious dialogue. The expression gives legitimate space for the divergent historical expressions of the Absolute and for each religion's claim to universal validity, while nevertheless insisting that there must always be an individual, subjective act of faith. The idea of a 'family of truth' reflects the dialogical and intercultural nature of salvation history; it lets religions remain what they are, yet brings out their mutual relationship, their shared participation in one Truth.



Adoration of the Magi, *by Sadao Watanabe*

[11] *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 11.

Interreligious dialogue faces an obvious stumbling block. Each believer legitimately defends the absolute value of their own truth claim; yet, objectively, these truths conflict. To think of the 'family of truth' enables us to honour everyone's subjective approach to religion, and indeed to see it as the condition for true dialogue. Precisely because one's own truth claim must be respected, one can concede the same to others. Tolerance grows out of one's own firm conviction, not from irenic relativism.

Masao Abe (1914-), a Buddhist philosopher and one of the most remarkable figures in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, has elaborated the basis for such an approach. He speaks in *koan*-like language of a 'positionless position' which 'being itself empty, lets every other position stand and work just as it is'.[12] This position of emptiness, equally distant from agnostic nihilism and postmodern egalitarianism, must be seen as reflecting a process of progressive emptying—emptying of illusions, preconceptions and preliminary realities. It is related to the Buddhist idea of *nirvana*. The Buddhist 'positionless position' is more than simply negation; it is pure presence, empty of all attachments.

Christians may be able to hear this idea as the renunciation of all worldly securities in a contemplative approach to God. The abandonment of Jesus on the cross, and the figure of Mary as totally open to God, might be seen as exemplifying the 'positionless position', as modelling a style of faithfulness that is universal. To the *kenosis* of God in Christ (Philippians 2: 5-11), there corresponds a human *kenosis* of faith in Mary;[13] one German philosopher has called her human approach towards the divine mystery the 'fundamental dynamism of the universe'.[14] If a theology of religions, or a 'dialogy', must begin from lived experience rather than doctrinal division, then the 'family of truth' might be a helpful image for how the process works. It implies that doctrinal absolutes are not in the foreground; it simply suggests that the truth enabling any dialogical encounter at all must be the emptying of the human heart.

Mary connects this element common to all religions—human faithfulness—with what is distinctively Christian: the uniqueness of

[12] Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, edited by W. R. LaFleur (Honolulu: University Press of Hawai'i, 1984), p. 210.

[13] John Paul II, *Redemptoris mater* (1987), n.13.

[14] Johannes Baptist Lotz, 'Zur Grunddynamik des Universums', *Geist und Leben,* 60 (1987), pp. 272-284.

her divine Son. Her passive openness is the most sublime activity a human person can engage in; it finds analogues in the 'awakening to the original nature' of the Buddhist tradition or in the humble 'surrender' of Islam. What is central here is transparency, mere 'letting in': like the Buddhist 'positionless position', it implies a consent, a consent given so that God's self-communication can abide in a pure heart (Matthew 5:8). This kind of humble human response to an existential call is the necessary condition for the divine offer of salvation to find its fullness in the incarnation of the Word through Mary.

This way of thinking offers us a perspective within which the religious traditions become part of salvation history and reveal their orientation towards the mystery of Christ. Other religions are no longer considered merely imperfect, secondary expressions of God's saving will; they are full members of a larger family. The Church's guaranteed witness to God's personal presence in Jesus Christ only makes sense in this wider setting.

In the 'family of truth', therefore, we move beyond mere knowing into a healing and integrating encounter. The family warmly and supportively embraces each member, and provides a setting where each one can live out their identity in relationship. Paul was close to this idea when he wrote, 'then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1 Corinthians 13:12), and the entire meditation on love from which this phrase comes could be called the 'canticle of interreligious dialogue'. Religions are human realities; the process of mutual understanding centres on human subjects rather than facts known. Thus the faith history of the Other can be appreciated without one's own being threatened. On the contrary, our own faith should lead us, as a logical consequence, to honour the faith of others. When we claim autonomy in matters of faith, we must at the same time allow this autonomy to our neighbours.

A dynamic contemplation, a 'contemplation in mission', is marked by outreaching love. It creates bonds that lead us to 'recognise, preserve and promote' other spiritual truths.[15] It understands religious practice in terms of the first commandment (Matthew 22: 38-40)—a commandment of tri-polar love encompassing a sense both of oneself in the presence of God and of the needs of one's neighbour. The love in question here extends to fellow human beings as they live out, through

[15] *Nostra aetate*, n. 2.

their own religions, their relationships with God. A 'family of truth' accepts the challenge to live out a tri-polar relationship of mutual love: its members love God (through their own religion); they love their neighbours (as committed to their religions); and therefore they also love themselves (in the openness of a 'positionless position'). Thus the contemplative circle finds its completion. The challenge is not just 'Love God and love your neighbour'. It goes further: 'Love the God of your neighbour, too'.

Michael Fuss is a priest of the Archdiocese of Cologne in Germany. He teaches Buddhism and New Religions at the Pontifical Gregorian University, in Rome, and lectures at various European universities. He is the European member of the prestigious International Buddhist-Christian Theological Encounter. In 2002 he is organizing the second International Dialogue with Tenrikyô, a monotheistic religion of Japan. Among his major publications is *Buddhavacana and Dei Verbum* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991).